



# Mortality

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## Die letzte Ordnung. Tote hinterlassen Dinge (The last order[ing]: Things left behind by the dead)

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Die letzte Ordnung. Tote hinterlassen Dinge (The last order[ing]: Things left behind by the dead)**, by Christine Süssmann and Cornelia Staffelbach, Zurich, Friedhof Forum Zürich, 2019, 112 pp., CHF 22.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-9524142-2-4

This beautifully designed book is the catalogue accompanying an exhibition with the same title, which ran from the 12<sup>th</sup> September until the 28th November 2019, in the Friedhof Forum in Zurich, Switzerland. For a few years the Friedhof Forum has been in operation as the City of Zurich's information centre on bodily disposal, funerary culture and history. The Forum, located near the main entrance of Sihlfeld cemetery, organizes lectures, tours and exhibitions. It also acts as Zurich's 'Office for the Last Journey,' providing the citizens with information about funeral planning. Permanently exhibited in the Friedhof Forum are the human remains resulting from the first modern cremation in Switzerland in 1889. The book-cum-catalogue of the temporary exhibition contains a number of photographs that show how magnificent and imaginative 27 selected objects of the dead have been put on display. These can be seen amidst a great deal of other objects that have all been painted light blue.

*Die letzte Ordnung. Tote hinterlassen Dinge* (The last order[ing]: Things left behind by the dead) deals with personal objects that remain after a death, the survivors who care about these things, and relationships between the living and the dead. After an informative chapter on facts and figures (pp. 7–19) follows a chapter about '27 things that are precious to people' (pp. 21–77). The subsequent chapter presents eight conversations detailing people's experiences of clearing the living spaces of the deceased (pp. 79–103). Next, a brief chapter deals with how to handle the digital data left behind (pp. 105–109). The slim volume is concluded with two pages of information on 'death cleaning,' with excerpts from an interview with Swedish author Margareta Magnusson, who introduced this term (*döstädning* in Swedish) with a book that became an international best-seller.

Sorting out the material belongings of a deceased close relative can be a tall order. A material ordering, a way of life, is going to be dissolved. Yet, as Süssmann and Staffelbach point out, the immaterial aspects of the ordering may be passed on to the next generation. Never before, they argue, have the dead left behind so much stuff. The average living space per person has increased. People are getting considerably older. Their offspring already possess all they need. Moreover, the things of the dead tend to be out of fashion. Consequently, an estimated fifteen to twenty cubic meters of garbage is left behind per person. Some precious objects, often with a very personal meaning, may be kept. Those selected for the exhibition are illustrated, next to information about the deceased, the inheritor, the latter's relationship to the dead person, how and when the object came into their possession, and why they kept or obtained this particular object. The things and the reasons given vary widely. A granddaughter, for example, chose a small enamel teapot (*Chrütli-Teehäfel*), pp. 56–57) out of 'an avalanche of things' because the everyday object had been handed down the female line from her great-great-grandmother to her grandmother. The eight interviews with people who took care of the dead's belongings, either their retention or riddance, provide further insight about what it entails. Telling is the account of a man (pp. 90–92) who outlines the tensions between him and his siblings, and the overwhelming confrontation with things without knowing what to do with them, in clearing the house of his father in another part of the country. It had taken eight months altogether. He decided not to burden his son with a similar ordeal.

I highly recommend this book to researchers specifically interested in, and anyone having to deal with, these matters. It makes one acutely aware of how the agency of the dead complicates the disposal of their stuff.

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