

**Inaugural lecture**

# **Stitches of Care**

## **Practising Solidarity through Fashion**

INAUGURAL LECTURE BY PROF. DR. DANIELLE BRUGGEMAN

**Radboud University**



## Inaugural lecture prof. dr. Daniëlle Bruggeman



This inaugural lecture highlights how art, design and critical fashion practice expose the importance of moving beyond the transactional approach of the capitalist fashion industry. It focuses on two perspectives

that deserve much more attention in the fashion and sustainability discourse. The first perspective builds upon post- and decolonial theories and highlights the importance of humbling the dominant Western, Eurocentric perspective of industrial fashion, in order to do more justice to the presence of multiple co-existing fashion systems and to affirm and activate a plurality of ways of making and wearing clothes. The second perspective focuses on humbling our perspective as human beings in relation to other species and

nature. From a post-anthropocentric perspective, it proposes a practice of interspecies solidarity that helps to move beyond a human-centred focus where the human is superior to ecosystems in nature and/or to non-human entities. This inaugural lecture is a call to open up a pluriverse of fashion systems and solidary practices of making and wearing that have to do with being-*with* the world

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## STITCHES OF CARE

PRACTISING SOLIDARITY THROUGH FASHION

## **Stitches of Care**

*Practising Solidarity through Fashion*

*Inaugural lecture, delivered upon acceptance of the Chair in Fashion and Sustainability at the Faculty of Arts of the Radboud University, on Thursday, March 20, 2025.*

door prof. dr. Daniëlle Bruggeman

## Stitches of Care: Practising Solidarity through Fashion

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## 1. Introduction



*Garment that belonged to Daniëlle's mother, embraced by stitches of care by Borbála Csiszár. Photo made by Rachelle Stoffels during the inaugural lecture 'Stitches of Care' on March 20, 2025.*

I would like to start on a personal note. The garment that you see here belonged to my mother. She passed away 25 years ago, and this is one of the few garments that we kept. It had holes in it, but I have worn it a couple of times. During one of our research projects, 'Practising Solidarity' at ArtEZ, I shared this garment with a then M.A. student, now ArtEZ alumna, Borbála Csiszár. As part of her artistic research, she invited every participant of the 'Practising Solidarity' project to share pieces of clothing with her. These were all clothes that hold special, personal memories or have emotional value. She wanted to connect garments to each other, to create connections between people's personal stories and memories—honouring these beloved garments. And I gave her this piece of clothing. When Borbála returned the garment to me, she said: 'I embraced the holes with caring stitches.' Embracing these holes with stitches of care, hence the title of my lecture, truly touched me. Borbála repaired this garment, so dear to me, with so much love, care and attention.

This brings me to the practice of *offering more attention to...* During our 'Practising Solidarity' project at ArtEZ, we conceptualised practising solidarity in terms of 'offering more attention to.' We did so by building upon the work of Iris Murdoch (1997 [1962]), philosopher and novelist, which fashion scholar Aurélie Van de Peer brought to our attention.<sup>1</sup> Murdoch's notion of 'unselfing' was particularly important. 'Unselfing' is a matter of offering undivided attention to someone/something else who/that did not receive enough attention. Murdoch understands unselfing as 'a transformative process characterised by a

<sup>1</sup> Aurélie Van de Peer, 'From Is to Ought: What Fashion Gains When It Loses Its Cool,' *Press & Fold* 2 (2022): pp. 196-197.

growing attunement to the surrounding world. (...) the idea of unselfing stresses the need for a decreased egocentricity and for a greater sensitivity towards other beings and objects in the world.<sup>2</sup> Offering attention to, and especially offering *selfless* attention to, is rare in a consumer culture that is interconnected to the dynamics of the dominant industrial fashion system. This system epitomises a market-driven, ego-centric and fast-paced culture of ‘attention competition.’ Thus, practising a process of ‘unselfing’ and developing a greater sensitivity towards other living beings and objects in our more-than-human world is ever more urgent.

In my inaugural lecture today, I will share a few perspectives with you that are, in my view, fundamental when it comes to fashion and sustainability. As a cultural theorist, I work closely with artistic and design-driven practice-based researchers, related to the topics of fashion and sustainability. Based on this experience, I want to highlight the role of art and design to open up new perspectives and to move beyond a mindset informed by the industrial capitalist system. My focus is on the cultural value systems that underlie fashion and how we, as wearers, interact with garments and textiles. Art, design and critical fashion practice expose the importance of moving beyond the transactional approach of the capitalist fashion industry. Art, design and critical fashion practice also acknowledge the presence of multiple co-existing fashion systems, a plurality of ways of ‘doing’ fashion and of making and wearing clothes.

## 2. Alternative Systems: Beyond Non-solidary, Industrial Strategies

Going back to the artistic practices of making and repairing clothes that I started with: this exemplifies a material practice that we have generally lost touch with in Western consumer culture. These material practices of making and repairing stand in stark contrast to today's hyper-capitalist fashion industry. And industry that generally plucks common resources from their natural context to be monetised as tradable commodities. Especially with the rise of fast fashion and more recently ultra-fast fashion, the dynamics of the industrial fashion system are driven by the dynamics of the (hyper)capitalist market economy. We have known for decades now how the era of hyper-capitalism has become inextricably interconnected to the logic of fashion and consumption. The cult of appearance, a constant desire for the new, and the rapid pace of contemporary Western society, are all expressions of this development. As a system, Western industrial fashion is occupied—or perhaps rather, obsessed—with the production and consumption of new commercialised goods. In these times of advanced capitalism, non-solidary strategies are inherent to how the dominant industrial fashion system operates. These are strategies such as: exploitation, a focus on financial profit and wealth, and a logic of growth and exclusivity—all at the expense of human, animal and planetary wellbeing.

<sup>2</sup> Anna-Lova Olsson, ‘A Moment of Letting Go: Iris Murdoch and the Morally Transformative Process of Unselfing,’ *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 52, no. 1 (2018): pp. 163/165.

At the same time, it is within—or perhaps even *because of*—these dominant power structures, that the desire for alternative fashion practices and alternative fashion systems is most urgently felt. The contemporary consumer culture and ‘throw away’ society demand a more respectful and solidary way of making, wearing and relating to fashion and clothes. This is about challenging and moving beyond an industrial mindset; this is about challenging and moving beyond a mindset focused on growth and consumption. As Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham have argued in *Earth Logic* (2019), ‘systemic change must address the economic growth logic which currently drives the fashion sector.’<sup>3</sup> Responding to the ways in which the circular economy is generally put into practice by the industry, they point out the risks of applying the circular economy as a way to optimise the current industry and to grow the circulation of materials. As long as the principles of circularity are situated within the logic of growth economics, they argue, there is a risk of circulating norms and worldviews that are detrimental to the earth.<sup>4</sup> The ultimate challenge is to find out what serves the wellbeing of the earth *including* the wellbeing of human subjects (as embedded in nature). This is related to economist Kate Raworth's argument in her renowned book *Doughnut Economics* (2017). Raworth describes the challenge of meeting the minimum of what serves human needs (i.e., that no one falls short of life's essentials) while making sure that we do not overshoot planetary boundaries.<sup>5</sup> So how to move beyond that growth logic? How to move beyond that industrial mindset? How to move beyond an understanding of fashion in terms of consumption?

This is where I would like to highlight the role of art, design and critical fashion practice. Over the last decade, we have seen a rise in critical fashion practice. Critical fashion practitioners aim to reflect on the principles, values and pace from which the fast fashion industry operates. And they simultaneously explore alternative approaches. These are creative practitioners who generally work at the intersection of fashion, design and art and use a practice-based research approach to interrogate the current dominant fashion system. They start from a fundamental critique on ‘fashion as a capitalist industry and clothing as a commodity’ and the current industry's mechanisms of alienation and exploitation of ‘workers, land and other living beings’ for financial profit.<sup>6</sup> Critical fashion practitioners expose, analyse and critique the power structures inherent to the fashion industry, such as capitalism and neocolonialism. And they want to move beyond the industrial fashion system, which often conceptualises sustainability and circularity from an industrial mindset and technocratic approach. Instead, these artists, designers and fashion practitioners aim to explore and develop alternative ways of making and wearing clothes based on values of care, solidarity, and wellbeing.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, *Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan* (London: The J.J. Charitable Trust, 2019), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-century Economist* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Warehouse (2021), ‘Fashion Against Capitalism,’ State of Fashion, January 21, 2021, <https://thisisanintervention.org/en/intervention-03-transition-an-introduction/longread-03-part-1-warehouse/>.

Here, the focus is on every day dressing practices. As we all wear clothes, we necessarily interact with the immaterial facets of fashion, such as its social values, its expressions of identity, and its cultural codes and meanings. Even though fashion has become captured by the logic of consumerism, wearing clothes and 'doing fashion' are social and cultural practices. Of course, there is a stark contrast between the industrial challenges (in terms of human rights and the industry's environmental impact) and these small-scale artistic practices. And I do not mean to suggest that these artistic practices offer *the* solution. Yet, these art, design and fashion practices help to create awareness of how the fashion industry operates. They play an important role in exposing, in making visible the dynamics of industrial fashion, opening up new perspectives—and opening up a fashion practice beyond a practice that is necessarily focused on making new products. Here, you can see an example of the project 'Made In\_\_' by our MA Critical Fashion Practices at ArtEZ, presented at Museum Arnhem in 2023; here, they dissected a garment to explore how all these materials, the zippers, the buttons travelled all over the world across many borders.

Very often, these practitioners also highlight the social, emotional, aesthetic and cultural dimensions of making, designing and wearing clothes. This could empower the creative culture, rather than the creative industry, of fashion. Instead of creating impact on a large scale through a logic of growth, these initiatives rather seem to start from the principle 'the next big thing will be a lot of small things.'<sup>7</sup>

Studying these practices has helped me understand the importance of developing more knowledge on every day embodied practices of dressing and wearing. This entails more studies on user (rather than consumer) behaviour that focus on the underlying value systems and world views that inform and motivate these daily practices.

Above all, working with artistic and design-driven researchers in the field of critical fashion practice has given me insight into the importance of two perspectives I want to highlight here. These are two perspectives that, in my view, deserve much more attention in the sustainability discourse if we want to develop and put into practice new and alternative fashion realities based on an ethos of care, solidarity, and human, animal and planetary wellbeing.

### 3. Humbling the Dominant Western, Eurocentric Perspective of Industrial Fashion: Acknowledging a Plurality of Fashion Systems, and a Plurality of Ways of Making and Wearing Clothes

First, I want to highlight the importance of humbling the dominant Western, Eurocentric perspective of industrial fashion. This includes humbling the industrial mindset that we tend to speak from in relation to fashion, clothes and textiles. It is important to acknowledge how Western and Eurocentric power politics continue to cause systemic inequalities.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Lommée, installation art at University of Ghent in solidarity with the Climate Summit in Paris, December 2015. Photo at <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org>.

These Eurocentric power politics have a detrimental effect on what cultural anthropologist Sandra Niessen calls the 'sacrifice zones' of fashion. Niessen defines 'sacrifice zones' as: 'resource-rich lands, generally associated with minority communities that are considered dispensable and exploited for economic gain.'<sup>8</sup> She argues that these sacrifice zones facilitate industrial expansion because they are a source of cheap labour and because indigenous design informs style change (which happens through processes of cultural appropriation). And at the same time, the sacrifice zones are the major sites of waste disposal, including second-hand clothing. As Niessen's work helps us to understand, the fashions, and fashion systems, in these sacrifice zones have been categorised as non-fashion and have been 'othered' by the Western industrial superiority.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the Western fashion system has claimed power over defining what Fashion—with a capital F—is and what is not.

As post- and decolonial theories have taught us,<sup>10</sup> it is important to understand that the dominant Western fashion system reproduces and represents its Other(s) in order to ultimately confirm the power of Western fashion. This is a legacy from the colonial era. It is often argued that the textile trade marks the beginning of 'a typically Western view of the world,' which emerged in parallel with Western industrial dominance.<sup>11</sup> Historically, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the textile industry was 'at the core of the social, political and economic transformations,' as well as 'at the heart of colonialism.'<sup>12</sup> Moreover, '[i]ndisputably, textiles and dress were a part of the economic system that adventuring created and colonialism sustained. (...) The West has tested Eastern materials and ideas in dress and has approved and immediately assimilated them.'<sup>13</sup> These dynamics rooted in the textile trade are still highly relevant to the contemporary fashion industry.<sup>14</sup> This decolonial perspective helps to critically reflect on how the so-called 'non-fashion' clothing traditions have been systematically marginalised by the Western industrial fashion system.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, colonialism, textile trade and industrialism are necessarily interconnected. Today, the fast fashion industry engages in neocolonial practices that generally benefit the Global North, yet comes with high costs for people and the environment of the Global South. And recently, of course, China has also been engaging in neocolonial practices, for example, by opening textile factories in Ethiopia.

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Niessen, 'Fashion, Its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability,' *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 6 (2020): p. 864.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, pp. 859–877.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Gaugele and Titton 2019; Slade and Jansen 2020; Jansen 2020; Niessen 2020; Cheang, Rabine and Sandhu, 2022; Ahmed 2025; Delice 2025; Lewis 2025; and Scrutchen 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Niessen, 'The Prism of Fashion: Temptation, Resistance and Trade,' in *Global Fashion. Local Tradition. On the Globalisation of Fashion*, ed. Jan Brand and José Teunissen, pp. 156–181 (Arnhem: Uitgeverij Terra Lannoo, 2005), p. 157.

<sup>12</sup> Eugenia Paulicelli and Hazel Clark, eds., *The Fabric of Cultures: Fashion, Identity, and Globalization* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Martin and Harold Koda, *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Daniëlle Bruggeman, *More Than Meets the Eye: Dutch Fashion, Identity, and New Materialism* (Ph.D. dissertation, Radboud University, Nijmegen, 2014); Anneke Smelik, Daniëlle Bruggeman, and Maaïke Feitsma, 'Vivid Colours: From the Local to the Global and Back Again: Oilily, Mac, and Maggie and Cora Kemperman,' in *From Delft Blue to Denim Blue: Contemporary Dutch Fashion*, ed. Anneke Smelik (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 84–101.

<sup>15</sup> Sandra Niessen, 'Fashion, Its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability,' *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 6 (2020): pp. 859–877.

In her work on decolonial fashion, cultural and fashion anthropologist Angela Jansen (2020) argues that fashion systems other than the dominant industrial Western fashion system have been denied the possibility to be(come).<sup>16</sup> As Jansen explains, based on the decolonial thinking of sociologist Rolando Vázquez (2018), ‘decolonial fashion discourse is not about including other fashioning systems into contemporary fashion history and assimilating them into the canon of contemporary fashion’s Euromerican normativity, but about restoring, revaluating and acknowledging a diversity of ways of fashioning the body; it is not about erasing difference, but about erasing inequality, distain and denial.’<sup>17</sup> This helps us to understand the importance of studying other fashion systems in their own right.<sup>18</sup> This decolonial approach is, in Jansen’s words, ‘about humbling contemporary fashion epistemology, to re-orient it through alternative trajectories of hope, alternative relations to earth, to community, to language, to bodies, to ourselves; through alternative forms of worlding the world.’<sup>19</sup>

Borrowing the term ‘humbling’ from Angela Jansen, and building upon these perspectives, I want to underline the importance of humbling this dominant, Western perspective of industrial fashion. Therefore, it is essential not to focus on optimising the Western fashion industry, trying to make fashion more sustainable from an industrial mindset. Even though one Fashion system has become dominant, we cannot change that system from the same industrial mindset that it was originally developed from. Rather, it is important to respect, acknowledge and offer more attention to the coexistence of a plurality of fashion systems.

And this is the intention that I see in critical fashion practice; an intention of how to affirm and activate alternative practices of making and wearing clothes—which allows to do justice to the existence of multiple coexisting fashion systems. In *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), anthropologist Arturo Escobar understands design ‘as a tool for reimagining and reconstructing local worlds.’<sup>20</sup> He defines the ‘pluriverse’ by building upon what the Zapatista resistance movement in Mexico ‘already voiced with amazing lucidity and force: *Queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* (We want a world where many worlds fit).’<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it is important to open up to a pluriverse of sociocultural and socionatural configurations of fashion systems and practices of making and wearing. Engaging with garments then becomes a tool to reimagine and reconstruct new local worlds and ontologies—new ways of being—of fashion.

As post- and decolonial theories highlight, practising solidarity starts with recognising and respecting the co-existence of difference localities, cultures, knowledges and systems as well as a plurality of subjective, *lived* experiences. It is a practice of centring marginalised voices, identities, experiences, histories and realities; of embracing other kinds of knowledges;

<sup>16</sup> Jansen, Angela, ‘Fashion and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity: An Introduction to Decolonial Fashion Discourse,’ *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 6 (2020): 815–36.

<sup>17</sup> Jansen 2020, p. 825.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Escobar 2018, pp. 15–16.

and of acknowledging a diversity of ways to fashion the body. This perspective shifts the attention from optimising the dominant fashion system from an industrial perspective, towards an attention on affirming and activating a plurality of ways of making and wearing clothes.

#### 4. Humbling a Human-centric Perspective, and the Response-ability to Develop a Greater Sensitivity to Other Species and Nature

Secondly, I want to highlight the importance of humbling our perspective as human beings in relation to other species and nature. This includes the practice of *offering more attention* to and developing a growing sensitivity towards other living beings and things on the earth. As philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway argues in her seminal work *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), all beings and materialities of the earth live in troubled times. These are times of a damaged earth, with natural resources being exploited by humans and for human purposes. Indeed, we have known for year now that the ways in which human beings enact power over nature and ‘living matter’ has led to the exhaustion and exploitation of biodiversity and natural matter. This requires a post-anthropocentric approach, to move beyond an approach that primarily starts from or serves the dominant human subject.<sup>22</sup>

Haraway offers new ways to rethink our relations to the earth and all its inhabitants—thinking in terms of how ‘human beings are with and of the Earth.’<sup>23</sup> In her view, ‘staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present.’<sup>24</sup> This entails that we acknowledge ‘how we require each other’ and how we ‘become-with each other’ in a continuous state of copresence.<sup>25</sup> In another work, Haraway writes that ‘species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on Earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention.’<sup>26</sup> So this is a practice of learning to pay attention to, for example, the gaze of living animals. This also means recognising that species other than the human race may be looking back. This practice is a way of ‘seeing *again*, to *respecere*, to the act of respect. To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention.’<sup>27</sup> Haraway’s work helps us to understand how all human and non-human species, living beings, and other material inhabitants of the earth become-*with* each other and are at stake to each other. The post-anthropocentric practice of *respecere* may be understood as a practice of *paying attention* to in such a way that acknowledges the relationality and interdependency between all (living) beings and materialities of the Earth. In

<sup>22</sup> Agnès Rocaamora and Anneke Smelik, eds., *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, second edition, in press (London: Bloomsbury, 2025).

<sup>23</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Haraway 2016, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Haraway 2016, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Donna Haraway, ‘Encounters with Companion Species: Entangling Dogs, Baboons, Philosophers, and Biologists,’ *Configurations* 14, nos. 1–2 (2006): p. 102.



addition, this is a way of paying attention that opens up a practice of 'learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-*ability* on a damaged earth,'<sup>28</sup> as Anneke Smelik also recognised in her valedictory lecture, which is about the capacity to respond while taking the responsibility of doing so. In my view, this is a practice of interspecies solidarity that helps to move beyond a human-centred focus where the human is superior to ecosystems in nature and/or to non-human entities.

For those of you who've joined Femke de Vries' artistic research and critical fashion practice during the Conversations earlier this afternoon: her project 'Which animal is present in your garment?' is a great example of how garments can be used as a tool to rethink human-animal relationships. Kate Fletcher, too, expressed in her performative reading this afternoon how clothes are 'possible portals, opening into worlds of shared aliveness and into a sense of our place in a community of living beings.'<sup>29</sup> Garments, clothes and textiles here indeed become tools to rethink the relationship between human beings, animals and nature. And help to create awareness of how we, as human beings, are embedded within ecosystems.

This ecosystems approach is crucial here, and this is also gaining traction in the field of design. In the context of the social, environmental, economic, and political problems of the contemporary textiles and fashion industry, there is a great urgency to deal with materials and natural resources in a more ethical way. In the past decade, a growing number of designers have been exploring ways a new design approach by 'designing with biology' by, for instance, applying biomimicry—to mimic biological principles and processes.<sup>30</sup> These (bio)designers explore how to integrate nature and living organisms into their practices to shape more sustainable design processes and materials. Yet, as recognised in a recent article, written with my former colleagues Lianne Toussaint and Jeroen van den Eijnde, their design inspired by nature often 'involves repurposing biology's best ideas to solve human challenges.'<sup>31</sup> Ironically, these designs seem to function as instruments serving humanity in solving the ecological crises caused by the ways in which humans depleted natural resources in the first place.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore important to explore design practices that challenge the anthropocentric idea that human beings have the exclusive right to shape and use other things (including nature and natural systems) as the means to human ends, without considering the ecological consequences.

Therefore, it is important to move beyond a focus on a human purpose, and rather, design-*with* nature in a way that benefits nature.<sup>33</sup> This points out the need to explore more ecocentric design practices—a way to design *with* and *for* ecosystems.

<sup>27</sup> Haraway 2006, p. 102. Original emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Haraway 2016, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Kate Fletcher, *Fletcher's Almanac: Nature Encounters & Fashion Systems Through the Year*, (Stroud: Quickthorn Books: 2024), p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> William Myers, *Biodesign: Nature, Science, Creativity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014): pp. 8–10.

<sup>31</sup> Emily Kennedy, Daphne Fecheyr-Lippens, Bor-Kai Hsiung, Peter H. Niewiarowski, and Matthew Kolodziej, 'Biomimicry: A Path to Sustainable Innovation,' *Design Issues* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2015), p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Oscar Tomico, Ron Wakkary, and Kristina Andersen, 'Living-with and Designing with Plants,' *Interactions* vol. 30, no. 1 (2023): p. 30.

Indeed, more and more recent research shows the importance of grounding design in more-than-human perspectives.<sup>34</sup> This is increasingly present in the fields of industrial design and interaction design but deserves more attention in the field of fashion and textile design. The challenge here is: how can we move beyond a focus on designing new products for a mere human purpose, towards a design practice that is in service of natural ecosystems? And how can we learn from ecology and how ecosystems—living systems—grow and develop in nature to rethink and redesign the fashion, clothing and textile systems?

Related to the fashion and sustainability discourse, I would say: approaching circularity from an ecosystems approach is crucial. As the posthuman philosophy by Rosi Braidotti explains, we must fundamentally reconsider human and non-human relationships and how human beings are embedded in 'nature-culture continuums.'<sup>35</sup> Anneke Smelik relates posthumanism to fashion and explains that, '[i]n the Anthropocene the human can no longer be considered in terms of superiority to the non-human world.'<sup>36</sup> This requires acknowledging the participation of all human and non-human actors as part of the ecosystems involved. Fashion practitioners or designers may activate the response-*ability*, to borrow Haraway's words again,<sup>37</sup> to practise more care for all living beings and all (living) matter related to fashion, clothing and textiles. This may allow to move beyond the transactional approach of the capitalist fashion industry to open up other understandings of solidarity, respect and care that have to do with being-*with* the world—letting ecosystems flourish again in service of planetary wellbeing.

Here, I want to mention the example of 1 m2 of flax (1 m2 vlas), a project of the Crafts Council NL and The Linen Project (which was initiated by a former colleague at ArtEZ in collaboration with the Crafts Council). In this 1 m2 of flax project, participants are invited to grow 1 m2 of flax in their own garden. They go through the whole process, from seeds to textile. In doing so, participants experience the whole process of growing flax for linen textiles, which helps to awaken an ecological consciousness. Here, the fibres, bacteria, the water are all interdependent in the material co-production of flax and linen. This exemplifies a post-anthropocentric way of learning to collaborate with nature—a way to affirm and activate alternative ways of re-engaging with nature, while moving beyond the industrial logic of production and consumption. And a way to practise how to live-with the earth and all its material inhabitants.

While arguing for a non-human centric perspective may suggest moving beyond the issue of human solidarity, we must not let post-anthropocentric approaches deny the need of offering more attention to human subjectivity. It is ever more urgent—especially in the

<sup>34</sup> Ron Wakkary, *Things We Could Design: For More Than Human-Centered Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021); Marysol Ortega Pallanez, M. 'Healing Our Designing: Practices of Care for Human and More-than-Human Relations,' *DRS Biennial Conference Series* (June 2024): pp. 23–28; Elisa Giaccardi, Johan Redström and Johanna Nicenboim, 'The Making(s) of More-than-Human Design: Introduction to the Special Issue on More-than-Human Design and HCI,' *Human-Computer Interaction* vol. 40, no. 1–4 (January 2025): pp. 1–16.

<sup>35</sup> Rosi Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities,' *Theory, Culture and Society* 36, no. 6 (2019): p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Anneke Smelik, 'Fractal Folds: The Posthuman Fashion of Iris van Herpen,' *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* (December 2020): p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 2.



context of the current industrial fashion system and its continued violation of human rights and systemic inequalities—to recognise how marginalised groups of people have been and still are rejected from being human. It matters to become response-able towards all the diverse human, embodied subjectivities and their lived experiences. This is especially true for the fashion industry in which human beings in precarious positions are continuously subjected to systemic de-humanisation.

## 5. In Conclusion: Looking Forward

In my work, at ArtEZ and here Radboud University, I aim to start from an acknowledgement of a co-existence of multiple fashion systems as well as a co-existence of human and non-human participants that we all live-*with*, also recognising nature and the ecology as an active participant here. I intend to bring together art and science, and theory and practice, even more through interdisciplinary research. And I would love to offer more attention to analysing critical fashion practices and their alternative systemic approaches, human-garment relationships and the underlying social and cultural values of how wearers engage with fashion and clothes, and the ways in which human beings are embedded in natural ecosystems, which includes learning to develop a greater sensitivity towards other living beings, animals, organisms and material objects in the more-than-human world around us. This all deserves more attention in fashion research and education.

This professorship allows me to bring together the art, design and critical fashion practice at ArtEZ and the diverse academic disciplines that are relevant in relation to sustainability here at Radboud University. Together with Edwin van Meerkerk, who is endowed professor social and cultural sustainability ('bijzonder lector') at ArtEZ as part of this exchange, I hope to strengthen the relationship between art and science, and theory and practice, in order to develop new research, educational and public programmes and projects that bring together students, artists, designers, scholars, fashion professionals, companies, NGOs, and policy makers. In doing so, we will build upon already existing initiatives like Edwin's Comenius Leadership project on sustainability in higher education, the initiatives of the Radboud Centre for Sustainability Challenges and the Green Office, and the ArtEZ-SPRONG consortium NewTexEco (New Textile Ecosystems), which is a partnership with Saxion Universities of Applied Sciences and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and more than 30 partners from practice.

I will continue to contribute to developing a critical fashion discourse—to help understand and contribute to reimagining and realising new fashion theories, frameworks and strategies for more solidary fashion and design practices that support human wellbeing while being in service of natural ecosystems.

As I've shared with you today, in my view, this entails a stronger focus on developing post-anthropocentric approaches in the fashion and sustainability discourse, thinking through the necessary preconditions and ethical attitudes that are fundamental to acknowledging our (species) interdependence with other human and non-human entities and the material inhabitants on the earth that we continuously become-*with*. Moreover, this entails a continuous awareness of the importance of centring underrepresented and marginalised voices, practices, realities, identities and histories. Not to assimilate these into the dominant fashion system, fashion scholarship or into Eurocentric/Western epistemologies, but as a way of revaluing, respecting, acknowledging and doing justice to other knowledges, lived experiences, ways of living, thinking and doing fashion—offering more attention to those whom had been denied in the industrial fashion system. This requires a collective practice of opening up fashion as a pluriverse of approaches, methods, theories, systems and practices

of making and wearing clothes and textiles. In doing so, it is important to move beyond an oppositional mode of critique, and to start from a positive affirmation of alternative visions for other kinds of futures and realities, which also require practices of learning and unlearning.

Of course, a professorship is made of many people, of cooperations and conversations, so I would like to say to all of you here: as we continue our conversations and explorations together, I hope we can contribute to a growing coalition-in-the-making. I hope that we can collectively practice—through art, design and multiple fashions—moving beyond a mere transactional approach of the fashion system while opening up a pluriverse of fashion systems and solidary practices of making and wearing that have to do with being-*with* the world.

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