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Sweeping stories: conversations about rubbish with people on the ground

Preface

At the House of European History we became curious about the history of rubbish in Europe and so we decided to talk to the men and women who are the real experts on rubbish. We wanted to hear their stories and include their voices in our exhibition.

And so, during the summer of 2021, I met and interviewed some 50 people in Brussels: the men and women who keep our city clean, men and women who repair or find a new use for things that would otherwise be thrown away, and men and women who limit the amount of waste they produce, sometimes to the point of producing no waste at all. To be methodological, we decided to call them hygienists, 'valorists' and minimalists respectively, but what really stands out is the commitment of these men and women – whether (extra)ordinary citizens, volunteers or professionals – to what they do. To ensure their words were reported as accurately as possible, this article was originally written in French, the language all interviews were held in.

I asked them to describe what a typical working day was like in the past and what it is like now; to explain what rubbish is and what it is not; and to tell me what they would like to see included in the exhibition. My interview partners answered all these questions and told me a lot more besides. I did not just learn about their work; I have the impression that I've seen Brussels in a way that very few people do, that I was given access to the city's small secrets and, in a way, to those of the inhabitants of Brussels.

After more than 35 hours of interviews, I would now like to set it all down here. I hope my account will be a true reflection of the generosity of all those people, including the ones I don't name, who gave me their time and shared their memories or thoughts. I can't include everything I learned in this article, however, so do come to the House of European History to fill in the

gaps! Until then, join me on a short journey through these conversations, these stories, all about rubbish.

'In the past people knew who the rubbish collectors were' (Patrick)

Patrick started working as a rubbish collector at the end of the 1970s. This was before all the rules about the different coloured bin bags found everywhere nowadays in Brussels (blue for metal and plastic packaging, yellow for paper and cardboard, green for garden waste, orange for organic waste and white for undifferentiated waste). A time before separated waste collections started in Brussels in 1992 and well before sorting household waste became mandatory in 2010. 'At that time there weren't even any bottle banks. Everything was mixed together.' And since Patrick was talking about the time before plastic bags were used:

Everyone had their own dustbin. [And] blocks of flats [had] these huge iron bins. And since the building's caretaker used to put them out the evening before, in winter all the filth and rubbish in there froze. You had to knock the bin against the edge of the lorry to get it to fall out. Sometimes, it was frozen so solid you had to shift it with your hands.

On the subject of the filth in the bins, he still remembers that, 'there were people who washed their bins. People who put a layer of newspaper on the inside so they were always clean. And also people [whose bin] had a layer of filth as thick as that!', he said, using his hands to show it was several centimetres thick.

I [also] remember that we had to empty [...] big tall bins that were filled to the very brim, with a sauce on the very top. It took three of us just to lift the bin and tip it into the lorry. [And the work was a lot more physically demanding then as] you had to collect the bin, empty it and then take it back. We were going back and forth all the time. [Nowadays] they just pick up three, four or five bin bags, [...] chuck them in and pick up the next ones.

Nowadays the rules say bin bags must not weigh more than 15 kg. Several rubbish collectors told me this is not always the case and that it takes two of them to pick up a bag that is much too heavy. So I asked Patrick whether there were any rules in the past about the maximum weight of a full dustbin. He thinks, if he remembers correctly, that 'it was 30 kilos.' 'And two of you would carry them?' 'No, no. One man alone!'

From what Patrick told me, the introduction of bin bags made life a lot better for rubbish collectors: more hygienic, fewer trips back and forth and bags to load that weigh less. But with this change came other problems. When bin bags began to be used instead of rigid dustbins 'lots of people used bags from GB [a supermarket]. This wasted a lot of time: you couldn't pick up lots of those little bags at once. And the bags would be chucked under the trees: you had to practically lie flat on the ground to pull them all out.'

A rubbish collector's job has always been hard, but

people were very grateful. If you wanted to, you could have drunk a coke in each restaurant. [...] And since many women [were at home] they knew what time you would go by. Sometimes in winter, people would ask, 'Would you like a cup of coffee?' [...] They were more careful too. [If they had sharp objects to throw out] they would wait until you came so they could hand you pieces of glass: 'Here, be careful, it's broken.'

Little gestures that avoided a lot of accidents. 'Nowadays, women work as well as men. So no one knows any more what time [the bin lorry] comes. No one knows the rubbish collectors any more. In the past, they called us by our first names. [...] I would say good morning maybe 200 times in one morning. [...] People recognised us.'

'At least someone thought about us when we were working on a public holiday' (Sophie)

Such friendly gestures are still extended nowadays but not as often as gestures signalling impatience – when the dustbin lorry blocks the traffic, for example, or is loud early in the morning (a necessary 'evil'). For example, a young woman working as a rubbish collector – yes, there are female rubbish collectors, the first ones in Brussels started working in 2015 – told me about something that had moved her. One day, at the end of the year, someone 'wished us Happy New Year and the best of luck, because she was sure that the bin bags were heavier than usual. Given the festivities, the amount of stuff wasted and all that [...] that really touched me!' (Sophie)

Similarly, during the 2020 lockdown rubbish collectors received lots of messages of support, just like other frontline workers in essential jobs who never stopped working. Children drew superheroes collecting bin bags,



Portrait of a Hygienist – Rubbish collector*

First name: Sophie

Name: Melckmans

Age: 26

Works for: Bruxelles-Propreté – kerbside refuse collection service

Length of service: Since 2016

Job: Heavy goods vehicle (HGV) driver and loader. Loads or drives bin lorries.

'It's a complicated job, it's very demanding physically. You are behind a lorry, some of the bags are much too heavy. Fortunately we learn to work as a team.'

* Rubbish collector: someone employed to remove household waste from outside houses (adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of a 'dustman' or refuse collector). Teams on the ground usually comprise a driver and two or three crew members who load the vehicle.

local residents stuck little notes of appreciation on the dustbins, Bruxelles-Propreté received emails thanking them. Those messages motivated the staff when they needed it the most. No one knew at that point how COVID-19 could be caught, making them even more afraid. And there were fewer people than usual available to do the work.

Another striking memory from 2020: deserted streets in Brussels, as if the city were sunk in a long, deep sleep! So different to before the lockdowns, when workers for the public cleansing service would see the city wake up. Most people are still asleep when these men and women start work but this means they get to see all the city's districts come to life.

However, rubbish collectors in Brussels haven't always worked only in the early hours of the morning. Patrick was one of those who did the evening round, which has long since been abolished. These atypical working hours – which are also a reason why it is a job few notice – are partly justified by the impact dustbin rounds have on traffic and vice versa. Driving an HGV in the city is not easy. The permanent stress of driving in traffic and the risk of an accident continue to be a (different type of) weight on the shoulders of – in this case – the drivers. In addition to watching out for other vehicles and pedestrians, they also have to watch out for the bin loaders behind the lorry.

After working for a dozen years as a bin loader, Patrick became a driver – at a time when reflective jackets were not commonly worn: '[you had to] watch out for the men [...] they were running back and forth without a reflective vest, so very early in the morning you had to spot their shadows [sometimes with] rain on the rear view mirrors.' Khalid J., who has been a loader for nearly 20 years, confirmed that it can still be dangerous: 'Once, stepping down [off the footrest], I found myself under the lorry!' And he recalls '[that] an old dustman once told him: "A driver is like a hen." "What do you mean?" "You know what a hen's like with her chicks?" "Ah, yes." "That's what drivers here at Bruxelles-Propreté must be like.'

'At the time, I preferred being a loader rather than a driver. [...] outside, we were always joking,' Patrick told me. That made me curious about why he changed jobs, something I'd also heard others talk about during my interviews. 'Why? Because I said to myself that when I was 50, I would be glad not to have to run behind [the lorry]! Even if at that time there was no heating in the cab, the

seats were hard as iron, and the mechanism to open the hopper wasn't automatic so your coordination had to be even better than nowadays.

Opinions among the younger ones – who nowadays switch between the two roles – differ. When asked, do you prefer to drive or to load the lorry, Amin (not his real name) promptly replied: 'Drive, definitely! When it rains, when it's snowing, when it's cold, who wouldn't want to be in the cab?' Sophie, for her part, is not so sure: 'Let's just say there are advantages and drawbacks to both.'

I also noted that preferences varied at the city of Brussels's public cleansing service. Even if they all agree that a street sweeper's work is less physically demanding than that of a loader on a bin lorry – and people change jobs normally so as to have less tiring work as the years in the job start to make themselves felt – the younger ones, like Jean-Marc, often do the exact opposite:

I started as a street sweeper [...] I liked it, [but] I was 19 and I felt ill at ease pushing a handcart: I was a bit shy [in front of the] schools [when the kids] came out! So I asked to go behind the lorries, as a loader. [...] I changed to get a bit more exercise because [sweeping roads] isn't very demanding physically. [...] I wasn't exerting myself enough for my age.

In the city of Brussels, Jean-Marc then switched again from a loader to a driver, and today he is a foreman. Just like Patrick who also started behind the lorry at the regional entity Bruxelles-Propreté, then became a driver and later coordinated a team. He has seen so many changes during his career – in society, organisational, the technology – that I asked him if there was anything that had not changed over the years. 'The smell! I don't think that's changed much: the smell stays the same! Especially in summer!'

'Like they say, it doesn't smell as sweet as a rose!' (Benoît V.)

Benoît V. knows that better than anyone. A florist by trade, he left his roses to become an inspector at Bruxelles-Propreté. Even if he does say that he 'saw right away how worthwhile' his new job is – and his commitment to his job is clear to see – he remembers too that 'there were a lot of people who knew [him] who asked, "Are you feeling OK?" [...] And I'm not going to deny that to begin with, I was a little bit discouraged because opening the bins... it's not always easy!'

I met other people too who, like Benoît, told me they had changed career. I asked them what jobs they had had before becoming public cleansing service workers. Some had worked first in the private sector. Others had lost their job and had been directed down this path. Yet others had 'inherited' the job their parents did or had been advised by them to find a stable job in the public sector.

'When you were little people said, "Work hard at school or you'll become a street sweeper!"' It was Mohamed – who became a street sweeper after a 17-year career in imports and exports – who told me this. But street sweepers 'always have work, no matter whether there's crisis!' added Serge.

Then they explained to me that 'there's an art to sweeping – you can't just make it up as you go along.' There's a technique to how you hold the broom. And in the past making the broom was an art in itself: street sweepers would go out and collect the twigs to make their 'witches' broom' themselves. Nowadays the tools for the job have moved on: handcarts are becoming lighter and lighter, and there are even big street vacuum cleaners or those small electric vehicles that are called street sweepers. Even kerbside dustbins have become 'smart' and close automatically when full so rubbish doesn't spill out; they are connected to the internet and those responsible know when they have to be emptied.

But when they talk to me about sweeping being an art, they are not just referring to the techniques used:

It's more than just a job, it's an art! [...] It's about creating the city's décor! Sometimes I turn up in a small square and it looks disgusting – and your task is to make it look prettier! Once you've cleaned it up and removed everything that's off-putting [...] you've made it a nicer place to live [...] you've created a scene that's picturesque! (Khalid O.)

Not that I really had any doubts, but I nonetheless asked Khalid, 'Do you take pride in your work?' 'Of course! I can go home and say to myself, "I've left that small square nice and clean for the people there!"'

A former soldier, a barman, a hairdresser: they have all found a purpose in their new jobs that make the city more beautiful, 'nicer, cleaner' (Khalid O.). But it was Benoît V's change in career that struck me the most. When he told me what he was doing beforehand, I imagined the beauty and scent of flowers making way for a sensorial universe of a completely different kind. I was not wrong but:

A florist will tell you that there is the lovely side – the shop smells nice, it's pleasant! In the workshop ... the smell isn't always so nice! [...] When you are preparing the flowers, you tread all over the leaves [...] the stalks rot, that also creates some very unpleasant smells. But OK, not as unpleasant as a dustbin! [...] Here you come



Portrait of a Hygienist – Street Cleaner

First name: Mohamed

Name: El Hoffadi

Age: 61

Works for: The City of Brussels – Roads / Public Cleaning Service– Laeken division

Length of service: Since 2005

Job: Public cleansing service operative / street sweeper

'[In] all four seasons – when it rains, when it is snowing or when it's hot – we are there. During floods or storms, we are there. During times of disease or war, we are there. The city can count on us. We are cleanliness "soldiers".'

across things that are decomposing. In summer, for example, opening bins that have been left out in the sun is not a pleasant experience for your nostrils! [...] Waste sacks put out in the sun, you open them a week later. Gases have formed, the sack swells. And when we open the sack what's the first thing that hits us full on? Those gases!

Benoit's description is very vivid. Just like those of other people in this job who have described the nasty side to rubbish, the maggots that appear in summer, and above all those smells, which get stronger in the heat. For some of them, the bad smell is even intrinsic to the definition of rubbish, which they describe quite simply as 'an object that is bothersome, that pollutes, a thing that stinks!' (Nourreddine)

But does our sense of smell in particular, and our other senses in general, always find rubbish in all its forms so disagreeable?

'Each piece of waste can be seen as a resource' (Valérie)

By talking to a number of people I realised that the tidier you keep your waste – by separating it – the cleaner it stays. This is because there are things that only become waste when jumbled up. Waste 'could be a resource, if properly separated' (Danièle).

'Rubbish' – in Stéphane's words – is the things 'that you can't sort; everything that can't be recycled'. Stéphane, who has been collecting waste door-to-door for almost 30 years, looks into those white bin bags and sees that what's heaviest – and stinks the most! – is food waste.

I became interested in this food waste and met people who, by composting, were taking care of their own household waste and helping their neighbours to do the same. They are master composters; another kind of waste expert. Even if, like Benoit S., an agronomist, they are all loth to use 'the word waste'

because it has very pejorative connotations: waste is something harmful that we need to get rid of. [...] Whereas actually, what we don't use becomes waste for us [...] but it's not waste for the whole of humanity [nor] in terms of biodiversity [...] We each represent one stakeholder, but there are billions of stakeholders. [...] Such as earthworms, which do an immense amount of work. It's thanks to them that we can feed ourselves. The least we can do is give them a little bit of what we don't

need. Sadly [...] we've lost that link to the land. Our soil is very poorly maintained. We exploit our soil, what we do is a form of enslavement. We use it as a place for plants to take root but [...] we haven't fed it properly. We have fed them with the waste products of war, with nitrogen and phosphorus that we use to make bombs. (Benoit S.)

I am learning from the master composters – trained by the Worms association in partnership with Brussels Environment – that our leftovers are resources to be recycled. How organic waste can be 'recycled' naturally and what results can be used to improve the soil; in other words, to nourish the earth that feeds us. And they assure me that, if you do composting the right way, it rarely smells bad: 'The finished product is, at any rate, completely odourless. It's only the bin with fresh composting material that might be smelly' (Danièle, master composter).

For your system to work properly – or even have a good 'yield' – your waste needs to be well balanced, with 50% wet waste, also called nitrogen-rich green matter, and 50% dry waste: carbon-rich brown matter. Jean, another master composter sees that as the first of the 'three golden rules'. The second is to oxygenate the compost, by pushing 'a broom handle or something [into the compost to carve out] ventilation channels. The third is to water it. Because 'all this macro- and microfauna has to drink. [...] Compost is a living thing.' But careful! You shouldn't take it out for a walk. [But] seriously: when you go on holiday, you should get someone to look after your compost' (Jean).

When Jean talks, I really get the impression that his routine for looking after compost is not very different from how he cares for his plants or pets. Another account, from Valérie, reinforces this impression.

While most people who compost do so in a neighbourhood or garden composter, Valérie has a vermicomposter at home: a plastic bin in which earthworms eat her food waste. By throwing away fruit and vegetable peels or eggshells she's literally feeding her worms. And you have to keep an eye on the temperature in your vermicomposter because 'when it's too hot – or too cold – the worms die' (Valérie).

It's clearly a noble undertaking to try and follow the golden rules of composting, which vary according to the weather or the type of food we throw away. But the result also appears noble because 'in fact, producing compost is almost producing black gold'. Olivier explains:



Portrait of an Upcycler – Master Composter

First name: Jean

Surname: Jacques

Age: 66 years

A volunteer at: The network of Brussels Master Composters (network coordinated by the non-for-profit organisation WORMS at the request of Brussels Environment)

Length of service: A trained master composter since 1995

Profile: Formerly a professional gardener and instructor in horticulture.

‘Compost is a living thing. But careful! You shouldn’t take it out for a walk. [But] seriously: when you go on holiday, you should get someone to look after your compost’.

[It’s] a resource we have to hand that can be used locally. [There’s] a magical side to it: you see what you throw away and the final result! And it [only] takes a few months, without machines and without using any fossil fuels! - this is undoubtedly a process that protects the environment [...] and it’s simple!

And this magic side of it is ‘fascinating’ for both young and old. It’s ‘fascinating [that] what we find disgusting, smelly, dirty, [quickly becomes] soil’ (Valérie). I am similarly fascinated. I just have one question left, and Danièle seems to read my mind: she admits that she used to be very afraid of creepy crawlies, but now she proudly shows off the more or less rare insects ‘swarming’ in her neighbourhood compost. Valérie tells me the same thing: ‘I used to find flies and maggots disgusting. But now I see them as living creatures with their place in the ecosystem! I don’t want them in my house [...] but I see these bugs very differently now!’

You can even find a kind of beauty in them. Like in Olivier’s neighbourhood, where he shows me photos that his neighbours shared of their compost bin: ‘works of art’ – with green, yellow and orange peelings – where they have captured a gradation of colours before it (bio) degrades. Organic works of art that they use to illustrate their greeting cards.

This shows that when we compost, our food waste doesn’t look so bad anymore. So can we see beauty in

other types of waste as well? Yes, sometimes. ‘When you look in the bin for a clue – a name, an address – you read it. And you come across little gems, touching pieces of writing, great declarations of love. [...] when we see a note from a little boy saying: “Mummy, I love you” [...] it’s impossible not to crack a smile’ (Benoît V.).

But what other messages does our waste contain? And, in addition to being resources, can they also be information sources?

We’ve paid for the things we throw away’ (Benoît S.)

Our collective imagination is rich in stories of buried treasure found in our waste. Those who sweep the streets or delve in the sewers have always dreamed of striking it rich. And that can happen.

Right here in Brussels in 2020, two cleaners were unclogging a drain when they found some gold bullion. Unfortunately, I was not able to meet them. But I ask others if they entertain such possibilities.

One day my mother told me: ‘you have a good job, one day you’ll find a great treasure.’ And I did! [...] a whole bundle of 500 euro notes [...] There was maybe 10, 15 or 20 euros thousand in cash... [But I ran [to] find the person who had dropped it, saying [...] «Here madam, this is yours.» She didn’t even thank me! (Khalid O.)



Portrait of a Hygienist – Rubbish Inspector

First name: Benoît

Surname: Vandeveld

Age: 47 years

Employer: Bruxelles-Propreté – Investigation and Offences Unit*

Length of service: Since 2004

Job: Coordinator / inspector / investigation and offences officer

A journalist called us the ‘bin-rifling’ detectives. Not bad, that one’

*Department dealing with waste-management offences.

Investigation and offences officers can issue fines and warnings as well as conduct investigations to prevent offences or neutralise risks to the environment or human health. (Adapted from Bruxelles-Propreté’s website).

‘The biggest thing I found was 20 euros,’ says Serge.

But if you find a wad of cash while sweeping a street, it does not mean that it was literally thrown away. Someone probably dropped it. However, if we think about it laterally, what is being thrown away is not our money, but it is still stuff we have paid for. Benoît S. told me this. And others develop this idea further – by comparing the speed of consumption, and the speed at which the products consumed become waste.

It’s really a vicious circle [...] By constantly making poor quality products and always downgrading them while saying, ‘it’s the consumer who wants cheaper and cheaper’: Isn’t that what creates ever more waste? And not just because of the poor quality of items, but also because their cheapness means people think nothing of replacing them. (Frédéric)

This relationship between buying things and throwing them away motivates other testimonies: ‘Society encourages us to consume and to possess a large number of objects. And then you have to get rid of them and make room for new ones’, as Héloïse, who gives many objects a second life in ‘Petits Riens’ shops explains. ‘Waste can be disgusting but can also be made of very clean, very new items’, says John, who finds it difficult to define waste. Even though, as an officer in Brussels Environmental Services’ Research and Enforcement department, he has to sort through piles

of rubbish: ‘I’ve seen people throw away brand-new, wrapped Christmas presents that they haven’t even bothered to open. [...] Or new furniture; you see that every day! So that constitutes rubbish. [When] people want to get rid of something, it’s waste!’ (John) And when he describes these new objects that people get rid of either by fly-tipping or going to the local refuse centre, I ask him for his take on this. ‘We really do live in a hyper-consumerist society!’

So, whether we engage in over-consumption or not, our waste always says a lot about us – ‘open up your bin and I’ll tell you who you are’ (Marc).

Our bins reflect society as a whole [...] they tell you who lives in a given house or flat: here you can see there’s a young couple who’ve just had a baby [...] or this is an elderly person. [...] We can see people’s habits [...], tell whether they eat well or get by on fast food [...] their bins are really the mirror, the defining characteristic of people themselves. (Benoît V.)

So what do we want our rubbish bins to say (or stop saying) about us? Could we throw away less? If we think about it, maybe we can produce less waste.

‘[We] want to buy new things, [we are attracted by] the unspoilt purity of cellophane...’ (Sylvie)

... because it's the blister packs, the shrink-wrap that make someone who buys an item in a shop say 'yes, it's been hermetically sealed. I really am the first one to use it'. And a lot of people think that having this object as the first user, [being able] to afford something new, makes them feel good, they are themselves rejuvenated. We're all looking to turn back time! (Sylvie)

But there are other ways to spruce up your interior décor or wardrobe. 'Of course you have to keep on consuming, you have to keep on buying. But not just any old way, not just any old thing, at any old price,' says Frédéric, who 'advocates conscious consumerism'. This is what the people I've met who practise zero-waste do – opting for reusable products rather than single-use items, buying in bulk, and reusing or repairing objects that can be brought back to life.

What if, like Sylvie, who 'prefer[s] used objects to new ones', we consumed differently? And what if, like Lucie, who has always preferred to wear second-hand clothes – even before she was aware of the social and environmental impact of the textile industry – we learned to love finding that rare gem in thrift shops?

My mum got me into bargain hunting, so I love it: rummaging around to find a unique piece! Something you don't have when you go to an H&M or a Zara. [...] I also know that this garment has already had its own life. It's maybe 15, 20 years old but still in good condition. So I'm giving it a new lease of life! (Lucie)

Or what if, like Gwendoline, we set ourselves the challenge of not buying anything new for a whole year? 'It's become second nature: first look for your second-hand items. [Otherwise,] you find other ways to get by: by borrowing or renting. Repairing things when they break, or [...] relying on the kindness of friends and family to create [upcycled] objects' (Gwendoline). For people engaging in this form of self-denial, part of the pleasure lies in the 'challenge'. The challenge lies in slowing down the frenetic pace of life, because 'when you buy second hand, you sometimes have to be patient [even though] you always end up finding a rare pearl' (Gwendoline).

It's the challenge of having fun finding alternatives to the easy way out. But without depriving yourself of any other form of fun:

In 2019 I celebrated my 30th birthday [and] planned a big party! I'd spent months planning it to ensure the occasion was zero waste. The fact that my loved ones knew about it meant they sprang into action

themselves. All my friends started cooking. We had everything we needed for a great party – and no waste! [...] And I received some great homemade presents! (Gwendoline)

The challenge of pushing the rules you live by 'really far to see how far [you can] go'. This what Marc does each time he sets himself a challenge:

[First] I took part in 'plastic-free July' for a month [to] try and avoid consuming single-use plastics. And that gave me a set of new habits [...] that I ended up keeping. [Then] in 2016, I set myself the goal of trying to produce no waste at all. [...] what an interesting challenge it was! It proved extremely demanding[including] in my social life. (Marc)

The challenge of living by those particular rules while continuing to live in our shared society. And maybe of inspiring other people, like Marc, in the year that he only produced as much waste as he could fit in a jar. And also, he said to himself 'by telling everyone about this I can't renege on this commitment!'

And Marc was right to start this process, because, as Valérie says, 'what you do on a small scale ends up snowballing and becoming a big deal':

I think that following an overall zero-waste approach [...] is very important for our collective intelligence. [Even if] one person's impact pales in comparison next to that of all of industry. [...] I've received comments [such as:] 'it's problematic to guilt-trip people'. And I fully agree! Industry is the problem here. Now I think it's important as a consumer to [speak with] the voice you have – your money – [...] and prefer greener alternatives. But it shouldn't also mean guilt-tripping people simply because they're poorly informed and make use of the cheap and easy option of throwing things away. (Valérie)

I get it: reducing waste starts at the point of sale. But the 'conscientious consumerism' that Frédéric espouses goes further than that, into extending the life of objects. That's good for both for the planet and for our wallets. And to ensure that it also benefits our state of mind, many people practise it with friends and neighbours. I met them in repair cafés.

'We can have an impact on how quickly something becomes rubbish' (Frédéric)

'We spend a lot of time [...] explaining how to use things properly' (Frédéric). That's one of the tasks of repair cafés –

events where repairers make their skills available. Another task 'is to plant seeds in people's minds, so that they ask themselves, has my object really reached the end of its working life or not?' For that to happen 'the penny has to drop', as Sylvie says. And then it takes time to move on to repairing: the process of acquiring specific skills is gradual. 'There are [things] that we can't repair: [objects] with programming cards – they're not mechanical, they're electronic – so they're difficult to change, some are impossible to open without breaking them, and some have stupid screws.' To give me a better explanation, Sylvie shows me a small box marked 'weird screws':

We're very familiar with cross-head screws! But there's a whole range of screw heads, with squares, triangles, five slots instead of eight. [Sometimes I] think, 'We'll never get this open! [But] the repair café has made a broad array of screwdrivers. We make them ourselves when we have unusual screws. [Then there are] devices that are basically not very sturdy, made to break very quickly, and not made to be repaired ... We see them all the time!' We unsolder things that are soldered, we warm up things that are crimped to make the plastic soft so we can take them apart. [...] We still manage to get them open! (Sylvie)

To inspect the inside of an object, volunteers need to show a lot of ingenuity. As they do in order to repair them! Sarah repaired the handle of a trolley suitcase with chickpeas. Sylvie keeps the wooden sticks from chocolate ice cream bars to reinforce weak parts. They say that you

just need to be creative, to look for something that's the right size and to keep your eyes peeled – to be 'surprised and astounded':

When an object at the repair café can't be repaired, my friends [...] unsolder the elements and switches and put together a small supply of spare parts with them. I take all the small bits of plastic, unusual cords and wires, nice pieces of wood. [...] I'm not going to recoup big things. But at every repair café session I go to, I have my box of wonders! (Sylvie)

Because of the way she looks at things, where others see waste, she sees 'a gem', which is where her specialism as a repair expert has come from:

I add parts, I glue things, I add splints, I make ligatures, I strengthen pushchair wheels and axles, [...] I fixed a cog on a mixer gearwheel. Sometimes it's just something small causing the problem [...] for example, everything might be in working order aside from the on-off button, which might be too flimsy. And because it can no longer be switched on [...] it's taken to the dump. (Sylvie)

But several volunteers tell me that sometimes spare parts cost more than a new object. 'So now that 3D printers are available, we would like to be able to make them... instead of ordering them and having them delivered' (Sylvie). They do their best to repair any object, to prevent obsolescence, which, even if it is not always planned, is at least expected. Volunteers love the challenge even if they would prefer it if



Portrait of a Minimalist

First name: Valérie

Surname: Ghesquière

Age: 36 years

Volunteer at: Zero Waste Belgium

Length of service: Around five years

Profile: Valérie is a vegetarian who practises zero waste for the sake of the environment, ethics and social responsibility. She is also a member of a cooperative supermarket for bulk purchases.

'An overall zero-waste approach [...] is very important for our collective intelligence. [Even if] one person's impact pales in comparison next to that of all of industry. [...] what you do on a small scale ends up snowballing and becoming a big deal'

manufacturers made their objects easier to repair. They're proud of their mission. Even though, like Sylvie, they know that there will always be 'objects that can't be repaired'. Those objects should be discarded, if possible via the right recycling channel. Because even a plastic appliance that no longer has any value or use 'contains some copper – and other precious metals – in the contacts'.

Sometimes things "end up in the bin even though they're not broken". This's another kind of obsolescence. 'People get it into their minds that as soon as a household appliance isn't totally white any more, it's not clean any more,' Frédéric notes. Having worked for a long time in household appliance sales, he is well placed to make the following observations:

And how many fridges [are there] that nobody wants because they have a dent in the door? [...] This is known as aesthetic [or psychological] obsolescence: we get rid of things because they no longer meet aesthetic criteria. [...] We might wonder what role the industry has played in that. (Frédéric)

But we must also remind ourselves that often 'there is someone out there who can salvage what you no longer want', as Gwendoline says. She has got into the habit of having any item she replaces repaired, so she can give it away instead of throwing it away. Fortunately, there are organisations that make it easier for us to donate our

objects. Such as Les Petits Riens in Belgium. The non-profit association has a network of 800 textile collection containers. They are involved in both the circular economy and the social economy. Because their collection, sorting and selling of second-hand goods prevents objects from becoming waste prematurely – while bringing happiness to their shop customers and the beneficiaries of their social inclusion work.

And because re-use drives employment, people can carve a career out of giving objects a new life. Like Muriel, who explained to me that the tonnes of clothes which arrive at the sorting centre are separated according to their quality – and even a holey T-shirt can still be used if it is sold as a rag to the car wash sector. Like Nicolas, who sorts second-hand goods and sometimes stumbles across antiques that are valuable enough to be auctioned off. And Héroïse, who sorts books and sees as many rare editions as bestsellers.

As I'm talking with them, I wonder how they go about sorting. What should be kept? What should be given away? What should be thrown away?

'Waste is something that can't bring joy any more in any way' (Héroïse)

Héroïse is quick to give me her definition of waste: 'It's not just a question of whether something is useful [...] There



Portrait of an Upcycler – volunteer repairer

First name: Frédéric

Surname: Vignaux

Age: 53

Volunteer at: Repair Together not-for-profit organisation, particularly for the Berchem Saint-Agathe Repair Café

Length of service: Since 2012 (9 September 2012 being when the first repair café was held in Belgium)

Profile: Volunteer repair expert, co-organisator of the repair café in Berchem-Sainte-Agathe and administrator of Repair Together (an association representing repair cafés in Brussels and Wallonia)

'I thought it was a really interesting idea [to] have some fun giving a second life to objects while meeting people [...] in the neighbourhood [...] The social side and getting things done at the local level: people can make a difference.'



Portrait of an Upcycler – Second-Hand Objects' Sorter

First name: Nicolas

Surname: Rosso

Age: 28

Works for: Les Petits Riens – sorting centre

Length of service: Since 2020

Profession: Sorter of second-hand goods / handler of antiques and works of art –studying to become a second-hand goods and antiques dealer

‘When we sort, we work with our eyes. They feed on everything we have seen before. They have experience and come with their own tools. Inspecting the mass of objects arriving at the sorting centre every day enables us to pick out the extraordinary.’

are lots of things that are useless but lovely!’ Perhaps that is why ‘we all have things [...] that we carefully tuck away, that tie us to our past, to our family. [Because] sometimes we open up a drawer, dig around, and these memories surface’ (Benoît V.). But one day they might end up fly-tipped or thrown away at the dump. Benoît has seen that happen before:

an entire life being thrown away. A lady died and someone came to empty her house. He just took what he wanted and threw out the rest [...] about 10m3! We saw all her family photos, holiday memories [...] her entire life was thrown away. That affected me.

‘When we empty houses, we realise the inheritors have already been in and taken almost nothing’ according to Nicolas, who briefly stripped houses for a living – before he began to train as a second-hand goods antiques dealer while also working at Les Petits Riens.

Before, we had family furniture, made of solid wood, intended to last a long time [...] things stayed there [...] people didn’t even need to move because they inherited a farm and their lifestyles were very similar. Now that we move a lot, we realise that moving things is hard work. Given the shift in our lifestyles, there is a real gulf between generations. (Nicolas)

Indeed, ‘when you’re a minimalist you’re not put off the idea of moving’, according to Stéphanie.

My mum left me a box with all my drawings from when I was a child. I moved and, for 20 years, that box moved with me. I threw it away when I was 39! Here I have the photos of my dad when he was little. Am I going to give them to my daughter, who’s going to give them to her children? [...] I don’t have the heart to throw them away, but someone else will do it for me. (Stéphanie)

That is why Stephanie says, ‘everyone has something to sort out’. And, as a freelancer, she helps others to do so. What you really shouldn’t do is ‘keep holding on to things [...] if they could be used by someone else, instead of gathering dust in your house [...] it’s not healthy’, says Nicolas. You have to learn to ‘say goodbye to certain things, because you have to throw them away. The opposite of not saying goodbye is hoarding [...] which means putting things in a safe, they don’t move anymore and they become dead stock.’ Sylvie ‘talks about waste but the idea of death comes [to mind]’. And she is not the only one:

There’s a fear of death, people look at themselves as objects that won’t work any longer some day. [But] by dealing with our waste, we deal with ourselves [and] what we produce. [...] It’s madness: ‘on the one hand, I jettison all my rubbish and, on the other hand, I want to live forever!’ (Sylvie)

‘Waste is what we leave behind, it’s a record of our lives’ (Marc)

There’s no doubt that we won’t be here forever, but our waste, on the other hand, may remain on our planet far longer than us. ‘That’s why people think about consumption when they have their children. “What do I want to leave them?”’ – Marc muses:

[Waste] is something intimate, it says things about us! [And about] how we live on this planet. [...] It’s clear from history: archaeologists will look at our rubbish! [...] And sometimes [all we need to do is] just take a look at our bins and see what [...] has been produced and how long it took. [...] And ask ourselves, ‘is this what I want to leave for future generations?’ (Marc)

Would it be reasonable to imagine we could leave no trace?

After asking how it was before, having learned so much about the different ‘Rs’ – reducing, repairing, reusing, recycling, returning to the earth – and having seen how anyone and everyone can be involved in change in their own way, I would like to talk about the future. I asked whether a world without waste would ever be possible. Patrick and some others give a categorical no: ‘We’ll always have waste!’

But if only that were possible, we would need to create the museum that Pauline – one of the founders of Zero Waste Belgium – dreams of:

A [waste] museum. Because if we’re thinking of rubbish no longer existing, it must be put on display as something that’s very hard to find! [If bits of rubbish] become museum items [...] the next step will have been taken! (Pauline)

Perhaps Pauline will be able to turn her dream into reality and create a waste museum. As things stand, we will have to content ourselves with an exhibition on its history.

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