Towards an Agency of Dust

Anne-Kathrin Wielgosz, Walsh University, U.S.A.

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
In 1987, photographer Peter Wellmer stumbled upon a deserted building with an interior both fully assembled and in working order: the abandoned United Linen Factory at 48a Viktoria Street in Bielefeld, Germany. It had been built in 1913, and, by 1920, Juhl & Helmke employed 164 seamstresses there, who worked on dowry assortments of undergarments and household linens. Under one roof, linen was cut, sewn, embroidered, washed, starched, ironed, and packaged. When forty years later, decline set in, every expenditure was stalled; by the 1970s, the factory was in the hands of only four employees, until, in 1981, they too quit the building. From then on, nothing settled there but dust, and its deceleration locked the space into an interval of stasis and a corner in time long since past outside the building. When, in 1993, the space opened as The Linen Works Museum, it was a museum only at second sight, as nothing had been tidied up or interfered with. Neither wrenched from their place nor explained away, every object was left exactly where it had been left, where it had been lying about by happenstance. Textiles, especially, are vulnerable to dust, but no curator estimated their worth for preservation. The visitor simply moves on equal footing with the muffled pensiveness of the building's languishing remains. At the United Linen Factory, the past has claimed its residue, time has said goodbye to its own present, and dust tells of the afterlife of the objects it covers.

Keywords: dust, museum, seamstress, textiles

Introduction

What could be more pleasing than a miscellaneous assemblage of sewing notions: thread, buttons, hooks, ribbon, and lace, all spread out by salesmen on the desks of the Visitors Reception Room in the United Linen Factory of Juhl & Helmke in Bielefeld, Germany. Built in 1913 by Arthur Busse in the style of Reform Architecture, the factory at 48a Viktoria Street housed "all…production processes for the creation of a piece of linen under one roof: cutting, sewing, embroidering, washing, starching, ironing, and packaging" (Wille, 1996, p. 545), while in the Visitors Reception Room, "sales representatives of the suppliers sat in upholstered chairs and smoked the cigars that can still be found in the wall cupboard" (Wille, 2012, p. 99) today…and this is why: in 1987, photographer Peter Wellmer accidentally discovered the courtyard and in it the deserted building, with its interior fully assembled and in working order, as if the seamstresses had only just left for lunch break (incidentally, the clocks in the Director's Office, the Accounting Office, and the Sewing Hall all stopped at 12:50) and were expected back momentarily. "[E]ven the [sewing machine] needles [were] still threaded" (Buchwald, 2012, p. 41). Though production, since the 1970s in the hands of only four employees (Kühne, 1996, p. 135), did not end until 1981, "hardly an object in the factory [was] of a younger date than…1962" (Kühne, 1996, p. 113), and so it seems that the past had already laid claim to an aftermath that had not yet begun.

Body

In 1920, Juhl & Helmke employed 164 seamstresses alone (Kühne, 1996, p. 126), because "[b]etween 1870 and 1910 consumer behavior had shifted: linen[, this durable household fabric,] was no longer sewn by women (or their seamstresses) at home, but was bought at a linen store or…directly from a linen factory" (Wille, 1999b, p. 44). Juhl & Helmke sold "the typical assortment…of the day: undergarments, table-, bed-, and kitchen linens" (Wille, 1999b, p. 46), that is to say, a woman's most substantial endowment upon marriage. A head cutter from the 1950s recalled: "'For individual customers, large orders were assembled. Often, a whole dowry was delivered, with all that belonged to it: twelve nightgowns, twelve shirts, twelve-times this and twelve-times that. Everything had to fit perfectly. And you should have seen how that was done! Not just smoothed out like they do it today. Each piece was beautifully folded, so that the [embroidery] pattern was displayed when it was unwrapped. Each pillowcase was lined with tissue paper'" (Museum Label). With proper linen rotation, which was recorded in the household ledger, a dowry lasted from marriage to death, ran alongside the life of the family upon which it had been bestowed. After all, what is a dowry but the careful numbers in the accounts of intimacy: the linens that encase and hold our bodies like a second skin, the textiles whose frays and stains remember a life time's worth of domestic strife.

Like humans, textiles "endure[s] but…[are] mortal" (Stallybrass, 2012, p. 69). They can be understood fully only through touch, and, in its turn, "[t]he tactile can only yield bodily knowledge" (Pajaczkowska, 2012, p. 62). Handling fabric and "[s]itting in front of the sewing machine[, you] can see the extent of your actions" (Hobbs, 2012, p. 344). Each seamstress had "her own work space…and the rows between were extremely narrow because a stool with a basket, containing linen, sat next to each chair….Most orders [at Juhl & Helmke] were made to measure" (Museum Label), and

most seamstresses were “unmarried…young women between 16 and 21” (Kühne, 1996, p. 119). Despite being hemmed in without much elbow room, their gestures were deliberate, their work precise, they did not whine. “Because talking was prohibited, the women often sang together” (Museum Label), and this quiet strength showed in their humble faces like a family resemblance. They understood how perfectly useless it is to hope for anything beyond one’s immediate reach, how one’s life is bound by the objects that are near, how we leave upon them the imprint of our hands. The world of these seamstresses is silent, now. The industrial dust of the past (like shreds of fabric and flakes of skin) has long since been succeeded by the material thickening of time, by time turning into matter, and it has muffled any residual sound into an uncanny lifelessness. A space changes when the people are gone, and when time seems to have said goodbye to its own present.

In the Sewing Hall, “sewing machines of different generations sit next to each other for no apparent reason” (Buchwald, 2012, p. 41). “[A] smell of…oil and fabrics, patterns and many sundries like fabric swatches, spools of thread, tools, oil cans, a pair of shoes or a cushion left behind add to the peculiar mood of th[is] room” (Uffmann, 1999, p. 12). “With less and less women working, things were put aside ever which way. Patterns…were…left lying on the cutting tables” (Uffmann, 1999, p. 17), and with time, dust gathered and settled, became the debris of all that had been misplaced, discarded, or rejected. Indeed, “dust ‘measures’ something that once was and still persists past its term” (Marder, 2016, p. 36). Today, its continued habitation tells of the agency between seamstress and material, of which only her careworn instruments remain: the severity of a black Dürkopp sewing machine, the grace of a crimson spool of thread on its pin. These things have lasted, their discrete contours now covered with the pensive stillness of dust. And so they squat in the Sewing Hall, inert and insistent, and it feels reassuring that they are weighed down and cannot make their escape from the building. But these often inconspicuous objects also tell of “the organization of labor, sewing technique, product variety, and…working atmosphere” (Buchwald, 2012, p. 41) in the history of the Bielefeld linen industry between 1913 and 1981.

When decline set in at the factory in the mid 1960s, ”every investment was halted and personnel was reduced continually. Wherever possible, expenditures both in production and administration were stalled. Every machine and every binder was used until an irreparable defect would have made a new purchase inevitable. This, however, rarely happened; instead, ‘getting by’ was the rule of the day” (Kühne, 1996, p. 135). The deceleration that ensued from this practice settled the space into an interval of stasis and a corner in time long since past outside the building. When in 1993 it opened as The Linen Works Museum, it was a museum only “at second sight” (Wille, 1999a, p. 4), as nothing had been tidied up or interfered with. Neither wrenched from their place nor explained away, the objects were left where they had been left, where they had been lying about by happenstance and docked by dust. No curator decided on their worth for preservation, since “mere things [usually] lie outside the grid of museal exhibition” (Brown, 2004, p. 5), lack the representational force generally required to be displayed in such a pristine place. At The Linen Works Museum, visitors see all things insignificant, and they are left there vulnerable, while dirt and dust give “testimony to the singular journey of each [object] through time” (Marder, 2016, p. 81). But “[b]esides serving as a sign…of the past and…the surviving

remnant[s] in the present, dust [also] betokens the future…is the things' next generation, their mode of surviving" (Marder, 2016, p. 42-43).

Conclusion

Textiles, especially, "are hostage to their own fragility….[N]ewness [is] gradually replaced by wear and tear until worn out" (Hemmings, 2012, p.57) by use and handling; light and moisture further contribute to their disintegration, but no attempt has been made at maintaining and thus slowing the process of depreciation and decay, never mind the effacement of damage. In fact, "continuing breakdown…[at The Linen Works Museum]…challenges the authority of the [concept] museum itself" (Healy, 2012, 89). And so it is that the visitor moves in the space on equal footing with the undoing and haphazard re-layering of time. Walking through the shabby factory hallway, which reaches high into a grating of privacy glass above the paneling, the space and its objects crowd in on the visitor and position her adjacent to the seamstresses who once stitched dowries here for more fortunate women: textiles that became the witnesses and unsolicited record keepers of married and family life, absorbing, as they do, the traces both inevitably leave behind. Because of the material nature of textiles, the soiling that injures them further, linens thin out and turn brittle, and before long, their material integrity erodes because "[e]verything sheds little bits of itself everyday" (Horsfied, 1999, p. 186), and "[e]very conceivable substance enters into the composition of dust (Ogden, 1912, pp.13-14). But dust also "defers the final moment of vanishing" (Marder, 2016, p. 38) and, at 48a Viktoria Street "teaches us about the afterlife of its sources" (Marder, 2016, p. 38).

References

All translations are the author's.

Brown, B. (2004). Thing Theory. In B. Brown (Ed.), *Things* (pp. 1-16). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Buchwald, D., Kühne, H.-J., Uffmann, R. (2012). Die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen. In Förderverein Projekt Wäschefabrik (Ed.), *Museum Wäschefabrik. Zeitreise in ein Stück Bielefelder Industriekultur* (pp. 41-70). Bielefeld, Germany: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte.

Healy, R. (2012). The Parody of the Motley Cadaver: Displaying the Funeral of Fashion. In J. Hemmings (Ed.), *The Textile Reader* (pp. 89-98). London, England/New York, NY: Berg.

Hemmings, J. (2012). Part II Memory Introduction. In J. Hemmings (Ed.), *The Textile Reader* (pp. 57-58). London, England/New York, NY: Berg.

Hobbs, P. (2012). The Sewing Desire Machine. In C. Harper (Ed.), *Textiles: Critical and Primary Sources* (Vol. 4, p. 343-350). London, England/New York, NY: Berg.

Horsfield, M. (1999). *Biting the Dust.* New York, NY: Picador USA.

Kühne, H.-J. (1996). Aufstieg und Niedergang der Bielefelder Wäsche- und Bekleidungsindustrie am Beispiel der Unternehmen von Juhl & Helmke und der Gebrüder Winkel (pp. 113-138). In *83. Jahresbericht des Historischen Vereins für die Grafschaft Ravensberg.*

Marder, M. (2016). *Dust.* New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing Incorporation.

Ogden, G. (1912). *The Kingdom of Dust.* Chicago, IL: Popular Mechanics Company Publishers.

Pajaczkowska, C. (2012). On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth. In C. Harper (Ed.), *Textiles: Critical and Primary Sources* (Vol. 4, pp. 47-69). London, England/New York, NY: Berg. Stallybrass, P. (2012).

Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things. In J. Hemmings (Ed.), *The Textile Reader* (pp. 68-77). London, England/New York, NY: Berg.

Uffmann, R. (1999). Der Nähsaal des Museums Wäschefabrik. Typisch für die Branche? *Ravensberger Blätter, 2,* 12-17.

Wille, H. (1996). Eine Sinfonie der Unschuld. Zur Geschichte der Bielefelder Wäscheindustrie. In A. Beaugrand (Ed.), *Stadtbuch Bielefeld. Tradition und Fortschritt in der ostwestfälischen Metropole* (pp. 544-549). Bielefeld, Germany: Westfalen Verlag.

Wille, H. (1999a). Eine ehemalige Wäschefabrik wird zum Museum. *Ravensberger Blätter, 2,* 1-6.

Wille, H. (1999b). Von Bettwäsche bis Teppichboden. Zur Entwicklung der Prdultpalette der Wäschefabrik. *Ravensberger Blätter, 2,* 44-48.

Wille, H. (2012). Spitzendecken und Zigarren. In Förderverein Projekt Wäschefabrik (Ed.), *Museum Wäschefabrik. Zeitreise in ein Stück Bielefelder Industriekultur* (p. 99). Bielefeld, Germany: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte.