
A Life Unworn: The Neglected Wardrobe as Archive

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Abstract

Unworn clothes and unused textiles hold rich social narratives and personal histories. From textiles bought from destitute women in the 19th century through acts of philanthropy, to dresses purchased today in the "wrong" size as a spur to weight-loss, these objects take on a new significance precisely through the non-fulfilment of their design. Whilst reflecting on this wider context, a substantial part of the research for this paper is practice-based: rooted in the author's ongoing investigation through photography, drawing and installation of an unworn, perfectly preserved collection of negligées and infants' clothing from the 1950s and '60s. Having all belonged to one woman and remained largely untouched for decades until their re-discovery in 2017, these garments together serve as a striking example of the personal collection as a potential archive. The collection was donated to charity following the owner's death in 2016 along with little accompanying information beyond that of her never having had a family of her own. Yet her life and aspirations are made vividly clear through the pastel coloured, texturally synthetic and overtly 'romantic' trousseau she amassed but never put to use. This paper examines unworn clothing as a social artefact, touching on the unstable relationships between intimacy and the mass-produced, philanthropy and female solidarity, whilst re-figuring purchasing as a creative, political act.

Keywords: clothing, archive, gender, philanthropy, unworn

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