

Reusing Textiles: on Material and Cultural Wear and Tear

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Reusing, recycling and circulation

Issues concerning recycling and circulation of second hand items are widely discussed and highlighted in Sweden today. Designers are interested in creating products that are sustainable, and turning second hand and vintage objects to desired commodities is a frequent part in developing business (Thorpe 2008, Grundström 2014, www.stadsmissionen.se/Secondhand/Remake/, www.beyondretro.se). Non-profit organizations are involved in charity activities financed by second hand markets or thrift shops, for example Myrorna that is located in many Swedish cities and is run by The Salvation Army (www.myrorna.se).¹ Myrorna has made a campaign to reach more customers and donors. The campaign explains the benefits of buying second hand and argues for consuming used objects as a possibility to express environmental and social awareness as well as fashion and design consciousness (ibid). Among younger people an increasing interest in questions concerning sustainability and how to live a fair life can be noticed, often connected to DIY (Do It Yourself) tips and tricks on how to reuse or recycle material and objects (see for example www.365slojd.se and www.slojdhaller.se; Åhlvik & von Busch 2009; Watson & Shove 2008).² To practice a fair and sustainable life means for this group to buy second hand, or newly produced quality products that will last for a long time, and also to transform used objects to new things and in that way make them recycle to last longer.³ Flea markets and thrift shops owned by non-profit organizations are organizing systems for receiving things people do not longer need, in order to sell them to their customers. Arrangements as clothes' swapping's and clothes' libraries are other examples of branches of the same tree (Åhlvik & von Busch 2009, Grundström 2014).

¹ Other examples are Stadsmissionen, Erikshjälpen, Emmaus and The Red Cross.

²The motives for people to practise DIY varies, as Watson & Shove points out in an article written from a British perspective: "*some seeing it as a form of work, others as an arena for self-expression and creativity; some being driven by economic considerations, others by notions of quality, care and control.*" (Watson & Shove 2008:75).

³ Another example is the concept of "dumpster diving", when younger people are looking for food products in containers nearby supermarkets. The "divers" want to live a fair life and instead of accepting the ongoing waste of food, they are taking care of it and eat it up.

The contemporary focus on recycling issues raises questions. One can, for example, conclude that there are more things in circulation today than a few decades ago. When it comes to textiles, this is a consequence of an escalating production of clothing and textiles. At the same time people consume more. The concept called fast fashion, when clothes are produced and displayed every sixth week and not by season as earlier, are dominating the market (Black 2010:2f). Clothing is also relatively cheaper today (ibid 2010:1). On an individual level the more clothes one consumes, the more one has to store, and questions on what to keep and what to sort out from the wardrobe are a recurring concern in peoples everyday life (Palmsköld 2010, 2012 and 2013). In this article contemporary practices connecting to clothes and home textiles that are not longer in use will be discussed (a.a. 2013)⁴. How the textiles are objects for different sorting processes in private homes as well as on the second hand market, and peoples ethically concerns connected to the processes will be focused. The main questions asked are: *Why do many people find it hard to throw away their used textiles in the garbage can? What do they actually do instead with their worn out clothes or home textiles?*⁵

Sorting processes

In the Western world we are able "to get tired of things before they become worn out "and allowing them to circulate to be useful to others (Åkesson 2005:141). Many objects that are sold on the second hand market are examples of this. When it comes to clothing one can for example find clothes for sale in good material condition and functional for many seasons to come, but by the owner defined as impossible to wear. This can be seen as an example of cultural wear and tear, a process leading objects to be considered as old, hopelessly passé or even to be abandoned (see Löfgren 2005). Within the process when objects are categorized as useful or not useful, considerations based on visual as well as functional aspects are done. An old hand woven linen cloth or an embroidered curtain is one example of objects that can be defined from a functional point of view. These kind of textiles have to be taken care of in ways that many can find time consuming and demanding, and even old fashioned. They might

⁴ The article is based on a research project titled *Reusing Textiles: on Material and Cultural Wear and Tear* (Palmsköld 2013).

⁵ The questions asked in the project were:

- What happens to the clothing and home textiles that by owners and users are considered unusable and ready to be sorted out?
- What is the everyday practice when you sort, discard, reuse, give away, sell, trade or donate textiles to charity?
- Why do many **feel** reluctance to throw away clothing and household linen into the trashcan?

even be considered difficult to be incorporated and used as part of the home decoration. On an individual level a solution for this kind of textiles could be, instead of saving them, sorting them out and donating them to flea markets or thrift shops. Cultural reasons for classifying or sorting out material objects such as textiles can be seen as an opposite position to material reasons, that is for example when fabrics actually are worn out or damaged in different ways.

Sorting processes are central when we manage and categorize objects as Strasser points out, when saying: "*Trash is created by sorting.*" (Strasser 1999:5). But there is a differentiated scale between opposite categories such as "useful" and "trash", and most of the objects in sorting processes are ending up somewhere between. When it comes to clothes and home textiles the starting point is in the private sphere, in front of the closet or linen cupboard, when people are inspecting their clothes and home textiles visually and sensory to determine their future fate. The textiles are sorted in different categories and some of them are presumably landing on one of many flea markets run by different charity organizations. The sorting process continues at the flea markets, that has several stations and opportunities for each individual garment, fabric or curtain. Estimation is that approximately 10 % of the textiles that are donated are actually sold, and thus the remaining 90 % are separated and has to be taken care of in some way or another (Palmsköld 2013).

Methods

When working as a volunteer on a local flea market, it stood clear to me that textile was a material category that stood out from the rest. At first most of the things donated were textiles. Second, as a consequence of the first, among the volunteers taking care of the donations one always had to make sure one person were working with the textiles alone. And third it was apparent that donors wanted their disposed things to circulate and to be useful for somebody else. This made me curious and I wanted to learn more about the processes in action, the practices people are involved in and their concerns about their worn out clothes and home textiles. In order to study this phenomenon I continued to be a volunteer worker, but this time I was an ethnological researcher doing fieldwork by doing participating work in all different processes of sorting that took place on the flea market. Taking part in the work together with other volunteers made it possible to learn the practices and routines connected with handling and sorting donated objects. At the same time it was possible to ask questions or to discuss issues connected to the sorting processes. During the fieldwork notes were taken in a diary, which grown to a story where I was able to tell what had happened during the

work, which tasks that every pass included, discussions that took place, questions that were asked and analytical points that were made (Field diary 2009). The fieldwork focused on sorting processes that is taken place after textiles has been donated. To be able to analyse the first step, namely what happens in people's private homes when they are sorting textiles, I used a common ethnological method involving cooperation with the Archive in the Nordic Museum in Stockholm. The archive has since the 1920's sent out questionnaires to informants who has agreed to continuously, and on a voluntarily bases answer the questions asked on different issues⁶ (www.nordiskamuseet.se). The questionnaire were sent out and 94 informants⁷ answered questions on how they handle their used textiles focusing on reusing practices, what to save, what to give away and if and how textiles are used for creative purposes (Questionnaire 239/2009).

The methods chosen made it possible to follow the different sorting processes connected to textiles that are starting in people's private homes and ending on a flea market. What people do with their worn out textiles when sorting them, which they save, how and why textiles are disposed and how people connect to this object category is questions not previously studied.

Altering, patching and mending

Until the mid-1900s textile recycling was rather defined as common house hold practices of repairing, altering, patching, mending and sewing, to be able to economize with scarce resources (Grimstad Klepp 2000, Åkesson 2005:143). The consumption of textiles was characterized by valuing the quality of the material used, to consider if it would last for a long time, and if it would be able to be altered and reused. The practices connected to how to reuse textile materials required skill, ability and creativity to be able to use down to the last piece of fabric or thread. These kinds of reusing practices were closely connected to morally and ethically concerns, and wasting material objects that could be used in one way or another was not an option. Patching and mending textiles was until the 1970s an important, and for economic reasons necessary task, occupying the everyday life for most of the women. It was actually cheaper to mend clothes and sew new ones than to buy them in the mid 20th century in Sweden (Husz 2009:58). According to a study made in 1961, housewives (including

⁶ The same method is used in other Swedish ethnologist based archives, such as DAG in Gothenburg, DAUM in Umeå, ULMA in Uppsala and LUF in Lund.

⁷ 83 of the informants were women and 11 men, a majority was born in the 1930's and 1940's: 2 in the 1970's, 3 in the 1960's, 11 in the 1950's, 34 in he 1940's, 21 in the 1930's, 13 in the 1920's and 3 in the 1920's (Palmsköld 2013:55).

professional working women with families) were sewing approximately five hours per week (ibid). To be able to understand the historical situation, one has to add that the industrial production of children and teenagers' clothes was still not developed. Also bed linen had to be sewn on a household level, as they could not be bought on the market.

To be able to provide for all the textiles in a household, knowledge about materials and fibers were needed as well as different skills in patching and mending. Young girls learned these skills from their mothers, grandmothers, aunts or other female members of the household. The schools provided education in needlework for the girls and they were taught different techniques useful for future housewife duties. A frequent pedagogic task was to make samplers that could be saved as memories of technical possibilities when the girls later would be mending and patching by themselves. The samplers showed for example techniques required for darning stockings, for patching bed linens, tricot underwear, woven woolen fabrics used for costumes and outerwear and fabric used for blouses, shirts, dresses, skirts and pants. These kinds of skills were taught to schoolgirls in Sweden until about 1970. At this time a lot of women started working professionally instead of being housewives, and at the same time the production and consumption of clothes and home textiles increased. Children's clothes as well as bed linen could be found on the market, and the home production of these and similar textiles were not longer a necessity. At the same time the previously desired skills in how to practice altering, patching and mending clothing and home textiles became of less importance.

The questionnaire provides a lot of information on this matter. Some informants even remember the World War II and the rationing of clothing and textiles that lasted for some years after the war in Sweden. The authorities promoted reusing and recycling activities and courses in how to - in a broader sense – take care of textiles were held for housewives. A common practice was to transform the materials and turn clothes for grownups into clothing for children. As one informant puts it:

I remember well the procedure during that time: old men's suits and over coats were unstitched using razor blades, put in special holders. The pieces were washed, and eventually coloured. Left to a local tailor, who measured me. When later visiting him, one had to undergo a detailed trying on. (Questionnaire 239:516).⁸

⁸ "Jag minns mycket väl proceduren under den tiden: gamla herrkostymer och dito överrockar sprättes upp i sömmarna med hjälp av rakblad, fastsatta i en speciell hållare. Tygstyckena tvättades, eventuellt färgades. Lämnades till en byskräddare, som tog mått på mig. Vid senare besök skulle man

Clothes and home textiles were highly valued materials that could be used and transformed over and over again. The material quality had to be very high, to sustain a long life and a circulation process including different transformations. Textiles produced today are of lower material quality, not suitable for this kind of reusing processes, which many informants as well as the voluntary workers in the flea market notices and are concerned of.

At home

Most of the informants who answered the Questionnaire have described the sorting processes that take place in their homes in detail. To conclude many says sorting takes place by season, or when moving to new homes, as their bodies have changed sizes, or when the wardrobes are too crowded. One principle mentioned, is sorting out clothes that has not been used for some time, for example for one, three or five years, in fact this is a popular advice given in books about wardrobes and clothing as well as in magazines (see for example von Sydow 2006). A common sorting method is to place the clothes in different piles, for example one for keeping, one for donations, and one for patching and mending. There is another pile that many refer to as the "maybe pile". The content of this pile represent the owners doubts – will these clothes be used or not if kept?

During the sorting process lots of decisions has to be made. The clothes, for example, have to be thoroughly assessed. In reusing processes that takes place in people's home, clothes are eventually "downgraded", as some informants express it. At first the clothes are used as formal wear, secondly they are used as everyday clothing, and in the last phase they become work wear for gardening or home renovation. Not until when really worn out, most of the informants think it is possible to throw them away in the trash bin. Other forms of circulation mentioned are when worn out textiles are torn to pieces in order to be used as cloths. These are useful when taking care of cars and bikes, cleaning windows, working in the garage, doing trimming and furbishing, doing painting work, oiling, cleaning, drying, and wiping of wet pets. When the clothes have been used for one of these purposes, the informants allow themselves to throw them away.

Although most of the informants express reluctance to throw textile objects, there are some

vara med om de omständliga provningarna." (Questionnaire 239:516)

exceptions. Categories such as shoes, socks, T-shirts, jeans, scarves, hats and underwear often end up in the trash bin. Clothes that are materially worn out, faded or washed-out join them. As one informant puts it: *"I never throw a complete and usable garment in the trash."* (Questionnaire 239: 613). But sorting out clothes that have lost their shapes, are soiled, ragged or full of holes in order to throw them away is a possibility. The examples of clothes mentioned are considered too intimate and personal, as they are worn near the body and close to the skin.

To conclude the informants' stories: from a moral point of view many express that it *feels wrong* to throw clothes and home textiles that could be used. When explaining these feelings some express guilt and moral concerns due to the fact that they on one hand really want textile objects to circulate, to use and reuse them. On the other hand, there are items they really do not want to keep and to use any more. The feelings of guilt are however less troubling if the clothes and textiles on a household level have been circulating in several steps before they are sorted out. Donating textiles to charity organizations helps to reduce the feeling of guilty conscience. When choosing this alternative, the decisions of the future fate of the textiles are carried forward to the receiving organization. The informants mention different organizations that they benefit with donations. Trust is an important factor when they choose which one to give to. The preferred ones have to fulfill their promises to help people in need. By donating textiles the informants think they have contributed to the circulation process, and they are satisfied by the thought that someone else will reuse the sorted out textiles.

What to save

One aspect of the sorting process is what people are saving. When analyzing the informants stories on this matter, some categories connected to clothing appears:

1. Small children's clothing (the first and smallest ones)
2. Handmade clothes, especially those made by the informants or older relatives mainly mothers and grandmothers
3. Clothes used for certain occasions or representing different styles as the wedding dress or the mini dress from the late 1960's.
4. Expensive formal wear as evening dresses and tailcoats.
5. Clothes connected to their former user, no longer alive, such as daddy's worn out

sweater or mammy's night linen.

6. Textiles that could be reused for creative purposes, such as clothes made of beautiful fabric.

When explaining why they are saving this kind of clothing, the informants mention words as *memory*, *nostalgia*, *security* and *sentimentality*. Many of them believe that things like textiles help us to remember various events and eras in life. Dear persons are associated with the clothes they have worn; their fragrance can remain, just as the patching's and repairs they ones made. To put the clothes on, like another skin, is to come closer to the loved ones and to remember them. Experiences connected to the senses are important, how the clothes feel, how they smell and look, and how they sound when moving. The reusing processes in this case, is about a desire to remember people, occasions or ones life history.

Apart from people's desire to remember, other aspects connected to ideological considerations and economic conditions can be seen in the informant's stories. One informant says (s)he saves a lot of things, not only textiles, building up resource depots for future use . This way of living is a very conscious decision based on the individual's political ideology and desire to care for the planet and its limited resources. Saving and reusing things is for this informant a way of practicing hers/his ideological point of view.

Buttons, zippers, embroideries and large pieces of fabric are examples of resources kept by many in order to use them for making new clothes or patching old ones. Before getting rid of sorted out textiles, they are examined by their owners to see if parts and details could be saved. Sometimes altering is a possibility in order to be able to use the actual clothing a bit longer. A common practice among elderly informants is for example to turn worn out collars and cuffs on shirts and blouses. When telling about these practices, they also bear witness of previous economical conditions forcing people not to waste anything that could be useful. As one informant put it: *"You did not throw away clothes that were useful when I was a child. You patched and repaired or you maybe made something else from them."* (Questionnaire 239:613).⁹ The idea of reusing textiles is for this generation, connected with this certain skills and practices in altering, patching and mending. It is also connected with an economical

⁹ *"Man slängde inte användbara kläder när jag var barn. Man lappade och lagade eller möjligen sydde om till något annat."* (Questionnaire 239:613)

practice, which is based on the ability to avoid costs in the household in order to make material objects (as well as food) to last as long as possible.

On the flea market

The flea market in focus for the study is located in a medium-sized community and it is run by a non-profit organization that are politically and religious independent. When the fieldwork was done in 2009 there were not many competitors¹⁰ to the business, and a lot of residents living in the central parts of the city frequently donated things sorted out from their homes. The location of the flea market is in a house that earlier was used for small industrial purposes. It is an example of the fact that sales of used goods earlier took place in the outskirts of a town, near industries, dumps and railway stations (Straw 2010:211). The last decade however, the central part of the city has enlarged and apartment blocks have been built nearby the flea market. Instead of being located outside the town, it has become a part of and incorporated in the urban city. There has been an increasing interest in the second hand market, and one can notice a movement when large charity organizations relocate their thrift shops and second hand stores to more central parts of the urban city (ibid 2010:211).

People who want to make donations to the flea market can leave the things in a special room nearby one of the entrances. The first sorting process starts in this room when the donations are taken care of. Most of the donated things are textiles, and at least one-person handle all the textiles and sort them before they become involved in further circulation on the flea market. The sorting opportunities are many, the volunteers working here wants to take care of everything, even the textiles that cannot be sold. They actually make an effort to avoid throwing textiles away. Instead they cooperate with other organizations that work with charity and aid. Here are some examples of opportunities, which the volunteers have to know when sorting:

- Net curtains becomes malaria mosquito nets in Africa
- Sheets and towels are donated to homeless people
- Whole pieces of fabric and threads are donated to a municipality's sewing room
- Finally dirty and really torn fabrics are thrown

¹⁰ Since 2009 the second hand market has come in fashion, and moore organizations have started up buisnesses in the community.

Another opportunity is to sort out textiles that are to be donated to Belarus. Transparent plastic sacks are used to contain the textiles that are being transported to a religious organization located in Borås. This organization sorts the textiles again, before transporting them to Belarus. In the plastic sacks go warm jackets, blankets, children's clothes and a lot of clothes in dark colors like grey, black, brown and green. The choice of what to put in these sacks follows each volunteer's idea of what people in Belarus need.

The sorting process described, continues in the textile apartment located in a room decorated with shelves and a large table. On one side of the table home textiles are taken care off, and on the other side clothing. Every textile item is inspected before decisions are made of what will happen to them, and as a consequence where they are going to be placed. As mentioned earlier, one estimates that 10 % of the donations of clothing and textiles can be sold.

Therefore an important aim when sorting is to identify possible commodities, textiles that will be bought by the costumers. Many of the volunteers have a long experience working on the flea market and "knows" who the regular customers are and what they desire. Regular costumers sometimes ask them to look for certain things, such as hand woven linen clothes or tailcoats. Textiles who are to be sold get a price tag. When paid the volunteers who are working in the shop cuts off the tags, and put them in boxes for later reuse.

Material and cultural wear and tear – a summary

Expanding wardrobes and cupboards is a consequence of the contemporary increasing textile production, and consumption. This means people in their every day life have more textiles to manage and to sort. When asking informants to write and tell about what they do with their worn out textiles, which items they save, how and why textiles are disposed a lot of interesting analytical reflections can be made. At first handling and sorting textiles is about coping with different feelings connected with guilt and bad consciousness, or when it comes to saved clothing with memory, nostalgia, security and sentimentality. From a moral and ethical point of view it seems to be easier for people to dispose worn out textiles. But even if worn out, many informants say they are trying to make them circulate in different ways. Clothes can for example be downgraded and end up as working clothes (see Hetherington 2004). Buttons and zippers can be saved for future altering practices, and pieces of fabrics can turn to cloths used for different purposes. Most of the informants have experienced household practices when housewives duties was about avoiding costs, and taking care of all the clothing and the home textiles in the family. Skills in how to alter, patch and mend was a necessity to

be able to cope with the work and young girls were taught the skills that were needed in school. Having experienced this kind of relation to objects and having learned, as a child not to waste what could be useful, the idea of reusing materials has turned to a natural every day practice.

Second the volunteers in the flea market have the same approach towards the donated textiles as the informants has towards their private items, they are to be circulated and reused instead of being thrown away. The sorting processes on the flea market are organized in a way that most of the items are taking care of and will be reused. Since only 10 % are sold, 90 % has to be taken care of in another way. The options are many, and every textile object has to be examined in at least two processes before their future fait is decided. Collaborations with other organizations are necessary in order to get the textiles in further circulation, to people in need in Sweden, Africa and in Belarus.

When analyzing how textiles are reused from a contemporary point of view the categories material and cultural wear and tear is useful. If a textile is really worn out, it can be disposed. The same goes for textiles that are worn near the body, such as for example socks, T-shirts, scarves and underwear. For generations born before the 1960's buttons, zippers and fabric pieces can be removed and saved for future needs. On the other hand if a textile is culturally worn out, in good condition but in some way or another impossible to use, it is from a moral and ethical point of view difficult to dispose it. Instead people, informants as well as volunteers on the flea market, are trying to make the textile object to circulate. In that way it can be useful for others.

To understand the cultural significance of textiles, the questions to the informants of what they save and why is of importance. It becomes clear that textiles and textile objects can mediate memories connected to life experiences and persons, and that the sensory experiences are mediators in the process (Goett 2010). To put on clothes or to sleep in bed linen that once belonged to loved ones that are know deceased, is to come closer to them and to put on another skin. Textiles can be very personal, connected with different feelings.

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