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Out of (the Assembly) Line: Mo(ve)ments of Uselessness Beyond the Human Scale[1]

Abstract: Since modernity the relationship between man and things has become precarious. At that time a far-reaching invention turned into a symbol and memorial of modern usage requirements and most efficient production processes: the assembly line. The movements to be performed within the strictly specified processes served only one purpose: the final product. As a consequence, work processes were divided up in the rhythm of the machines, sequences of actions were reduced, and alienation (*Entfremdung*) was promoted – pushing not only Charlie Chaplin's tramp into the gear wheels of *Modern Times* (1936). Under these conditions the relationship between man and thing(s) was renegotiated: on the one hand the working class found itself objectified in a rushing hamster wheel, on the other hand the things in literature and arts regained obstinacy. During those times various authors started questioning the human scale as an omnipresent measure and value of life. Furthermore, things were equipped with biographies of their own, for example by the Russian futurist author Sergei Tret'iakov and his "Biography of the Object", which featured the intrinsic value of the non-human, non-heroic towards traditional protagonists. Even today, artists succeed in their way to explore various assemblies of peoples and things, such as the artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss in their mixed media experiment *The Way Things Go* (1987). The article focuses on such resistant gestures of/towards things, that lack any obvious benefit and purposefulness, but, on the contrary, reveal their uselessness by literally falling 'out of line'.

Keywords: Assembly line; Fordism; *Modern Times*; *The Way Things Go*; Sergei Tret'iakov, *Biography of the Object*; gesture, out of line.

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Resisting Things

"Toni war ein Küchenmesser, wollte niemand weh tun.
Doch er musste schneiden, bis er daran zerbrach. [...]
Renate war ein Kaugummi, sie hatte Angst vor Zähnen.
Sie wurde hart wie Stein, klar dass da was kaputtging!"[2]
1000 Dinge brauchen Liebe,
1000 Dinge wollen glücklich sein.
1000 Dinge sagen: 'Bitte,
könnt ihr vielleicht einmal aufmerksam sein.'"

"In jedem Ding steckt die Zeit
Und ich will mich erinnern.
Und deshalb geb' ich die Dinge
Niemals mehr aus den Fingern."[3]

A few years ago, the German singer-songwriter Funny van Dannen and the rapper Pyro One used the same title, "1000/Thousand Things," to sing about two aspects of things, which – mirrored in German pop culture – they apparently found worthy of consideration.

First, things are given a life of their own. It is one that brings out the *human* side of things, like that of the kitchen knife Toni, who, like a professional, did what he was expected to do, as one song review puts it: "Man wollte ihn als Messer haben, und er hat geschnitten. Geschnitten, zerbrochen. Jetzt liegt er in der Lade."[4] The fate of a thing: an all too human one. The outcry of things: an appeal addressed to the inattentive human users.

Second, things turn out to be a condition of human life. People and their lives are 'be-dingt,' as the German word puts it, they depend on things, they exist under the condition of things. Acts of remembering or forgetting are attached to things because they store time, like in a 'time core' ("Zeitkern"),[5] referring to Walter Benjamin, one of the most prominent observers of things in modern times. Things condition human life. It is all *a thing of destiny*, so to speak.

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[2] Funny van Dannen, "1000 Dinge." *Clubsongs* (Germany: Trikont, 1995) ("Toni was a kitchen knife, didn't want to hurt anyone / But he had to cut until he broke. / [...] / Renate was a chewing gum, she was afraid of teeth. / She became hard as a rock, it was clear that something broke! / [...] / 1000 things need love, / 1000 things want to be happy. / 1000 things say: 'Please, / can you be attentive for once.'" (translated by Veronika Darian)

[3] Pyro One, "Tausend Dinge (feat. Kobito)," *Tränen eines Harlekin* (Germany: Twisted Chords, 2009) ("Time stucks in everything / And I want to remember / That's why I never let the things / out of my fingers ever again." (translated by Veronika Darian)

[4] Helmut Schoedel, "1000 Dinge brauchen Liebe," *Die Zeit* 51 (December 15, 1995). ("They wanted him to be a knife, and he cut. Cut, broken. Now he lies in the drawer." (translated by Veronika Darian)

[5] Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk, Gesammelte Schriften V.1*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 576.

The scene that opens here gathers truly different actors. In this scene, almost human tragedies can take place for the things as secret protagonists. Within this scene peoples and things find themselves connected to each other through *gestures of use*. In a newspaper article entitled "Die Diktatur der Dinge. Wie Objekte das Verhalten von Menschen formen" ('The dictatorship of things. How objects shape people's behavior') the author claims that it is only through man that things come to life by completing themselves only *in use* and *with the gestures of use*, revealing their meanings in such man-thing-constellations. Furthermore, the author attributes a life of their own to things, but according to him this only becomes apparent when they are unruly and do not want to function.[6] As soon as things do not fit into functional processes, they open up a twofold and ambivalent perspective: on the one hand they suggest their own resistance to functional logics, and on the other hand they point out that every theory about things is in turn subjected to precisely such functional assignments. Thus, in dealing with things, criteria of one's own human life, of one's own effectiveness, but also of potential dysfunction and disturbance become evident. Thus, in the view of things, there is a barely concealed view of human beings themselves. Or as the anthropologist Ruth-Elisabeth Mohrmann puts it precisely: What we seek in things is not least the human being itself.[7]

There was a time when people and things, both, were gathered under the logics of function, effectivity, and production. For since modernity at the latest, the gestures of use have united things and humans according to their usability. A special constellation turned out to be the preferred place for this particular gathering: the assembly line.

Dis/Assembly Lines

The assembly line is both, a symbol *and* a reminder of modern usage requirements and production processes taken to extremes. Centuries before the Industrial Revolution, there were already examples of production technology facilitated using assembly lines. For example, in the Arsenale, the shipyard of Venice, the largest production plant in Europe at the time before the age of industrialization, they had been used in the construction of ships since the beginning of the 12th century. At the end of the 19th century, they were introduced in the slaughterhouses of Cincinnati, for the various steps of processing meat – from killing, cutting, rendering to salting. They were then technically perfected in Chicago, for example at the Swift and Company's Packing Houses. As so-called *disassembly lines*, they facilitated the transport of slaughtered animals from one processing step to the next. What was here still used for disassembly came into play a little later in the production of food and cars for faster, more effective, cost-saving production. The production lines, now called *assembly lines*, came to international fame at the latest from 1913 on when they were used by

[6] Cf. Markus Zehentbauer, "Die Diktatur der Dinge. Wie Objekte das Verhalten von Menschen formen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (November 21, 2012): 13.

[7] Ruth-Elisabeth Mohrmann, "Können Dinge sprechen?" *Rheinisch-westfälische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 56 (2011): 15.

car manufacturer Henry Ford and his T-Model, called "Tin Lizzie". By combining aspects of previous assembly lines with production methods borrowed in part from slaughterhouses and breweries,[8] he was able to reduce the time it took to build a T-Model from more than 12 hours to about 1 hour and 30 minutes. Ford yearned for maximum efficiency in the production of his vehicles, as this allowed him to offer an inexpensive, reliable automobile to the masses.

At the same time, however, the assembly lines also became an ambivalent symbol of the Fordism based on them: On one side and in the literal sense of the word, the assembly line brings different parts of the product directly *in contact* with the workers and vice versa; on the other side the socio-economic realities mirror the separation and alienation as effects of every process of dividing labor. The assembly line, thus, merges two contradictory impacts: first, the effectiveness and increase in production, and second, the experience of meaninglessness and functionlessness of the individual worker. In the utopian variant of an eternally running perpetuum mobile, the assembly line points to the playful variations of the Rube Goldberg machines; the dystopian variant leads to Charlie Chaplin's tramp stuck in the gear wheels of *Modern Times*, as shown in the factory scene of the film released in 1936.

In 1929, the Soviet Futurist writer Sergei Tret'iakov published his essay "The Biography of the Object," in which he argues for a "revolution on the object's conveyer belt"[9]. Tret'iakov uses the idea of the assembly line at a time when Henry Ford has already been achieving huge sales successes with his assembly line-produced Model T for almost two decades, but when assembly line production had not yet become established in the Soviet Union. Tret'iakov's polemic is directed at the (neo-)bourgeois novel and its absolute focus, the human hero. He argues for an empowerment of the neglected "accessories" that are constantly subordinated to this human hero.

> The hero is what holds the novel's universe together. The whole world is perceived through him. The whole world is, furthermore, essentially just a collection of details that belong to him. […] Despite the fact that a substantial number of objects and production processes have been incorporated into the narrative, the figure of the hero is distended. Thus, this figure, instead of being conditioned by these objects and influences, begins to condition them himself.[10]

However, Tret'iakov does not oppose the things to the human being but places them quasi at his or her side: in this way, the so-called "collection of details" initiates an assembly, artistically speaking an *assemblage*, through which people and things come together. In Tret'iakov's mind, this is about a network of paths and cross-paths, which demonstrates the mutual conditionality of these assemblies. At the same time, it *combines* a new kind of artistic composition with a critique of utilitarian thinking.

[8] See Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1922).

[9] Sergei Tret'iakov, "The Biography of the Object," in *October Magazine* 118 (Fall 2006): 62.

[10] Ibid., 58, 60.

> The compositional structure of the 'biography of the object' is a conveyer belt along which a unit of raw material is moved and transformed into a useful product through human effort. […] The biography of the object has an extraordinary capacity to incorporate human material. People approach the object at a cross-section of the conveyer belt. Every segment introduces a new group of people. […] They come into contact with the object through their social aspects and production skills. The moment of consumption occupies only the final part of the entire conveyer belt.[11]

Tret'iakov's plea ultimately aims at a different form of biographical narrative. A human should no longer be at the *centre* of this narrative; rather one should "run a human along the narrative conveyer belt like an object"[12]. But before we turn to Tret'iakov's utopia of social(ist) togetherness, in which the human being ends up on the assembly line as a thing among other things, it is worth taking a closer look at another artistic example in which things are used *without* function or fixed goal. Here, the 'message of things as a message about people'[13] reveals itself in its *exhibited* and at the same time also *interrupted* course.

The Way Things Go, or: The (Un)Steady Course of Things

In the beginning there is movement. A rotating black plastic sack filmed in close-up, crunching, crackling. The camera slowly zooms out to reveal this large, hanging, spinning rubbish bag, under which a car tire, standing upright, is placed on a small ramp made of boards. A slight downward movement and the sound of scraping the rubber once or twice after a few turns strengthens the assumption: the tire is starting to roll. The camera follows the tire horizontally until the next hurdle, the next bump. This time, the tire first pushes a board on which a can is rolling, which makes the board tip when it falls, giving the tire another spin – on to the next obstacle. Things fall by the wayside, but the movement continues.

For almost half an hour, through a course in a large hall, uninterrupted and interlaced only by a few invisible cuts – since the hall measured only 25 meters at the time, but the course took up 50 meters – the course of things goes on: a happening realized by things, documented on film by the Swiss artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss in 1987.[14] No human being far and wide, no outside intervention, only the invisibly guided camera that stoically follows the rhythm of the sequence. Simply: *The Way Things Go*, as the title of the film suggests: Mechanical movements and chemical

[11] Ibid., 61.

[12] Ibid., 62.

[13] See the title of the article by Joachim Kallinich (2003): "Die Botschaft der Dinge ist eine Botschaft über die Menschen," in: *Botschaft der Dinge*, ed. by Joachim Kallinich and Bastian Bretthauer (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 2003), 7–8.

[14] Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *The Way Things Go* (color video, transferred from 16 mm film, with sound, 30 min, Switzerland, 1987).

reactions keep things going, an experimental perpetuum mobile, a nonsense machine à la Rube Goldberg, *without* a final task to be carried out; only the individual steps count, where the end of one movement constantly entails the beginning of a new one.

The Honda commercial from 2003 entitled *The Cog*[15] – which Fischli and Weiss legally fought as plagiarism – *shows* something similar but *aims at* something completely different. Here, too, a lot of individual car parts are arranged in a precise sequence. But not only the setting, a brightly paneled room with parquet flooring, contrasts sharply with the factory hall of the Swiss artist duo. In the commercial the single parts of a vehicle – naturally, nearly teleologically – come together to form the finished product. "Isn't it nice, when things just – work!" This is the message in the end. Referring to this kind of Fordist logic, the course of things, instigated by Fischli and Weiss, can be read as a commentary on the functional gestures of people *and* things, which have been adjusted on the assembly lines of the modern world. At the same time, the artist duo does not miss the opportunity to make, at least, one ironic comment: Even the title *The Way Things Go* as a phrase-like idiom is suggesting a fatefulness in the course of things without a chance to intervene. Yet the course is thought out down to the smallest detail: the things in their physical and chemical qualities, arranged in the most precise manner, in order to consistently complete one step after the next. *An order* of a special kind, in which things are deprived of their inscribed function and have only one task to fulfil: to keep the race going. But despite the apparent harmlessness of a process of seemingly useless things that keeps itself running, this perpetuum mobile unfolds a fascinating, almost emotionally charged scenario. This completely purposeless chain reaction provokes a mixture of feelings between tension and relief by reversing usual orders, that makes one laugh and at the same time causes a certain unease.[16] This ambivalent effect of the artist duo's arrangements is often based on the play between things and words, between what is shown and what is claimed. Through a commentary on the film, Fischli and Weiss consequently link their experiment, that is apparently working with *things*, with moral and ethical questions, that in contrast refer to *human* values:

> Naturally, this tape is also concerned with the problem of guilt and innocence. An object must be blamed for not proceeding further, and also for proceeding further. An unambiguously CORRECT result of experiments exists; this is obtained when it works, when this construction collapses. [...] The CORRECT range (which in terms of moral theology might also be called GOOD) is, in our view, incredibly narrow. Similarly, GOOD and EVIL are often very close, for example when the candle on the swing sets fire to the detonating fuse. [...] Because they are nice and childish, the candle and the swing tend towards the good, whereas the detonating fuse is evil because you don't need it for harmless things. On the other

[15] See Honda, *The Cog,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ve4M4UsJQo, acc. on January 16, 2022.

[16] Cf. Michael Luethy, "Der Einsatz der Autonomie. Spieldimensionen in der Kunst der Moderne," in *Faites vous jeux! Kunst und Spiel seit Dada*, ed. by Nike Bätzner (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 41.

> hand, every object in our installation is good if it functions, because it then liberates its successor, gives it the chance of development.[17]

No order is harmless, every order aims at bringing things and people 'into line.' Ultimately, order always entails acts of violence. "[T]here is nothing more tentative, nothing more empirical (superficially, at least) than the process of establishing an order among things"[18], that is how Michel Foucault describes the pitfalls of any attempt at order in the preface of his groundbreaking "archeology of human sciences", *The Order of Things*. Foucault, for his part, teaches us laughter and discomfort, both, regarding the attempt to put things in order as well as regarding their tendency to undermine any attempt to order – their 'un-orderliness' ('Un-Ordentlichkeit'), so to speak.

With their works Fischli and Weiss enter the spaces of represented orders, such as museums, galleries, and further places of representation. They convey an idea of how the gestures of use, these places require, can be stripped of their function. Even more, they transform them into gestures of abuse, mis-use or even un-use. These gestures are brought into play by the things themselves.

As soon as things do not fit into functional processes, they open up the view twice: on the one side on potential resistance to the functional, and on the other side to these logics themselves that focus and reduce every thing *and* every person under the aspects of function and effectiveness. In dealing with things, criteria of one's own life as a human one, of one's own functioning, but also of a potential dysfunction and disturbance become evident. Beyond the thereby questioned human scale, a human being itself is eventually transformed into a "thing with dirt on it," as American museologists call the objects of everyday culture.[19] Strictly speaking, the useless gestures that make people and things step *out of line*, bring out the *thingness* of the human being itself. What we claim by looking at the disturbing things is our hidden longing to be allowed to be useless, banal, un-effective, and without preset function. As one possible effect, however, a different place within these human-thing-constellations is suddenly assigned to the human being itself: he or she moves out of the center and instead closer to the edge of the (anthropo-)scene.

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[17] Peter Fischli and David Weiss, "The Way of Things," http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/the-way-of-things/, acc. on January 16, 2022.

[18] Michel Foucault, "Preface," in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), xxi.

[19] Cf. Gottfried Korff, "Zur Eigenart der Museumsdinge [1992]," in *Museumsdinge. deponieren – exponieren*, ed. by Martina Eberspächer et al. (Köln, Weimar: Böhlau, 2002), 140.

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