

BETHANY WILLIAMS

JOIN COLLECTIVE CLOTHES

ELISA VAN JOOLEN

MATTHEW NEEDHAM

FIT

FOR

PURPOSE

HELEN KIRKUM

CURATED BY
ARMANDO CHANT

25 February -
17 April 2020
UTS Gallery

CONGREGATIONDESIGN



Introduction

Sartorial Integrity may perhaps be, in my opinion, one of the most potent phrases that, if understood in the depths of our being, will change the lexicon of fashion. A design practice that is based on sartorial integrity immediately asks an honest question—are we participating in an industry with a sense of morality and responsibility? In fact, it seeks the best in us and puts up a mirror to our core values that drive us to be creative engines of the world. The fashion industry has, for far too long, ignored its environmental impact of degradation and depletion. Now we need to change the language and the practices to that which is restorative and regenerative. Only then can we be the vanguards of the environment.

For Mahatma Gandhi, clothing was an essential part of his inner quest for truth. By what he chose to wear, he made his morality transparent to the world. In a world of conspicuous fashion consumption, we need to bring back to clothes the cultural and ideological narratives that not only makes us hold on to them longer, but care deeply for the very environment that supplies us with the resources to create.

One of them is *Ahimsa* or non-violence.

“Non-violence is not a garment to be put on and off at will, its seat is in the heart and it must be an inseparable part of our very being”¹. Therefore today, it is imperative that we weave the threads of Ahimsa into the tapestry of fashion. We need to take individual action and find our own moral compass within the cycle of creation, production and consumption. Most of our countries are becoming victims of a centralized and industrialized economic system that is replacing handmade with machine-made; indigenous, cultural skills with assembly line fast fashion. Fashion has become the poster child for social inequalities because this industry continues to look at countries as just sources for raw materials, sources for cheap labour, sources for extraordinary made-by-hand textiles, embroideries and embellishments for which little credit is passed on.

Ahimsa goes to the heart of our dialogue on sustainability and the ethics of fashion production. It holds up a mirror to our technological progress and industrialization. On a fundamental level it asks us if our systems and patterns of consumption are non-violent. Can linear systems of ‘fast’ unscrupulous production, consumption and disposal, creating extraordinary waste and damage to our environment, continue? Or can we create circular systems where the end of one lifecycle of a product becomes the starting point for another lifecycle?

Our quest for authenticity must be paramount in our journey of design and self-discovery. After all, authenticity is at the heart of truthfulness. Mindful luxury is nothing if it’s not authentic and if it doesn’t provide an authentic experience. If the *process* is less important than the end-product then we will continue to be fooled by the destructive, resource depleting systems of newness, novelty and the revolving images of ‘disposable fashion’.

All we need to start with is to invoke the power of individual will and the power to change. After all, history tells us that ‘he who rejects change is the architect of decay’. We must strive to be on the right side of history and bring back humanity into what can be a beautiful, fulfilling communion between creator, producer and user.

Bandana Tewari

- ¹ Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Merton (Ed.), *On Non-Violence*, New Directions: 2007, 10

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Monday – Friday

12 – 6pm

FIT

Was September 17, 2019 the day that Fashion died? At Trafalgar Square in London, more than 200 people – some in funereal clothes complete with black veils – gathered around two black coffins. ‘RIP LFW 1983-2019’ was scrawled on one, while the other simply identified its contents as: ‘Our Future’.

In a theatrical protest suited to the high drama of fashion, the environmental movement Extinction Rebellion labelled the clothing industry as a primary offender in the climate crisis and called for London Fashion Week to be cancelled. With the effects of climate change being felt around the world, and more horrors yet to come, this was not quite a requiem for the fashion industry but a clarion call: Fashion may not be dead, but it needs to change.

Fit for Purpose showcases the work of six designers who articulate the problems of fashion in the context of a global environmental crisis. These are designers who imagine, if not enact, new solutions for production and consumption that has ethical, responsible and socially inclusive pillars at its core. Fit For Purpose captures a growing category of designers who recognise that fashion today is not just about materials but also intention. These practitioners do not consider themselves ‘sustainable designers’ but instead align with a collaborative and transparent way of thinking and making, recognising, as Orsola de Castro founder of the sustainability advocacy group Fashion Revolution says: ‘The only way forward is to share best practice, open source good ideas, push creativity.’²

Footwear designer **Helen Kirkum** cites a process of ‘hacking and remastering’ to create highly collectable pieces that embody a sustainable approach to production. Made from mass-produced footwear sourced out of London’s recycling centres, Kirkum’s pieces reframe the aesthetics of sustainable practice by shattering unflattering perceptions of deconstruction and recycling. Her sneakers exploit the aesthetics of wear and tear; encouraging an appreciation of the old in a culture that worships the new. ‘Here is a movement towards post-commerciality, as small brands strive to take ownership and revive craftsmanship,’³ Kirkum explains. Her sneaker prototypes fetishise the worn and discarded and she cannily uses traditional hand-made practices to fabricate a consumer item that is synonymous with our love affair for the products of mass produced manufacturing and the fast-paced streetwear industry.

Matthew Needham similarly exploits the potency of deconstruction and recycling to inform his ethical design process. After working as an intern in Paris, Needham saw first-hand the scale of waste produced and was concerned by the industry’s culture of disposability, where specially commissioned fabric samples in multiple colours, and toiles (garment trials, usually in calico) are created, with a single one to be used and the rest discarded. In response to this, Needham’s first collection, developed during his BA at Central Saint Martins in London, used industrial, environmental, and everyday waste—‘roofing asphalt, fly-tipped rubbish and upcycled Chanel tweed’—as material. His narrative and anthropological approach stems from his need to combat ‘unconscious’ design practices and reveal the untold story of fashion’s footprint. In scavenging at the edges, Needham allows unexpected narratives of material and formal transformation to emerge. In his hands, waste and discarded items become anecdotal fragments of an industry, and an integral part of his provocation for change.

Needham reframes recycling as a design methodology, building on the nostalgic and sentimental value of clothing and the cultural practices of preservation, inheritance and the archive. ‘I want people to think about owning something that they can have forever, and pass on to their children,’⁴ he says. His designs ask us to consider if luxury is a value embedded within a brand or material, or whether luxury might be represented by the garment’s potential to instigate an emotional response, to trigger memories of past events and interactions. If so, the term ‘luxury’ must be applied to a glove, a jumper or a jacket that may no longer fit but brings with it a trail of poignant memories that articulate its purpose.

Alongside the use of recycling and repurposing materials to address issues of waste, several designers question the idea of value in fashion hierarchies. **Elisa Van Joolen**’s practice considers where the value of fashion resides by collaborating with brands to create ‘propositions’ that establish new processes, and mutual ways of working. ‘Ideas of recycling

Events

Exhibition opening

Tuesday 25 February, 6-8pm

To be launched by Dr Gene Sherman AM, Founder, Executive and Artistic Director of the Sherman Centre for Culture and Ideas

Curator Talk with Armando Chant

Friday 6 March, 12:30pm

Panel discussion - Gallery Warming:

Making Art and Architecture in a Climate Crisis

Tuesday 10 March, 6-8pm

Panellists: Jed Long, Co-Founder and Project Director, Cave Urban; Armando Chant; Angela Tiatia. Moderator: Matt Endacott

Co-presented with Art Month Sydney

Audio described tours 

Tuesday 17 March, 12:30 - 1:30pm

Wednesday 25 March, 5:30 – 6:30pm

Supported by UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion

D&K LOOK BOOK 2019/D&K Covers launch

Thursday 19 March, 6-8pm

Art Month Art at Night

Redfern & Chippendale Precinct

Friday 20 March, 6-8pm

Workshop: JOIN Collective Clothes

Saturday 28 March, 10am - 4pm

Anouk Beckers, JOIN Collective Clothes

\$25 + booking fee, limited places available

Golden Age Guest Screening:

McQueen, 2018

Dir: Ian Bonhôte

Wednesday 8 April, 8:30pm

Paramount House,

80 Commonwealth St, Surry Hills

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and waste are for me not only linked to materials; rather, on how to work together in new ways.⁵ In her *One to One* project, garments are inked with a roller and ‘stamped’ onto other clothing items. The inking process exposes an assemblage of garment types – jeans, sweatshirt, T-shirt, jean jacket – combining ‘the whole scope of fashion into one piece of clothing.’⁶

Using one garment to print on another neutralises the power of a singular ‘brand’. The materiality, structure and form of the original item is highlighted, while the value of the first garment is absorbed by the next, along with the processes embodied in it. For Van Joolen, the work becomes ‘a way to observe the garment’s actual material qualities in a very detailed manner.’⁷ Thus, perceived value is always a shifting proposition.

Ethical design practice must concern itself not only with issues of post-consumer waste but with alternative approaches to production. **JOIN Collective Clothes** re-imagines the fashion system as an open, collaborative and adaptable system, where design and construction happen through workshops and public events; firmly placing the value of creating in the hands of the many, rather than the few.

Anouk Beckers of JOIN says: ‘Fashion is something we all participate in. JOIN Collective Clothes actively accelerates this idea by inviting everyone to JOIN.’⁸ Rather than produce a range of clothing, JOIN’s work amalgamates parts (a trouser leg, a sleeve, etc) made in workshops by diverse members to create a whole outfit. Beckers has also created an open-source manual that allows the user to personalise the garment, adding their own aesthetic. She says: ‘Every form is an addition to a growing collection of clothing pieces that can be assembled and re-assembled into a variety of garments.’⁹

This process playfully critiques the hierarchies of fashion design, blurring the line between designer, maker and wearer. JOIN is a modular system that encourages consumers to become makers by offering ‘ownership, identity and authenticity’¹⁰ and, in the process, challenge the fixed system of fast fashion.

Fashion has always been a bellwether, reflecting the social, cultural and political zeitgeist of the time. In this current moment, many designers are considering how fashion can not only capture, but enact powerful social change in the wider community. Designer **Bethany Williams** cites contributing to society as the core mission of her practice. For her, fashion is an agent for community change and engaging marginalised groups. The collection *Adelaide House* exemplifies Williams’ engaged processes, where she offers ‘unisex designs made from waste collected from [the newspaper] the *Liverpool Echo*, handwoven into new fabric by women in Italy’s San Patrignano drug rehabilitation community, plus recycled denim and organic jerseys produced by female inmates at Surrey’s Downview Prison.’¹¹

Her work demonstrates that the designer’s role is not only as creative catalyst or social narrator; they can also ease or resolve problems that result in significant societal impacts and contributions. “When the girls in San Patrignano see something they have handwoven in *Vogue*, it gives them encouragement and confidence which is really needed in order for them to progress.”¹² Her ethos and strategy revolve around the desire to connect ordinary people, through clothing, to each other and their environment.

Williams apportions a garment’s value to the hands, skills and lives of those who make it. It leads us to ask whether this reframing of fashion from the fast to the treasured can return us to a time of care; what does it look like when fashion’s economic value is proportional to its societal value? A significant challenge is to impress on consumers that such a level of community engagement requires substantial investment, both financial and personal. The fabrication process takes time - and her clothing is not cheap. But there is little mark-up for the consumer and Williams donates percentages back into the communities she works with. 20% of the proceeds from her Adelaide House Collection went to Adelaide House, a women’s refuge in Liverpool that supports female offenders with complex needs across a range of issues.

CONGREGATIONdesign is an anonymous collective composed of photographers, stylists and designers who shun the conceit of ‘designer as identity or icon’ in favour of

List of works

Bethany Williams

Jacket, 2019

Screenprint on recycled black denim

Adelaide House, Autumn/

Winter 2019

CONGREGATIONdesign

Upcycled deconstructed jumper, 2018

Merino wool, upcycled camper bag

Upcycled plastic bag trousers,

2018

Upcycled plastic bag, synthetic, tape

Zine 1, 2017

Recycled paper, plastic sleeve

Elisa van Joolen

One-to-One (R. Mariz), 2017

Textile and ink

Bonne Suits x By Parra x Outour

x Patta

Donated by Bonne, Justus, Gee, Vincent, Remco, Piet

Helen Kirkum

Sneakers, style: YY51, 2016

Mixed recycled components

including leather, suede,

synthetic, rubber, PU, EVA

Royal College of Art Masters

Graduate Collection 2016

Sneakers, style: XD42, 2016

Mixed recycled components

including leather, suede,

synthetic, rubber, PU, EVA

Royal College of Art Masters

Graduate Collection 2016

JOIN Collective Clothes

JOIN Collective Clothes manual

pattern, 2019

Initiative by Anouk Beckers

Matthew Needham

Shopping Trolley Jacket, 2017

Shopping trolley, LV/MH

deadstock, cotton, electrical

circuit board, wire

Man and His Man-Made Future

“Process Collection”, Central

Saint Martins BA Graduate

Collection 2017

Paint Shard Skirt, 2017

Norwegian sea plastic, garment

bag, cotton, paint shards found

in Camden Town, London, scrap

metal, wire, string, glass.

Man and His Man-Made Future

“Process Collection”, Central

Saint Martins BA Graduate

Collection 2017

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collaboration. This ethical, seasonless, community-based collective demands that each contributor create garments from existing pieces, deadstock fabric, even shopping bags to create new items that celebrate skill, craft and collective vision. ‘At the core of CONGREGATION is a plot to conceptualise a new way of working – much of what it does is not about the outcome itself, but the stages of collaboration, support and community in the lead up to it.’¹³ CONGREGATIONdesign asks consumers to engage with the designed item, not with the name or brand. Such a radical, alternative model allows young creatives to work outside of a rigid fashion schedule and retain artistic and creative integrity within a community of like-minded individuals.

Awareness of how things are made, their intrinsic value and their significance are fundamental to the fashion design process. As Orsala de Castro asserts: ‘The emphasis must not be on shutting down the fashion industry, but shifting it – far more rapidly than it already is – towards alternative, innovative models that promote creativity, craftsmanship and a meaningful form of fair and decent employment for millions of people around the world.’¹⁴

Certainly, sustainability as an ethos should be embedded within any design practice or company. However, for many the term has become so all-encompassing and daunting that it seems near-impossible to achieve. Such a change necessitates a re-imagining of sustainability in the context of ethical, responsible and conscious decision-making. These designers show how can fashion contribute to an ethical and responsible design culture that has environmental, cultural and human awareness at its heart. As Bethany Williams puts it: ‘As a designer thinking for the future, it is a case of problem-solving all the issues that face our generation – from the planet to the people. If we don’t do it, who is going to?’¹⁵

Armando Chant

References

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- ² Castro, O, 2019, *Fashion Revolution calls for an end to fashion weeks*, Fashion Revolution, viewed 30 January 2020, <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/fashion-revolution-calls-for-a-new-approach-to-fashion-weeks/>.
- ³ Francis, L., 2016, *The Royal 20: Helen Kirkum*, 1 Granary, viewed 30 January 2020 <https://1granary.com/designers-3/schools/royal-college-of-art/the-royal-20-helen-kirkum/>
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- ¹⁰ Beckers, Join Collective Clothes.
- ¹¹ Conlon, S, 2018, “*Bethany Williams: ‘I love turning waste into something cool’*”, The Guardian, viewed 30 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2018/jun/10/bethany-williams-ethical-fashion-turn-waste-into-cool>
- ¹² Conlon, *Bethany Williams*.
- ¹³ Eells, H, 2018, *The anonymous London collective changing its team every season*, Dazed and Confused, viewed 30 January 2020, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/40217/1/the-anonymous-london-collective-fast-fashion-royal-college-of-art>
- ¹⁴ Castro, *Fashion Revolution calls for an end to fashion weeks*.
- ¹⁵ Conlon, *Bethany Williams*.

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Contributors

Armando Chant is an artist, designer, and academic whose creative practice engages with an explorative approach to fashion where the image and garment produced are seen not as a final outcome but as an interpretive tool. Armando currently works as a fashion design lecturer at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and is coordinator for the Honours program.

Bandana Tewari is a lifestyle editor, sustainable activist and formerly the editor-at-large as well as the fashion features director of *Vogue* India.

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