

Clothing Upcycling, Textile Waste and the Ethics of the Global Fashion Industry

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Abstract

This article addresses the fashion movement referred to as ‘clothing upcycling’ and the observations of textile practitioners and designers in Otago, New Zealand utilising these methods to further understand the upcycling movement and how these local actions connect to the global upcycling movement. This article is informed by a more substantive sociology masters project which interviewed local designers about what they were upcycling and why they were using this approach in their design. This research centres on a group working in a somewhat obscure and isolated region of the world yet because fashion is a globally connected industry, all designers, textile practitioners, and textile workers working conditions, production and sales are constrained by the current state of global economics and the global fashion industry even if the local environment and responses of various communities to these factors is distinctive. This makes clothing upcycling in Otago, an interesting comparison to the industry forces and fashion initiatives other writers and critics are witnessing in their local fashion scene. The term ‘clothing upcycling’ is chosen for its current relevance within fashion theory especially theories discussing the human and environmental ethics of both fashion production, fashion consumption and textile and clothing disposal and recycling.

Keywords: clothing upcycling; global fashion ethics; textile waste; textile employment.

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Introduction

This article overviews certain slow fashion themes presenting within my current sociology masters research at the University of Otago. My research examines textile practitioners who design clothing utilising second-hand fabrics and clothing in the city of Dunedin, New Zealand. While the research centres on a specialised local textile practice in an obscure localised fashion centre down under, it applies a macro lens onto a global fashion phenomenon making it relevant to any global textile and fashion audience.

Dunedin, even New Zealand, is considered to be peripheral as a global fashion centre but Dunedin acts as a national fashion hub¹ and the surrounding Otago region has a strong textile production and clothing manufacturing history. It also has a rich textile and home-crafting legacy. New Zealand and Dunedin fashion have localised traditions which produce certain stylistic features, features that local upcycle designers work also reflects, but the emphasis in this research is to discover more about clothing upcycling, what localised upcycling practices are, how these practitioners operate in the current global fashion environment and why the work that they are doing is so relevant to the future direction of the fashion industry.

My current sociology research interviews and photographically documents ten clothing upcyclers discussing their labour conditions, how they have organised their practice, the supports and obstacles they experience in their upcycling work and how their ideas and the way they organise their practice comments on the fashion industry. While this article does not contain any direct quotes from participants, participant interviews have informed this discussion. Otago Human Ethics consent has been granted from the University of Otago for this research and all participants have knowingly consented to participation.²

The story of upcycling is a story of how local textile practitioners are responding to global fashion problems through coordinated and individual actions. Their actions are informed by the global 'slow fashion' and 'clothing upcycling' movements and participants are pursuing these processes due to their love for textiles, to work at something they love, and as a step to becoming more sustainable and self-reliant while sharing their skills and teaching others how to develop their creativity and self-reliance.³ These processes, like any hand-crafting process, are very difficult to make financially viable and with neoliberal economic policy and manufacture firmly entrenched⁴ there is little institutional and policy support offered to these designers/artists so how do they manage financially and why does this 'uneconomic' fashion process and fashion philosophy matter so much to the group?

'Clothing upcycling' is a popular contemporary fashion term and a design approach which offers possibilities to both comment on, and to augment, the current unsustainable global fashion system. Upcycling involves not only the much needed recycling of second-hand textiles, but unlike recycling, upcycling actually increases the value of these discarded and often stigmatised materials by creating inspiring new and useful designs.

Only a select few people in the world can afford to buy expensive boutique designer clothing that is often hand-crafted, designed to last and even 'upcycled.' Clothing which offers more personal customisation than that of the cheapest clothing retailers. Yet there are so many people in the world who cannot afford to purchase this type of clothing and this group are often compelled to buy the clothing that they can afford at the time. To be seen with dignity is often viewed as expressing personal dignity by being well presented so those who are financially struggling in society often feel the need to 'dress right' acutely. This is one of the underlying factors that drives the production of faster and cheaper fashion and the constant replacement and disposal of these redundant items.⁵ This is also why writers on this topic, such

1. Sally Weller, "Creativity or costs? Questioning New Zealand's fashion success: A methodological intervention," *Journal of Economic Geography*, no. 14 (2014): 721–2.
2. University of Otago, Otago Human Ethics consent (Reference Number: 18/176, November 14, 2018).
3. Angela McRobbie, *be Creative* (Malden: Polity Press, 2016), 60–115.
4. Jane Kelsey, *The Fire Economy* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Ltd, 2015).
5. Lucz Siegle, *Is Fashion Wearing Out The World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011).

as Clark emphasise that slow fashion research is a systemic process which must analyse how all the actors and processes align in order to make systems change.⁶

According to Jane Milburn from the Australian online organisation *Textile Beat* in 1992, the annual average consumption of clothing was under 6 kgs per person per annum while in 2017 it was nearly 14 kgs per person. In 2017 women's clothing was also reported as the cheapest it has been in 28 years, since 1989. According to World Fibre Reports 2011-2017, in 1992 we annually consumed around 39000 million kilos of fabric per annum with over half being comprised of natural fibres. In 2016 the overall fabric consumption is 100000 million kilos per annum with only 30000 kilos of that being natural fibres meaning natural fibres are now under a third of total fibre consumption. The percentage of this total consumption being comprised of man-made fibres verses animal and plant fibres is rising and synthetic fabrics are not equipped as natural fibres are, to decompose.⁷ Although there are industries working on technical solutions to break down these fibres, the 'old fashioned' idea of slowing down clothing consumption and being conscious and mindful to the features of the industry which compel people to be 'passive purchasers' is a much harder sell.

The participants in this research have all demonstrated a reluctance to work with these synthetic fabrics but they do not want them in the landfill so there is the dilemma of what to do with all these cheaply-produced synthetics we have created and the moral question of whether we should be manufacturing more if we do not know how to recycle the synthetic waste we already have.

The current fashion industry, like many other large-scale global industries, is driven towards delivering ongoing and increasing shareholder profit and with few regulations on human and environmental resource use, this quest for profit and efficiency fuels the production of throw-away fashion, poor human rights for textile practitioners, toxic textile processes and the physical and ethical weight of this non-decomposing mass which is rapidly clogging up the planet. It seems the fast-fashion industry and fast-fashion consumers want to throw it away to 'embrace the new' but where is away? If the new global emphasis about moving towards sustainability is to be achieved then clothing consumption and waste must be dealt with in a localised closed-loop system.⁸ People must assess and take responsibility for their personal consumption and waste and governments must mandate to regulate and prioritise these societal shifts. We need strong movement from citizens, government and industry to effectively move production and employment to a more sustainable global model. We need the recognition that the material needs of everyone is everyone's concern.

Clothing Upcycling

With clothing 'upcycling' the emphasis is on the improvements and enhancements of discarded textile materials through the process of refashioning them into new clothing. It is a fashion phenomenon, a re-emphasis on refashioning and an alteration of the notion of recycling where rather than 'a gradual devaluation in the value of the product'⁹ such as a patch on the knee or making rags from an old sheet, the upcycling process and approach adds value to the materials or item. It is a process which knowingly questions human need, the value and meaning of materials, and the ideas and processes that have helped shape the piece's newfound form.

While the term may be new, reusing fabric within home-sewing, patchwork and restyling garments has a long tradition. Clothing upcycling has 'poverty' and 'making-do' associations attached to its making and wearing, but it also speaks of ingenuity and originality. Some participants have expressed audience's negative reaction to their work due to perceiving the final product as second-hand. Rather than being seen as designer chic, second-hand materials made them uncomfortable and they were not willing to

6. Hazel Clark, "SLOW + FASHION—an Oxymoron—or a Promise for the Future?," *Fashion Theory*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2008): 427–46.

7. Jane Milburn, *Slow Clothing: Finding meaning in what we wear* (Brisbane: Textile Beat, 2017): 17–8.

8. Alison Gwilt, *A Practical Guide to Sustainable Fashion* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014).

9. Gwilt, 146.

wear clothing that was upcycled. Customers who did show interest wanted to pay less than their asking price, which was already low considering the time and creativity they had put into the process. For some this contributed to a move away from upcycling to other slow fashion techniques and for others it illustrated a need for careful presentation and branding of their work to draw emphasis on the design process involved and their professionalism.

Where the term 'upcycling' officially ends remains imprecise because it specifies the process of design but can also incorporate the process of self-styling. This can be through op-shopping for as in ready-wear ethos, the shopper/sewer mixes and matches eclectic eras, styles, sizes and states of repair catapulting a new array of stylistic tropes facilitating a greater emphasis on personalised style over more pre-packaged looks available at a new clothing outlet. Many participants are drawn initially to a particular garment or second-hand fabric remnant and build their design out from this. Carefully inspecting the item in store trying not to make their interest apparent. Holding it up, visualising what they would do to it to make it sing.

Participants' backgrounds and approaches

I personally have been making my own adornment from second-hand materials since I was 12 growing up living the 'sustainable lifestyle' with my parents and siblings. Living in poverty but surrounded by nature and my mother's extended family. These aspects of my character feed my design philosophy. In my sociology research I am the researcher but am also a fellow clothing upcycler.

The participants all defined themselves as outsiders to the fashion industry even though some express that they are not necessarily anti-fashion. They are on the periphery of the periphery, balancing on changing ground wanting to make social change, to get respect for what they are doing and creating, and trying hard to find creative and meaningful employment in an arena they are experienced in and passionate about. This group not only make but many are active promoters and advocates of the upcycling and slow fashion movements. The participants are all strong in the belief that change starts on the personal level and they all feel that what they are doing is important and will make a difference to their lives and the lives of others. This does not take away from the fact that it is still difficult to sustain their practices.

Participants have been upcycling for different lengths of time, they design for themselves, as gifts to others, as exchange, and for sale. They have practices that have evolved from different creative arenas which are often cross-disciplinary. Some exhibit their work as fashion, craft and as art and wearable art and participants have sold their work as clothing, fashion, art. All participants mentioned the societal need to reduce the consumption of fast fashion. For some participants being politically active on these issues is vitally important whereas for others the political act is the doing, living creatively, to one's ethics and leading by example. Many participants saw the change happening through the sharing, learning and teaching of these textile skills. This small group of localised 'clothing upcyclers' are using second-hand textiles consciously and deliberately, and in exciting and challenging ways. They are inspiring the local public to think about the ethics of the fashion industry, to support local makers; especially 'upcycler designers,' and to give upcycling a go themselves.

Upcycling is costly, it takes time, attention, creativity and care. It grabs hold of the 'ready-made' aesthetic reminding us it does not take a 'designer' wardrobe to dress well, you can buy second-hand and vintage and can alter or make clothing yourself¹⁰ and it is okay to have a distinctive look, it should be the basis of being a fashionista at any place and time. These movements utilize the old but they are not looking backwards. They are incredibly 'now' while simultaneously responsive future thinking ideas.

Upcycling embraces the haute-couture ethos that textiles and clothing are expensive to produce and purchase, and should be something regarded with value and of quality. When people put this level of thought, attention and creativity into their hand-crafting, this is when clothes and personal dress become

10. Hilary Radner, "Making Do": Intersubjectivity, film, fashion and bricolage. Inaugural Professorial Lecture Series," Dunedin: University of Otago, (July 14, 2005).

art. Clothing upcycling is a social movement and many of the participants' practices could be considered creative social enterprise that enrich the local community and environment, but the people doing this work need to be supported to get their message and their work circulated.

Research Methodology

This clothing upcycling research project is qualitative and inductive and interviews and photographs ten local clothing upcycler practitioners. Eight of the participants also took part in a Public Seminar on April 24th, 2019, *Fashion Revolution Day*,¹¹ where we spoke to our work and the topics underpinning this research.¹²

The main theorists for this research are Angela McRobbie¹³ and her theories on the textile and fashion industry, its gendered employment, precarious employment and 'passion work.' I also adopted Grace McQuilten and Anthony White's approach which discusses art as a form of social enterprise with fashion firmly locate within the arts making it an easy model to transfer to my research.¹⁴ McQuilten's (2017) article on ethnic textile groups in Melbourne, discusses their reasons for forming, how they organise their group based on their values, and the socio-economic conditions they navigate in their communities.¹⁵ I have adapted these frameworks to frame the participants as a shared community of upcyclers and to assess the individual and group motivations, expectations and organisational principles that guide their practices.

In New Zealand we are losing local textile and arts employment and knowledge through the loss of funding, development and employment in these industries. Utilising social enterprise models could offer new possibilities for organising textile practice outside purely commercial operations but as White and McQuilten acknowledge, the arena of social enterprise is rife with its own stories of exploitation.¹⁶ Many of the participant's practices in this research I would class as social enterprise as they span the art/fashion nexus in their design philosophy, they make, teach, sell, exchange and gift their work in ways that engage with the public on the importance of embracing slow fashion and participants' reasons for practicing are based on principles of promoting public and environmental good.

Authors Molley and Larner assess the recent history of the New Zealand fashion industry. They comment on the changes the globalised 'new economy' has bought about for those employed in this female-dominated industry on New Zealand fashion design. They assess how experiences and perceptions on "the nature of work" and of "the working self" are underpinned "...changes in relations of both production and consumption." The authors write that women's global labour has generally been addressed through the lens of the third world or poor exploited garment worker and the female first-world consumer. Theorists have not recognised the role and history of female workers within the first world formal economy and how this is linked to globalization. They have not recognised that first world women may be consumers of fashion, but they are often fashion workers too.¹⁷

In *Reflections on Feminism, Immaterial Labour and the Post-Fordist Regime* Angela McRobbie references Larner & Molloy's (2009) text noting the New Zealand fashion industry as an unusual but no-

11. Fashion Revolution, <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/>.

12. Clothing Upcycling Seminar, Dunedin, <https://www.facebook.com/UpcyclingClothingSeminarDunedin>.

13. Angela McRobbie, *be Creative* (Malden: Polity Press, 2016); Angela McRobbie, "Reflections on feminism, immaterial labour and the post-Fordist Regime," *New Formations* (2011), 60–6.

14. Grace McQuilten and Anthony White, *Art as Enterprise: Social and economic engagement in contemporary art* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016).

15. Grace McQuilten, "The political possibilities of art and fashion based social enterprise," *Continuum* vol. 31, no. 1 (2017): 69–83.

16. McQuilten & White (2016), 137–9.

17. Maureen Molley and Wendy Larner, *Fashioning Globalisation: New Zealand Design, Working Women and the Cultural Economy* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), 36.

table example of a female-centred industry that has been so successful.¹⁸ McRobbie writes about the way labour has been shaped within post-Fordist regimes noting that fashion industry wages and employment stagnation has increased precarity in the creative job market, yet this restructuring of the job market has also allowed for new entrepreneurial enterprise driven by people's passion for fashion and their wish to follow their creative dreams in their work.¹⁹

Influence of Fashion Movements

Alternative economies such as make-your-own, local and non-monetary exchange all connect to a search for alternative ways of belonging. One of the questions asked of participants' in this research is how fashion movements influence their work. While some participants are theoretically guided in their work many strands of the various movements overlap and participants are often making from their personalised understanding of these various ideas without demonstrating the need or the inclination to specify where every aspect of their thinking originates. While some participants' works did have specific political messages and theoretical influences, participants' retellings of their process and their textile upcycling journey emphasised their personalised story and their need to make from this personal space, not a theoretical one.

Anti_fashion and Beyond Fashion

In her Anti_fashion Manifesto, Lidewij Edelkoort writes that the fashion styles that have traditionally been most popular are those that enforce class and social divisions and emulate the tastes of the upper-class.²⁰ Dunedin designer and fashion tutor Rekha Shailag writes that self-image is not unitary but is "continually disrupted by the circulation of global, local and specific discourses." She writes that these fashion trends elude to a "conceptual space of 'beyond' fashion." I interpret this as the way fashion both interprets and is shaped by social phenomena and therefore fashion can still be an effective tool for enabling particular future social directions.²¹ Authors Clark and Rottman write that "the body is formed or shaped by fashion, which assumes the power to reveal, conceal or enhance unclothed flesh."²² This quote emphasizes fashion's tendency to reproduce 'naturalized' cultural norms and ideals, yet it also alludes to the space clothing provides for wearers, the fashion industry, and fashion designers to critique, problematize and unsettle these ideals. In this same wish to distinguish through fashion, many people who can access upcycled pieces and self-fashion want to do so or are building up their confidence to do so. They too want to distinguish themselves, to be seen as having their own fashion ideas. People who have their own style, whose creativity is not dampened by conservative tastes of others.

Clark and Rottman discuss the superficiality of much traditional fashion literature but how the increased mediation of fashion has led to an opening up of the research field and an increased familiarity with the public's knowledge of fashion language. It has also increased public awareness of the strong and multi-layered connection clothing has to reveal the politics of people's lives.²³ Clark and Rottman emphasise the connectedness between the speed of fast fashion, the global and financial inequality between producer and western consumer and the new movement of slow fashion that is trying to acknowledge the issue of 'who makes your clothes?' and what are the environmental impacts from this addictive and 'reiterative' status symbol? Their comments also refer to the Rana Plaza disaster, and the impact the

18. McRobbie (2011), 60–6.

19. McRobbie (2016), 87–115.

20. Lidewij Edelkoort, "Anti-Fashion: a manifesto for the next decade," 2nd ed. (Jacques: Trend Union, 2015).

21. Rekha Rana Shailag, "Post-Fashion, Hybridity, the unconventional: Implications for the end of fashion," in *Scope*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2017): 103–13. Dunedin: Otago Polytechnic.

22. Clark and Rottman (2017), 192.

23. Clark and Rottman, 187, 189.

mediation of the reality of these garment workers' lives has had on western consumers' recognizing our implicit culpability in this very form of global slavery.²⁴

Slow Fashion and Slow Clothing

In an earlier influential article on slow fashion, Clark argues that the slow fashion movement is not an oxymoron, and that these initiatives are slowly yet steadily working to reform designers and consumers' attitudes towards fashion. The movement is linked with consumer attitudes toward their self-image and the clothing they purchase and wear to express this identity. Clark writes that fashion has predominately been a movement associated with speed and newness with a drive to fuel the turn-over of consumerable wearable trends. Clark states the need to undo the hierarchical relationships between producer, designer and consumer through assessing the relationship between throw-away fashion and sustainability. After identifying this relationship transparency in fashion production chains needs to be established and maintained²⁵ but regulation costs money and slows down trade so industry needs government and consumer pressure and resistance to change their mode of operation.

Jane Milburn has switched the term slow fashion to slow clothing in the title of her latest book taking a more social science-based and environmental sustainability-based approach to how we do fashion. She sees humans as responsible for clothing ourselves and feels we should be conscious of how we do this and how we can act personally to subvert the global fashion system. Milburn inspires others to participate in the slow fashion movement through running upcycling workshops, writing books, through her website *Textile Beat* and through the upcycled pieces she makes and wears. She encourages others to buy second-hand, discover and explore their own creativity and to have the courage and pride to wear their own creations. Many slow fashion principles are based on ideas of sustainability and how humans should interact with the planet and with other people. Much of this philosophy is enacted in the way an individual wants to change their own life to be more connected and that change starting with the self. But this idea also links with collective identity, of creating community and working together as a global movement. Milburn states that slow fashion principles are to: 'wear natural, quality, local, few, care, make, revive, adapt and salvage.' Milburn suggests that the reader become the 'threads of change' emphasising the way slow fashion or slow clothing is an evolutionary change we can all be part of.²⁶

Second-hand shopping

New research results from the ThredUp 2019 annual resale report suggests that the second-hand clothing market presents a major threat to the new clothing industry and is predicted to overtake the new clothing market within 10 years.²⁷ The most common place for participants to source their materials are at the second-hand shops and most of them purchase their own clothing second-hand too. The participants note that the quality of materials and garments available at second-hand shops in the last ten years has degrading and it takes a lot of sorting through the glut of throw-away fashion to find a garment or fabric with more integrity. The range of people that now shop second-hand locally is also growing as the global figures suggest and customers must shop around the op-shops to find a bargain. Second-hand shops also have a weight of donations from a relatively affluent city populous with a seasonal tide of migrating students with no room for their excess clothing.

24. Clark and Rottman, 191.

25. Hazel Clark, "SLOW + FASHION—an Oxymoron—or a Promise for the Future?," *Fashion Theory*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2008): 427–46.

26. Milburn (2017), 117.

27. Dara Prant, "Thredup reports resale will outpace fast fashion, what revenue streams work best for media companies," *Fashionista*, vol. 3, no. 19 (2019). <https://fashionista.com/2019/03/thredup-resale-report-2019>.

Clothing waste

Clothing waste is an escalating problem within our global garment manufacturing system and this research explores how creative local practice, and the unique upcycling initiatives of these designers are critiquing this topic through what the designs they create, their ideas and approach and their sheer determination to pursue this practice despite its low monetary reward.

The issue of textile waste is particularly critical in respects to the level of Co₂ these materials are creating in our local and global landfills and the world's need to drop CO₂ levels by 20% by 2030 in order to avert global catastrophe.²⁸

Clothes dumping in New Zealand

Clothes dumping is a growing issue locally and globally as well with the majority of Dunedin op-shop workers being volunteers who are not getting paid to sort and load clothing. Second-hand shops are constantly reporting they are having unsaleable clothing dumped on them meaning they have to pay to dispose of it all which is costly to their business.²⁹ This clothing dumping becomes acute during the Christmas season.

The job of recycling is a mammoth undertaking and it needs proper resourcing and local councils need to set up these facilities. There is also a need to reduce consumption at the household level, district level and at the national level. Manufacturers also need consumer demand to produce clothing that is easy to dismantle, decompose and to repurpose.

Much of New Zealand's clothing waste is exported and there needs to be publicly available government assessments of this process and the benefits this delivers to the economies it is sent to or if it is actually creating rubbish for another culture to sort, bury or burn. New Zealand's exported textile waste also needs to be monitored and publicly accessible to see how it is being disposed of and what the social and environmental conditions of this disposal entail. If sustainability is the goal all efforts need to be made to ensure that at least the disposal of unwanted clothing happens in the geographical locations it was consumed in.

The Ethics of the Global Fashion Industry

The people who work in the global fashion industry are 80% female, many children, often living inside factories, with many children separated from their mother so she can work in the factory. Forms of physical, physiological and sexual abuse from the male staffers that control the factory are also commonplace. Countries, factory owners and brands have designed complex mechanisms such as global multi-chain manufacturing and trade-free zones that provide avenues to sidestep responsibility for employment and environmental conditions.³⁰

A local textile social enterprise named Stitch Kitchen³¹ are running a current project named '4 KT Elephants' where three of my participants, Fiona Jenkin, Desi Liversage and Fiona Clements are responding to the over 4000 tonnes of textile waste deposited at the local rubbish dump, the Green Island Land Fill, last year. Stitch Kitchen are running community pop-ups and weekly workshops where the public can make an elephant with their own textile waste or that on-hand at Stitch Kitchen for themselves or as a gift for someone, maybe a child with many people wanting to donate theirs to the Tedz Project for

28. Otago Climate Change Network, "The End of All?," *Conversations on Climate Change*, vol. 3, no. 19 (Dunedin, Otago: University of Otago, 2019).

29. Brenda Harwood, "Project aims to highlight textile waste crisis," *Otago Daily Times* (May 19, 2019), accessed August 18, 2019. <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/project-aims-highlight-textile-waste-crisis>.

30. Lucy Siegle, *Is Fashion Wearing Out The World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011).

31. Stitch Kitchen, <http://www.stitchkitchen.nz/>.

children in the Dunedin community who have experienced trauma. The title was designed to bring attention to ‘The elephant in the room’ for the local fashion industry with nobody really discussing textile waste. Textiles and clothing speak of our material needs and the human need for security and protection. Textiles are associated with the personal body and the home; they are things we have a degree of control over and therefore taking on the challenge of addressing one’s dress and clothing shopping habits could be the way to increase people’s agency and awareness to hopefully reduce the acute current need for self-protection through purchasing.

In the wake of climate change government and local councils all have continual research and monitoring to conduct to be able to assess and potentially ameliorate the situation but the need to inform the public and potentially re-direct and slow down their consumption would help communities to take the social and environmental responsibility for their own textile usage. In Dunedin we also have limited recycling sorting facilities currently which if improved would really make a difference to our local resource usage and waste disposal. Some participants buy clothes and materials from the Green Island rubbish shop, *Rummage* but they felt that the facility could be developed further and become a bigger part of the Council’s operation.

The New Zealand Fashion Industry

Fashion theorist Peter Shand writes that local fashion designers excelled while New Zealand supported this local industry, regulated against the importation of cheap global labels and regulated the job market protecting New Zealand wages and job opportunity. Shand writes that throughout this time period the creative processes in fashion design and economic opportunities lined up, but this situation has changed for New Zealand design.³² Neoliberal economic and state restructuring occurred under a Labour-led government throughout the 1980s and continued to roll out with intensity under a National-led government in the 1990s.³³

This new way of ‘doing business,’ these changes from a social welfare based state to a neoliberal economic policy was justified as ‘a necessary adjustment in the current global economic climate’ and as a means of increasing citizen’s individual freedom while minimising their dependence on state supports. Since this time New Zealand has experienced one of the most rapid rates of neoliberal free-market interventions in the developed world and our accompanying rates of child disease, income and wealth inequality and inequalities in health and well-being in New Zealand is visually noticeable.³⁴

This opening of the global market has not equated to NZ designers having more global opportunities either due to the amount of money needed to launch this scale of operations. Ariane Bray discusses trying to design a slow fashion line following a designer-maker approach, producing small runs in a small business in one location, Dunedin.³⁵ Ariane is not one of my participants but does use manufacturers off-cuts and positions their practice in opposition to the unethical treatment of local and global textile workers, the environmental degradation and the problem of post-consumer waste. This emerging designer writes about these difficulties in making a sustainable and artisan fashion business economically sustainable.³⁶

With global competition and the downgrading of local manufacturing another result has been that clothing consumers are confused about what the, ‘made in New Zealand’ label actually means. A 2018 labelling discrepancy for the well-renown New Zealand fashion label WORLD brought to the surface an

32. Peter Shand, “Pieces, voids and seams: An introduction to contemporary New Zealand fashion design,” in *New Zealand Fashion Design*, edited by Angela Lassig, vol. 12 (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2010).

33. Maureen Molloy, “Cutting-edge Nostalgia: New Zealand Fashion Design at the New Millennium,” *Fashion Theory*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2004): 477–90.

34. Max Rashbrooke, ed., *Inequality: A New Zealand Crisis* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2013).

35. Ariane Bray, “Creating A Slow Fashion Collection – A Designer-Maker’s Process,” *Fashion- Scope: (Art & Design)*, vol. 15 (2017): 29.

36. Ariane Bray (2017), 34–5.

issue of lack of transparency in country of origin labelling and what emerged with this story was a local consumer awareness that most New Zealand designers were now manufacturing off-shore. With a main tag stating the item was made in New Zealand and a lower tag stating the item was made in Bangladesh and the company director Dame Denise L'Estrange-Corbet insisting the company was not being misleading the public it all got quite heated and an official investigation was opened by the New Zealand Commerce Commission.³⁷ This incident spoke of the inadequacy of the 'made in New Zealand' label for consumers wanting to support New Zealand manufacturing and production and of the lack of formal mandates, reviewing and public overview of the industry.³⁸

The local industry are going to find it hard to change their production to more sustainable ethical processes when they are having to compete against the power of global branding and product placement. Maybe the New Zealand industry adopt economic pragmatism not wishing to make the local industry any more unstable considering all the problems of scale, manufacturing and economic viability the local industry currently faces. As a result, it seems that the national industry do not have the resources and institutional support to make systematic sustainable change. Yet the New Zealand textile and fashion market and its' workers, as is the case in so many other localised economies, are not currently able to maintain local production due to global free trade markets, a shrinking job market and a lack of local industry, creative industry and job market protections in New Zealand.

In the 2019 Tearfund Report³⁹ on the ethics and conditions of the New Zealand fashion industry New Zealand designers responded to their ratings. The designers who did not rate highly in the report cited the lack of New Zealand manufacturing and the costs of auditing their business as creating a barrier which had resulted in their low marks. Their marks, they felt, were not a true reflection of their manufacturing process. They also felt that the Government should mandate the industry to make it fair rather than some designers trying to meet voluntary standards when other designers side-stepped this responsibility. Some mentioned that there were no factories in New Zealand that had all the equipment they required for their garment manufacture meaning the transport costs within New Zealand were sizable. Then there was the increased cost factor of having clothing constructed in New Zealand.⁴⁰

New Zealand fashion auditing and global free trade

When Molley & Larner wrote their 2013 work, the designers they interviewed were very supportive of their local manufacturing industry and local outworkers were employed to manufacture the majority of New Zealand-designed garments.⁴¹ Yet the New Zealand designers recent responses to the Tearfund Report speak of the current difficulties in keeping manufacturing local when there is no local textile manufacturing sector, and there are some small companies which only have certain machines at each locality meaning the manufacture process becomes slow and costly. These designers also mentioned established New Zealand brands having protected loyalty with the only specialty manufacturers available and also the difficulties of ensuring ethical production using multi-chain production. They also mention the prohibitive costs of compliance to the industry monitoring as small-scale designers promoting an idea of sharing the costs of monitoring to help reduce the punitive costs on smaller-scale or less financially-

37. Katie Roscoe, "Big read: NZ-made fashion is hanging by a thread," *New Zealand Herald/The Wireless*, vol. 5, no. 24 (2018), https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=12057529.

38. Anuja Nadkarni, "Fashion label World clothing not entirely NZ-made," *Stuff*, vol. 5, no. 7 (2018), accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/103679887/fashion-label-world-passes-off-overseas-clothing-in-nzmade-range>.

39. Tearfund New Zealand, *The 2019 Ethical Fashion Report: The truth behind the barcode*, Baptist World Aid Australia (April 2019), <https://www.tearfund.org.nz/getmedia/a3d9fc5f-5441-46c1-b85f-c004da975620/FashionReport_2019_10-April-19_NZ.pdf.aspx>.

40. Aimee Shaw, "Fashion Grades: Rating the retail brands that make your clothes," *nzherald.co.nz*, vol. 4, no. 10 (2019), https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=12220525.

41. Maureen Molley and Wendy Larner, *Fashioning Globalisation: New Zealand Design, Working Women and the Cultural Economy* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), 38.

robust fashion labels.⁴² These globally standardised large-scale business efficiencies have a local human cost and also bring attention to the air miles attached to the production and distribution of clothing. This process cannot be cost-effective unless environmental factors are not being adequately equated for in our global accounting system.

Conclusion

This article focuses on clothing designers and textile practitioners from Dunedin, New Zealand who use upcycling processes in their designs. The themes discussed are those presented from recent interviews with this group, research toward a masters in sociology at the University of Otago. While clothing upcycling is a serious political issue those involved are enjoying learning technical skills, exploring their creative capacity and helping make social changes that they see as beneficial in improving people's feeling of well-being, resilience and community connection. The participants in this research are connecting to both localised and global identities through their involvement with clothing upcycling and slow fashion movements demonstrating how global identities can positively influence local identities and how local activism can create broader societal shifts. Clothing upcycling as a component of the larger slow fashion movement has the ability to connect with many people on the importance of clothing, textiles and clothing waste. Clothing upcycling is also a demonstration of many people's wish to find creative employment or space for creativity in their lives suggesting the potential for developing creative social enterprise frameworks to encourage this type of creative practice. There is also the urgent environmental need to reduce CO₂ levels to avoid irreversible climate change, and in order to facilitate a global shift we need processes such as clothing upcycling and we need more government supports for teachers and advocates to raise public awareness and to teach people these skills.

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