

Reconfigurations of an etui in “Unattended Luggage”

The encounter with a wardrobe is always a peculiar one. It is where we would regard clothing to be kept or certain objects of personal value to be stored. Here the term of storage is one that relegates a primary function whether it be in order or in disorder to the patterns revealed by the contained material. The installation by Time's Up combines this concept of a cultural device with that of luggage, implying a dualistic sense of memory and experience being carried, as well as actual objects being contained. So the two implications are defined by the differentiation occurring between the idea of a suitcase and the general concept of a container which is the central thematic approach of relevance here.

The different documents transcending the 20th century family history of the Manlays contain a small plastic globe, diary entries, letters, crudely drawn pictures, and many other references of textual materials. The idea of containment here is one that gives rise to structures occurring as layers of historic material. Therefore it is a sense of historiography that occurs in the encounter of Unattended Luggage, as a frame of mind is determined by an early twentieth century (or perhaps even pre-dating it) travelling case that opens like a travel wardrobe.

After revealing that there are multiple compartments that can be opened a certain concept continues to develop itself to be suggested as a story or a narrative line which runs parallel to the experience of opening and closing the different drawers. The story is fragmented and this implies the viewers own agency as the defining factor of commenting on the process of opening and closing or re-opening the drawers and finding or discovering the material within them.

This is a pattern that first seems like an assemblage or a collection of objects that are all juxtaposed within the container. Here two terms derived from cultural theory are helpful in creating a perspective of intermediality that can clarify the interferential patterns generated within Unattended Luggage. The first term is that of the *Flaneur* coined by Walter Benjamin, in a poetic and lucid reference to cultural materialism but also an array of different theoretical approaches, concerned

with urban perception.¹ The concept of the flaneur is developed by Benjamin in reference to the Bohème, which as a societal group is considered as an intellectual and critical counterpart to the bourgeoisie. In the early 21st century the author David Brooks would form a new term “bobo” which combines the two concepts from above by a stylized imposition of wealth made to look poor, in simplified terms. Related concepts are to be found with regards to Hipster and Yuppy. In the original critical reflection on a function of the bohemian flaneur Benjamin created a figure that was less fashionable but more a cultural mode applied for analysis of mass cultural and capitalistic phenomena. These were linked with industrialisation and mass urbanization which created the vast concept relating to Benjamin's life work: the arcades. The classic arcade was an architectonic venture in the capitalistic sense that a multiplicity of stores could be brought together in a single building, thereby combining many different projections of human needs, which would be criticized under the aspect of fetishization more concretely by other members of the Frankfurt School. It was the primary interest of Benjamin to describe the aesthetic processes that occur in the act of walking through such passages, or arcades. This experience brings together the scheme that nothing can be afforded by the flaneur as he is a member of society who discovers artistic values as a form of romantic purity that can be placed above materialistic needs which essentially defamiliarize the owner from the process of production of the purchased product. Rather he is a part of the good itself before it turns into a product, becoming infused with the fetish of monetary values. What the flaneur sees are the reflections caught up in the glass of the front windows in the stores, which together create a cacaphony of synaesthetical phenomena, as the sound of many persons in one place mixes with colours and smells etc. He can only regard the products through a veil which is the mass, and in order to express it orderly a “sensorium” or a collection of senses is needed.

The key aspect in this approach of aesthetic theory is that there can be no linear progression of history or in the more concrete terms of Unattended Luggage a story or a narrative of any kind. Here the anachronistic structure implies that the experience beyond material is unattended, just as

1 Christine Schmider and Michael Werner, “Das Baudelaire-Buch” Burkhardt Lindner (ed.) *Benjamin Handbuch. Leben-Werk-Wirkung.* (Stuttgart, Weimar: J.B.Metzler, 2011), 572.

applied by Time's Up. This means that the opening and closing of drawers does not occur as a catalogue of time, but as a piecemeal of a family portrait. After a certain amount of time the agency of the viewer becomes functional which means it adheres to the stories being revealed in every drawer. That this story has no beginning and no end, or more precisely a multiple stance of many endings and beginnings is what allows the viewer to roam or to wonder between the different layers just as the flaneur would walk from store to store.

In addition to this process there is a development which reaches into the mediatization of the technical devices presented by Unattended Luggage, as there is a transition of historic apparatuses. In no linear progression whatsoever a list can be fashioned of the different recording devices that are present in the installation. (1. Answering Machine, 2. Tape recorder, 3. radio. 4. Screen.) This is the representation of a technical timeline which as a mode of representation is reconfigured for the installation, and leads to the container being adapted into a "Futtermal", or an *Etui*, with multimedial characteristics. Benjamin derives this concept from an inversion of the topographical organization of space in a city according to the private space at home and vice versa.

Der reale oder sentimentale Wert der derart aufbewahrten Gegenstände wird so unterstrichen. Sie werden dem profanen Blick des Nichteigentümers entzogen, und insbesondere wird ihr Umriß auf bezeichnende Art verwischt.²

The real or sentimental value of the contained objects is thereby underlined. They are removed from the view of the non-owner, and especially their outline is blurred in a descriptive manner.

These containers enter the economical reality of a monetary value in a dialectic mode where what is contained has no value beyond a sentimental one, or the sentimental memento carried or memorized can be prosthetically arranged in relation to the container. The act of containment becomes one of ownership carried outward in order to project or show a clear detachment from any need for capital. The container it is suggested here can be seen as a prosthesis of memory.

² Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974.) p. 45.

By this fashion it is not necessary to clearly differentiate between the media applied in Unattended Luggage because they blend into one another by the terms of their own historiography. By this definition they have no owner. This means that the material the different documents suggest are merely implications of a timeline. Such as the globe in the installation marks out a line of travel that has taken a person across the entire planet. It is compressed or held by a single reference toward the globe as a marker. Containment as a process of marking is implied here as the reduction of the media and the way in which they are bound into one installation.

The old world of the classic bourgeois *etui* is left behind by the modern times where the mediatization is a placement of an influx or an invariation, a messianic freezing of time into cataracts where different timelines converge. It is possible only to listen to the answering machine in order to listen to the quality of sound the tape produces. This quality is like the dream from which the surreal conversion to modernity has taken people in relation to their technology much like the i-phone today, as a simplistic device. The old is contained in a process of remediation that presupposes the new as an envelope. This is the relation the *etui* regains with the media, as Unattended Luggage simulates the feel or the senses required by the flaneur/viewer from different periods.³

The simulated history is also a collapsible one. Just as described above with the blurred difference between the clearly defined media apparatuses, they mimick a story that as a continuation becomes material, because the collapse is a pattern of discontinuity. This is the precise moment in which the viewer of the installation opens one drawer, and closes another. This interreferentiality generates a historiographic moment where the selection between drawers becomes the juggling of time but also has a clear reference toward the shift. The shifting elements are what gives the viewer a sense of responsibility that the timing or tempo and rhythm to the switching between drawers is not as in the television almost automatized and recorded but a very transient and analogue process, of discovering a structure. (Like the prescribed or suggested speed to meander amongst the stores of an arcade is given by the turtle as Benjamin explains it to have been fashionable to move amongst the arcades in

3 See: Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999).

the early 19th century with a turtle on a leash.)⁴

The collapse here means that history marks itself through historiographic means. Like the baroque sense of the fold that can unfold again and again to reveal different perspectives on the seemingly same object generate a multitude, here the wardrobe is a compressed document of time. The collapse here signifies a compression, which is an aestheticized narration. This aestheticization remains a clear break toward the characters which are not realistically formed but give mere glimpses of implications.

In this installation the art collective “Time's Up” shows time to be inevitably linked with the materiality of objects in a dialectic fashion. This means that the wardrobe as such is reflecting on its own object of materiality. Installation art becomes a gains a progressive fashion here, where the space of agency meets with the limits of an object.

4 Ibid.

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