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Special Session Title: Saving Practices in the City. Considering Degrowth in Low-Budget Urbanity

“Don’t let fashion go to waste.” Local Infrastructures Feeding on Textile Waste

A mountain of textile waste is ever growing in Germany and Europe. Spokesman of the textile industry declare that the industry is following the consumer need for cheap fashion. Consumer organizations answer that the fast fashion-model as well as planned obsolescence bring costumers to consume faster for a poor quality. This public debate about one of the most problematic consumption cycles is also mirrored in a scientific debate. Textile studies and economics inquire the consumer behaviour and needs whereas social studies and humanities focus on the social embeddedness of clothing, the relationship of body, gender, and class with ever changing fashion styles. In these sciences the actual practices after the purchase are nearly never studied.

The talk will focus on the consumer behaviour at home, the use, re-use, recycling or sorting out that is unknown but one of the foundations for textile waste. Here clothes become waste through an everyday valuation. They are highly valued because of their material, style, exclusiveness, historical value, attached emotion and memories or comfort. In some parts of society other values such as organic material and a fair production and trade show the social desirability towards sustainable clothing. These values play a significant role when it comes to the calculation of effort and costs for care and repair or the final sorting out.

When textile giant Hennes & Mauritz launched its “Don’t let fashion go to waste”-campaign in April 2013 they offered its customers to bring their used clothes back for a discount. The calculation to buy and to easily “exchange” clothes at the same shop is a marketing consequence. H&M, known for supplying cheap and fast fashion now also entered the business of disposal of clothing that is a growing market for decades and circumnavigates a local textile infrastructure of craftsman and distributors. The historical alternatives to H&M or the dustbin are established in second-hand shops, flea-markets, legal or illegal recycling-banks or swapping in peers or family. But these practices, easily marked as degrowth-practices, suffer of the social stigma that comes with second hand clothes. 20,8 per cent of Germans interviewees answered that they would never buy second hand clothes (Statista Dialego 2011), only 11 per cent that they like to buy in second hand shops or flea-markets (Statista Marplan 2006/2007). As historian Beverly Lemire shows until the 19th century new cloths could only be afforded by few people and the majority used old textiles traded down the social ladder until they were recycled into paper. New was, like Karen Tranberg-Hansen writes, what was new in ones closet but not new as a textile (Tranberg-Hansen 2000:9). Only with mass-production second-hand clothing became a sign of poverty. The system of charity donation took care of old cloth, locally in the city, in Europe and

in the global south (Norris 2012, Tranberg-Hansen 2012). Another study shows that second-hand shops in Germany are specifically urban phenomena because only here the acceptance is high enough to buy old clothes (Pro Quali 2011:4). Additional to these practices new forms like swap-parties or internet-based platforms like eBay or swap cycles help people to reduce their textile waste while considering their time, money, ethics and resources. They “earn money” in a classic second market or cycle for clothing. The ethnological study will show why people choose these opportunities that often involve new social relationships and cultural techniques. Does the cheap consumption (Bosshart 2004, 2007, Feuchte 2007, Bormann/Deckwirth/Teepe 2005) lead to a neglect of skills like sewing? Is it the same people that use these services that also mend their clothes or go to a tailor for reparations? Are old practices of care still used as saving tools? What means “saving” in regard to clothing and is this always more sustainable?