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English Translation

Where do our old clothes end up?



Welcome our exhibition called „Aussortiert!“ (Discarded!), in which we ask ourselves together with you which paths your clothes take after being sorted out. Throughout the exhibition, we are focussing on three central perspectives:

We want to address questions of sustainability with regard to our current use of textiles, as well as the emotional connection we develop with our clothes through buying and wearing them every day. We also ask ourselves what impact (used) clothing has globally.

In addition to the items of clothing and their stories, the exhibition also features various interactive activities and two workshop tables. You are invited to actively participate in the exhibition through the activities at these tables.

This exhibition was curated by us, the students of the Museum and Exhibition Master's programme at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg.

When we began our research, we developed a deeper understanding of the global structures of second-hand trade, starting from the everyday perspective of consumers. Through our research and interviews, we also gained deeper insights into local and global perspectives on the second-hand clothing trade. These findings significantly influenced our exhibition concept. Our aim in this exhibition is to provide a differentiated presentation of the opportunities and challenges of this trade.

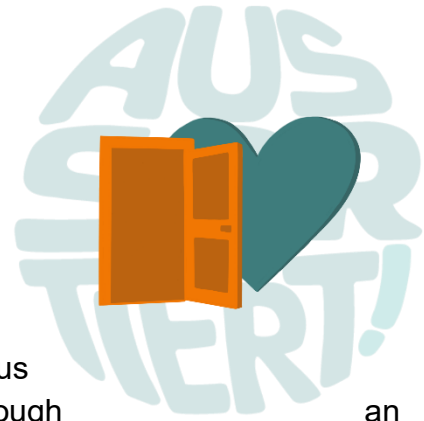
Why do we declutter our wardrobes?

Are we running out of space in our wardrobe or is it more than that? Every item we pick up carries memories - the knitted jumper from grandma that kept us warm for so many winters, or the shoes we danced through an unforgettable summer of festivals in. But not everything can last forever - holes, worn-out cuffs or stains tend to remind us that nothing lasts forever.

So what do we do with our worn out favourite pieces?

What is still good is either donated, sold or given away. What is worn out or broken is repaired or, since 2025, should end up in the old clothes container for recycling. However, despite EU directives, people are asked not to dispose of heavily soiled textiles in used clothing containers, but still in residual waste.

The decision as to what stays and what goes is not just a question of space, but of emotions, sustainability and responsibility.



Your perspective matters!

Cut a piece of thread about 2 m in length.

Tie the thread to the starting point on the left.

Answer the questions above by passing your thread around the pin that represents your answer.

Tie your thread at the end.

Thank you for your feedback!

How much of your closet is second hand?	What purpose do you most want your shoes to fulfill?	Would you wear a second-hand outfit to your wedding?	How many of your bags do you (really) use regularly?	Where are you most likely to dispose of your discarded clothes?
Nothing at all	Look good	Yes	1	Used clothing container
Less than half	Status symbol	Maybe	2 to 4	Regional donation
More than half	Usefulness	No	5 to 10	Flea market
Everything	Convenience / comfort		Over 10	Online sale
				Residual waste
				Passing on to friends & family

Living sustainably?

Roughly one million metric tons of textiles enter the “used clothing cycle” every year. A large proportion of this is disposed of in used clothing containers. But what actually happens to the clothing after the containers have been emptied?

Some of it goes to industrial sorting plants, while another part goes to social department stores, among others. This depends on which company owns the used clothing containers. There they are sorted into different categories in several stages. Sorting plants have up to 30 different categories.

Only a fraction is actually suitable for resale: often to the Global South, particularly to African countries. Only the garments in very good condition remain in Germany for resale. The rest is sent for thermal utilisation or further processing, for example into cleaning rags.



Sorting worldwide

After industrial sorting, the textiles are pressed into bales and dispatched. Our bales on display weigh 45 kg each.

The bales contain textiles from fine sorting, such as mini dresses that are only in very good condition. This allows retailers to purchase the bales specifically for the needs of their market or trade. The price depends on the type and quality of the sorted textiles.

The bales travel by road, rail and sea all over the world. They are unpacked and sorted again. As the quality of the contents varies, the purchase is associated with risks for retailers.



Is there a second life for your shoes?

Shoes carry us through the day. They protect us from the dirty ground, give us support and are part of our outfit. Today, they have long outgrown their purely utilitarian function. Shoes are collector's items and status symbols. Brands, limited editions and hype make some shoes more socially valuable than others.

With good care, shoes can last a long time as they are made from a variety of robust materials. However, due to their shape and diversity of materials, they are difficult to reuse and recycle. Many shoes end up on the global second-hand market, for example on a so-called 'bale market' in Mexico. Still, not every pair finds a second life in the importing countries either. The smaller selections of models and shoe sizes are major disadvantages of the second-hand market. Often, two shoes of the same pair are separated in the industrial sorting process because they were not tied together.

Do you have any ideas on how to repurpose sorted out shoes?



How valuable are your shoes?

Shoes are everyday objects, but also status symbols or collector's items. Limited editions or hype turn some shoes into rarities, while others become waste.

Shoes carry us through everyday life and reflect personal stories. A comfortable, well-fitting pair is often worn until it is completely useless.

Some shoes, on the other hand, are attributed a special value due to a particular designer brand, their age or a limited edition. Collectors of brand sneakers never wear these shoes. The sneakers increase in value and are resold among collectors.

What value do your shoes have for you and what gives them this value? Are they perhaps particularly expensive, cosy or have they accompanied you on important experiences?



Circular fashion or waste problem?

The clothing pressed into bales is requested by local traders all over the world and sold on at markets such as the Kantamanto market in Accra (Ghana). In some of these countries, there is a lack of functioning waste and recycling management, meaning that some of the textiles that are no longer usable are disposed of in illegal landfills in the environment. In this way, old clothes from different parts of the world find their way to a beach in Accra or to the Chilean Atacama Desert.

Even if the trade in second-hand clothing extends the lifespan of textiles, this cannot solve the fundamental problem: Every item of clothing eventually becomes waste. Without functioning global and regional disposal structures, environmental pollution remains a growing problem.



How sustainable are your old shoes?

Shoes are made of numerous materials - for example leather, rubber, plastics, adhesives and cotton. This diversity makes recycling considerably more difficult, as it is almost impossible to separate the individual components and takes a lot of time. Another problem is that many of the materials used are only partially biodegradable. Plastics and synthetic components can remain in the environment for decades or even centuries, releasing microplastics in the process.

The recycling of shoes therefore poses a particular challenge due to their slow decay and the difficulty of recycling them.

What do you do with your old shoes - throw them away, repair them or perhaps turn them into something new?



Too intimate to share?

Underwear lies in our most intimate places and has the main function of clothing our intimate areas. We wear underwear in a variety of shapes and colours with specialised fits and functions. Bras (short for brassieres) support

the breasts, but can also fulfil a shaping or decorative function.

Underwear is strongly associated with topics such as intimacy and gender and is also strongly stigmatised with regard to the second-hand market. Touching the underwear worn by a stranger is alienating for many people. Concerns about hygiene and a feeling of disgust often prevent underwear from entering the second-hand market, even though it is in global demand. Ghana imports a lot of second-hand clothing from Europe and second-hand underwear is also bought and sold there. These small items of clothing raise big questions about our relationship between the body and the use of clothing.



More than just fabric?

Our favourite underwear - it accompanies us in secret and is more than just a piece of fabric. As the most intimate piece of clothing, worn directly on the skin, it is a familiar companion in everyday life. Even if it has holes, the elastic is worn out or the colour has faded, it is difficult to let it go. It stands for comfort, familiarity and gives us security.

But why don't we discard it, no matter how bad its condition?

Perhaps because it brought us happiness, reminds us of times we don't want to forget or simply because it seems irreplaceable to us. Our favourite underwear reveals how we emotionally charge everyday clothes and how difficult it can be to part with them, even when their function seems long lost.



Illegal underwear?



The Kantamanto market in Accra (Ghana) is a central trading centre for second-hand goods, including underwear. Despite Ghanaian customs regulations, which are against the import and sale of used underwear due to hygiene concerns, the purchase of good second-hand underwear is a cheap and often more durable alternative to local goods for many people.

In early 2025, a fire destroyed large parts of the market and revealed its vulnerability. However, the flexible structure of the stalls made it possible to rebuild quickly and continue trading.

The complex balance between global trade with its downsides and local realities is clearly evident here - a place that creates opportunities, but also raises integral questions.

Woven, used, expired?

Underwear, often made from mixed fibres such as polyester and cotton, poses major challenges for recycling. Once woven, the fibres are difficult to separate from each other, so many pieces end up in the bin

- because only pure fibres can be processed into new cotton or synthetic yarns

Due to a lack of waste management, clothing often ends up in the environment. There, the fibres decompose at different rates and become entangled with other waste forming metre-long so-called “textile tentacles” that pollute ecosystems.

At the same time, passing on underwear is often rejected due to hygiene concerns, even though it would be a sensible way of extending its life usefully. Why do we accept throwing them away but not passing them on?



Do you dress to impress?

The significance of dresses in Germany has been changing dramatically for decades. From being an everyday item of clothing, they are increasingly becoming a symbol of special occasions and stages in life.

As a result, dresses often become special mementos. In our society, dresses have historically been strongly linked to femininity and the associated social roles. This perception is currently being broken down in the fashion industry and by artists. Anyone who wants to can wear dresses.

In this part of the exhibition, dresses and their stories are thematised in the form of a second-hand shop. A bale of well-preserved summer dresses can end up in a German second-hand shop. It belongs to the so-called *crème* goods from the sorting centre. The term refers to high-quality, well-preserved items that are very likely to be resold.



What are you clinging to?

Some clothes are bought or made for special moments in life. When these are over, it can be hard to give them away. That's why we either pass them on to our loved ones or have them repaired so that they stay with us for a long time.

Or we even sew them ourselves so that they fulfil our wishes exactly.

Children's clothing in particular is often a carrier of special emotional moments, as many special moments happen for the first time in childhood and are experienced more intensely. This is another reason why children's clothing is often passed down or kept in the family. Here we tell the story of a children's dress that was sewn and worn three years ago for a Christmas party.



How do clothes travel?

Second-hand shops bring together clothes with different stories. Only a fraction of the used clothes remain in Germany, the majority are sold abroad.

The trade in second-hand clothes is changing many countries.

In Nigeria, the import of second-hand clothing from Europe is banned, but the clothes still enter the country via neighbouring countries. It is cheaper than new goods and a source of income for many people. Nevertheless, it is criticised that the dependence of the clothing industry, especially on European countries, perpetuates colonial structures.

Despite global competition, the Nigerian tailoring industry is surviving. Nigerian patterns and cuts are known far beyond the country's borders. One example is the dress that was sewn for a wedding in Lagos in 2014. The best man's wife wore it and brought it to Germany, where it was passed down in her family before being discarded.



Wedding dress – single-wear dress?

Wedding dresses are often worn for just one special day. They are very elaborate and expensive to make. This is partly due to the boom in the wedding industry: between the 1950s and 2020, the average cost of a wedding has increased more than thirty-fold.

In Germany, the trend towards buying second-hand wedding dresses has only slowly taken off in the last five years: Mrs Kreikebaum, for example, who runs a second-hand bridal shop, reports that some of her customers used to be ashamed of their purchases, but 'nowadays, the ladies stand by it and even tell their friends: "I bought a second-hand dress" and their friends think it's great.'



How many bags to carry your life?

Bags are an expression of different trends, individualities, status and needs. They are used to carry shopping, accompany us to family events or take us to school or work. Over the course of a lifetime, we buy and use a number of bags. They are often discarded, thrown away or passed on.

In this section, a wide variety of bags are linked to global, sustainable and emotional aspects. This is illustrated by three selected bags. They hang at eye level in the exhibition and can be looked at, touched and opened. Taking photos with the hanging objects is also expressly encouraged.

A significant proportion of the trade in used bags takes place on the Internet. This is represented by the online shop on the laptop on the desk and emphasised by the floating bags.

You can look at the bags on the laptop as you would in an online shop and vote on whether you could imagine buying them.



Packed your bags?

Hiking backpacks are the epitome of wanderlust.

Together with travellers, the large rucksacks on go a number of adventures. They often go to the most diverse regions in wind and weather. This is why the material and workmanship

of these rucksacks are designed for durability. Some companies even offer a lifetime repair service for their rucksacks. Due to the material, workmanship, brand and size, the cost of such rucksacks can get quite costly. Travellers often grow fond of their backpacks with their memories and mend and repair them themselves on their trips. You learn to pack efficiently and know where to find things quickly - the traveller and the backpack become a functional unit.



Fling or life partner?

Around the world, there are many specialised types of bags for a wide variety of situations. Most people own a large number of bags in their lives. Sometimes they are only used for months, sometimes for years or decades.

When these bags are sorted out and passed on, they are given a new life with new memories. Bags also serve as luxury items and status symbols; designer bags in particular are often worn as a personal fashion statement.

And everyone has a favourite bag, right? A bag that you bought for a special occasion. A bag that you wouldn't want to leave the house without. A bag that carries memories and experiences with it.



Are school bags a status object?

Almost every child is given a school bag when they start school. In most cases, these are newly purchased for the occasion, as few children would voluntarily carry older satchels. Manufacturers contribute to this by bringing new models and designs onto the market every year.

Children from families who cannot afford new school bags are therefore visibly 'outed' at school. Charitable organisations therefore often collect money for new school bags instead of passing on old ones. Collections for used school bags, on the other hand, usually go to the Global South. Those who consciously decide to buy a used school bag usually do so in order to consume sustainably.

