

Dissolving the Ego of Fashion

Engaging with Human Matters

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PART II

Fashion's Human Dimension

EMBODIMENT AND ETHICAL SUBJECTIVITY

Affirming a more ethical engagement with the material objects that surround our bodies necessarily entails doing more justice to fashion's human dimension. As I will argue, an in-depth understanding of 'embodiment' is a necessary precondition when moving towards alternative systems. This also helps to acknowledge the ethical dimension of human subjective identity. We are all embodied subjects, and we have an embodied existence. Recognising this human dimension is also a process of acknowledging the *agency* of all people involved, doing justice to their active role of engagement and capacity to act. This will allow us to work from alternative, more personal and human values, which is an important contribution to debates on sustainability and circularity in fashion as well. In my view, dissolving the Ego will open up fashion's genuine human dimension.

Fashion's Ego is fed by mass-produced consumer goods. In spite of this, mass-production processes in the fashion industry have led to dehumanised labour of workers in factories. Furthermore, fashion designers often cannot keep up with the high demands. As expressed in the manifesto 'Hacking the System' by Alexander van Slobbe and Francisco van Benthum: 'The system reduces designers to suppliers of raw material. They provide a random ingredient for the preparation of fast-fashion snacks.'⁹ The fashion system operates at an inhumanly high speed. This fast pace evidently also exemplifies the acceleration of time in contemporary society – a society in which we want to 'consume without delay', which causes an 'accelerated obsolescence' of commodities (Lipovetsky 2005: 37). In this era of hyperconsumption, fashion has developed into a homogeneous system: it is a repetition of sameness. The complexity of identity is generally reduced to a visual image, and bodies are often presented as mere commodified objects to be looked at. This helps to understand the urgency of dissolving these identity constructions and objectifications of the body. Dissolving the Ego will acknowledge the subjective identities, physical bodies and, hence, the embodied existence of the human beings who make and/or wear clothes.

A focus on embodiment, as well as a deeper understanding of embodiment, is vital here. Embodiment can be understood as the lived experience of human beings. It is about *living* the body and experiencing who we are – and how we make sense of the world – through the body. This understanding of embodiment comes from the existential philosophical tradition of phenomenology, as famously discussed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

Merleau-Ponty argues that we cannot experience and make sense of the world ‘without the mediation of bodily experience’ (2002 [1945]: 235). We thus always experience the world through our embodied existence. A phenomenological approach helps to think through what it is to *live* one’s body, rather than merely *looking at* bodies – which is so dominant in our visual culture. Embodiment is the ‘radically material condition of human beings that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*’ (Sobchack 2004: 4). In this sense, we are, consequently, both an objective subject and a subjective object. This draws more attention to our subjective bodily existence – instead of only reducing the body to an object to be looked at. Philosophically, phenomenology thus highlights the embodied dimension of who we are – the embodied dimension of human subjectivity and consciousness. This is the bodily awareness of self. We are embodied subjects, and we experience our subjective identity through our embodied existence. This phenomenological perspective also offers insight into how we experience and engage with other bodies and material things.

This phenomenological approach is important for fashion. While dress is an embodied practice (Entwistle 2000), the body is often used as a blank slate onto which visual concepts, idealisations of identity and conditioned forms of aesthetics are projected.¹⁰ Often this does not acknowledge the human subject’s – for example the model’s – embodied experience. On the contrary, these idealised visualisations and concepts contribute to the construction of fashion’s Ego. Therefore, it is crucial to focus more on embodiment, especially in the field of fashion. This phenomenological approach helps to shift our perspective from looking at bodies being ‘fashioned’ with layers of meaning to the flesh and blood of our embodied existence (Entwistle 2000). As a result, this foregrounds our subjective embodied experiences instead of reducing the body to a mere object to be looked at, or to a surface that is dressed with layers of meaning and symbolic codes. There is an urgency to restore the subjective and embodied dimension of all human beings involved in the fashion system. Many human beings and bodies are exploited as dehumanised, objectified and commodified instruments to produce fashion. This is what is called the high cost of cheap – and high! – fashion, referring to the exploitation of workers in the system of global capitalism: ‘Worker exploitation and health and safety violations plague the entire industry’ (Pham 2017). A focus on embodiment in the field of fashion is thus an ethical act.

To redefine our relationship to fashion – through a critical fashion discourse and when developing alternative systems – the embodied dimension needs to be taken into account. An embodied approach is important to fashion because bodies *matter* (Butler 1993). And bodies – and diverse embodied subjects – need to matter more. Since bodies are continuously exploited beyond their human existence, the condition of embodiment is not self-evident. A genuine acknowledgment of human beings' embodied existence often is a struggle since many bodies do not have a space or voice in the system. For that reason, embodiment highlights the ethical dimension of human subjectivity, which is at the core of reclaiming the human dimension of fashion. This is where agency comes in again, for all human beings who create, produce, make, design and wear fashion and clothing. Recognising their active role of engagement and capacity to act opens up the possibility to start from alternative, human values.

AGENCY AND ALTERNATIVE VALUES

If fashion practices increasingly start from awareness of the embodied existence of all human subjects involved, that would fundamentally affect our ways of making, doing, thinking and experiencing fashion. Therefore, I would like to emphasise the importance of acknowledging embodiment, ethical subjectivity, agency, and alternative, human values. This includes the social and emotional value of clothing for human beings. A focus on this ethical engagement and human dimension of fashion – an alternative and affirmative approach – has been at the heart of the work of P a s c a l e G a t z e n for more than fifteen years. In her work as a fashion designer, artist and educator, she fundamentally redefines the values from which we live and work, starting from the question 'what is serving our well-being?' She cooperates with other designers, artists and craftsmen to collectively explore possible alternative systems based on more sustainable forms of fashion production, contributing to human and ecological well-being. In doing so, she moves beyond a conditioned perception of aesthetics and stimulates everyone involved to reconnect to their own personal values.

Together with Mae Colburn, Jessi Highet and Nadia Yaron, P a s c a l e G a t z e n founded the workers' cooperative 'friends of light' in New York, which is a weaving, design and production collective that develops and produces handwoven jackets made from locally grown fibres. These jackets are woven from yarn produced in collaboration with Buckwheat Bridge Angoras, a wind and solar-powered fibre farm

and spinning mill. This workers' cooperative is based on a hybrid business model which gives agency to all workers involved, focusing on their own personal development instead of being primarily occupied with economic value and profit.¹¹ Pascale Gatzén initiated this workers' cooperative as a tool for social, economic and cultural transformation – aiming to take fashion back into our own hands and make it a catalyst for social change. She thus works from a more holistic perspective to move beyond the current supremacy of financial value in the fashion industry. In her work, she always starts from human values, such as joy, well-being, community, inclusivity, love and play – focusing on fashion as an expression of our human togetherness. As she writes:

Pascale Gatzén

I see fashion as part of our everyday reality and activities; it is our common ground through which we express, share and position ourselves. Fashion is the public domain where we show up for each other and where we inspire and align ourselves with others. Fashion doesn't limit itself to garments, it expresses itself in our speech, in our movements, in the objects we create, in the way we shape and perform our identities and our relationships; it is a very lively, dynamic and exciting space.

It saddens me that when people think of fashion they often refer to only one domain, the domain of fashion that has been shaped by and reduced to financial gain. Fast fashion is successful because it preys on people's need and desire to belong. And because it gives the illusion of easy access, people are no longer seeing themselves as the creators and agents of fashion. Belonging has become synonymous with possession and property, not with creativity, vulnerability, exchange and play.

I think one of the most exciting and most beautiful projects I have done has been 'Questioning the Concept of a Uniform' in 2014 in Mito, Japan as part of the exhibition 'You reach out – right now – for something: Questioning the Concept of Fashion' at

Art Tower Mito and at the Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art (MIMOCA), Marugame, Japan. This project has shown me the absolute transformative power of fashion. Two weeks before the opening of the show I worked with eight of the 32 female guards of the museum and I taught them how to construct and sew their own uniforms, most of the women had never sewed before. We did a five-hour workshop for instance on how to set in a sleeve. I engaged the women in collective decision-making processes to decide on the shape of and the inspiration for their uniforms. We decided on a fairly simple dress with a distinct collar as the base on which they could elaborate. At the evening of the opening all eight women had successfully created their own uniform. They were extremely proud and some very emotional, for the first time in their careers they had been approached and spoken to by visitors as an essential part of the exhibition.

The exhibition ran for three months. We had agreed that the eight women that I worked with would teach the other guards how to make their own uniform. The museum had set up a workspace in which the women could teach, learn and make their uniforms. At the end of the three months 32 women had made their own uniform, each uniform unique carrying the distinct handwriting of the guard who created it and the handwriting of other guards with whom they had exchanged skills and gifts. The women had all included fabrics that they had an emotional connection to. They had exchanged hand-sewing and embroidery skills, fabrics and small hand-sewn gifts that were to be attached to the uniforms. As guards they had been working in the presence of each other during these three months, performing their everyday duties while wearing and developing their uniforms. Their uniforms were in a constant state of becoming.

Beyond my wildest expectations, the women had developed and created a distinctive language which brought about a uniformity that was so alive, so abundant and so incredibly potent.

This project showed in a subliminal way what fashion is and what fashion does devoid from the idea of competition and the notion of scarcity. The uniforms were created because the women created and cared for each other; they shared excitement, inspiration, respect, love and appreciation through the material reality of their self-made uniforms.¹²

Pascal Gatzén's approach recognises all human beings involved as embodied subjects, as active agents, while redefining what it means to engage with each other and with the material resources of the earth as a social practice and in a more ethical way. This is an egoless and embodied approach to fashion which gives agency to human subjectivity. As an alternative to the exploited values in the fashion system, this approach starts from fundamental human values, highlighting the emotional value and connection to fabrics.

In a similar vein, the collective 'Painted Series', led by Saskia van Drimmelen and Margreet Sweerts, works from alternative, human values to design, make and revive almost forgotten crafts. In their project 'Golden Joinery', they start from the love for imperfect beauty to repair garments with a 'golden scar'. This is based on the old Japanese Kintsugi technique – an aesthetic to embrace that which is broken or damaged. Instead of working from the value of 'the new', which is incessantly produced in the fashion system, Saskia van Drimmelen and Margreet Sweerts privilege values of care and love for what is broken. In doing so, they propose an alternative, more repair-friendly fashion culture. The broken is not just something that needs to be fixed, but also has its own desires, values and affections. As fashion critic Otto von Busch points out, 'as opposed to consuming something new, the act of repair embodies a sense of commitment and trust'.¹³ For a more ethical engagement with garments, it is thus important to focus on alternative value creation – to reclaim values that have been lost or that are commercialised in capitalism. Through the embodied practice of collective repair, Painted Series proposes a more personal approach of reconnecting with the garments. This is essential in collectively

developing alternative and more sustainable, as well as transparent forms of clothing production and value creation.

The work of Brazilian designer Flavia Aranha also has an emphasis on the agency of all people involved at its heart, as well as doing more justice to fashion's human dimension. She prioritises human relations and traditional crafts in the production processes and starts from an awareness of the entire ecosystem around her brand – the farmers, the artisans, seamstresses, etc. Flavia Aranha encourages 'the development and autonomy of cooperative producer groups and artisans through the enhancement of their knowledge, skills and traditions, enabling autonomy and independence of these groups and the maintenance of their traditional knowledge'.¹⁴ In doing so, she creates a more humanised supply chain and aims to stimulate a more harmonious and conscious ecosystem in the fashion industry. In her view, an emotional connection with clothing through the hand work stimulates an awareness of the origin of things we consume and how they are made, which will lead to durability and a more conscious consumption. Flavia Aranha's local and collective production processes exemplify an ethical approach because she acknowledges the human dimension and agency of all embodied subjects involved in the ecosystem of fashion.

Whereas the discussion on sustainability is regularly focused on materials and technologies, recognising fashion's human dimensions – embodiment, subjectivity, agency, and human values – is fundamental for a more ethical engagement with each other and with material resources, and is, therefore, crucial to the development of alternative, more sustainable and circular fashion systems.

ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT AND CIRCULAR THINKING

In her writings on sustainability and alternative fashion systems, Kate Fletcher also emphasises the importance of redefining values and developing an alternative value system:

This new system must be holistic, interdependent, dynamic, creative, responsible, resourceful, *and* satisfying. It must lead toward an alternative that permits us to imagine a way of living and being together not predicated on constant economic growth, that builds prosperity through channels other than the market, and that values a broad spectrum of activity, not only those that can be most readily monetized. [...] A new,

alternative fashion system must be based on an ethos of care, on attentiveness to one another and concern for the future, on continuous tending. (Fletcher 2015)

These alternative values are essential for the current debates on how to transfer to a more sustainable fashion system and to a circular society. Over the last decade, there has been a proliferation of initiatives that raise awareness of the problematic facets of the fashion system, claiming that we need to hack the system and slow down. We are facing a ‘systemic crisis that forces us to think about the more fundamental values of clothing’ (Teunissen 2016: 3). The dominant critique is that the linear throw-away system – the tree-like capitalist system – is unethical and untenable. The logic of ‘take, make and dispose’ is part of the Ego of the capitalist fashion system, which thrives on the continuous production of new fashion objects. The Ego thus continuously needs to be fed with more and more consumer products. However, people increasingly realise that this self-sustaining system is destructive – socially, economically, environmentally. The fashion system is ill. In my view, dissolving its Ego, starting from fashion’s genuine human dimension and alternative values, is an important step in healing the system.

The industry increasingly realises that there is an urgency to develop an alternative, circular system that is restorative and regenerative by design. As I see it, this could possibly be a rhizomatic system, and rhizomatic thinking could contribute to circular thinking. Generally, ‘circular thinking’ starts from the idea that the earth offers an abundance of resources and that we can find many self-sustaining ecosystems in nature. This is primarily based on the cradle-to-cradle philosophy (McDonough & Braungart 2002, 2013) and on biomimicry, which is ‘innovation inspired by nature’ (Benyus 2009). In 2014, the term ‘circular fashion’ was first coined by Anna Brismar and the company H&M. Based on the circular-economy framework of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Anna Brismar defines circular fashion as:

clothes, shoes or accessories that are designed, sourced, produced and provided with the intention to be used and circulate responsibly and effectively in society for as long as possible in their most valuable form, and hereafter return safely to the biosphere when no longer of human use (Brismar 2014, 2017).¹⁵

Although there is a rapid increase of diverse initiatives related to circular thinking and design, we are still far removed from an integrated, alternative circular fashion system. Nevertheless, circularity has become a quite mainstream purpose in the fashion industry and is increasingly incorporated into companies' policies. A report presented at the Copenhagen Fashion Summit in March 2017, 'The Pulse of the Fashion Industry', states that the 'fashion industry has a clear opportunity to act differently, pursuing profit and growth while also creating new value for society and therefore for the world economy' (2017: 2).¹⁶ This report was critiqued due to its focus on profit and growth.

For example, Greenpeace recently released the report 'Fashion at the Crossroads' (2017) in which they criticise the ways in which "circularity" is being promoted as the latest solution to the environmental problems of our wasteful society, particularly by the fashion industry and policy makers' (2017: 6).¹⁷ Greenpeace argues that major 'brands fail to recognise that the overconsumption of textiles is the larger problem that must be tackled. In addition, the promotion of the circularity myth that clothes could be "infinitely recycled" may even be increasing guilt-free consumption' (Ibidem). In their report, Greenpeace reaches several conclusions on how to move forward. For example, they underline the importance of developing into a society 'where materials – and the world they rely on – are cherished' (2017: 45), referring to Kate Fletcher's work (2016). In addition, Greenpeace found that 'design for longer life and promoting extended use of clothing are the most important interventions to slow down the material flow', emphasising the importance of the emotional durability of clothing (2017: 6). Focusing on revaluing materials and on emotional durability, in my view, is crucial in order to move towards a more ethical engagement and personal connection with the material objects of fashion. These are important steps in redefining in more depth what it means to have a more sustainable and ethical relationship with the material resources of the earth. With regard to this emotional dimension, it is again essential to acknowledge fashion's human dimensions – an embodied approach, recognising the subjective identities of human beings, and starting from human values is essential in the debates on circular fashion.

In contemporary culture and society, and in fashion, there is an increased awareness that the 'Earth Matters' – which is the title of an exhibition in the Dutch Textile Museum.¹⁸ The curators of this exhibition state that '[t]he Earth is hurt and emptied. It feels raped and shackled', yet they present a hopeful vision for the future and foresee that 'our

entente with nature will be rewritten and reconceived: people will try to live together in a more harmonious way [...]. A more intimate and intuitive form of ecology will be the result' (Edelkoort & Fimmano 2017: 7). Again, here, the values from which we engage with each other and with materials, nature and the earth are highlighted. The personal and intimate connection between human beings and the earth's material resources is an important part of the discussion. In this regard, the work of both Jonathan Chapman on 'emotionally durable design' (2009, 2015) and Kristine Harper on 'aesthetic sustainability' (2017) is essential.

Based on empirical research, Chapman states that the process of consumption is motivated by complex emotional drivers (2009: 34). While the discussion on designing for durability has been focused on the product's longevity – its physical endurance – Chapman recognises an emergent paradigm of 'emotionally durable design'. In his view, this emotional dimension increases the 'resilience of relationships between consumer and product, presenting a more expansive, holistic approach to design for durability, and more broadly, the lived-experience of sustainability' (2009: 35). In addition, Kristine Harper builds upon this emotional relationship between people and material objects. In her book *Aesthetic Sustainability* (2017), she argues for the importance of 'empowering people to make ethical and aesthetic choices to limit overconsumption'. Agency, and a strong emotional bond between subject and object – consumer and product – is crucial to her understanding of aesthetic sustainability. This also entails a design strategy devoted to nurturing, maintaining and caring for things. Both the aesthetic dimension and emotional value of material objects deserve more attention and recognition in current debates on sustainability in relation to fashion. This is an essential part of our human engagement with material objects. As embodied subjects, we have a physical and emotional bond with material objects – which is related to our subjective identity.

Working from alternative values, reclaiming fashion's human dimension and thus highlighting the emotional value of material things are crucial for a critical fashion discourse, moving towards an alternative approach to fashion. This will also open up a deeper ethical and aesthetic dimension of fashion, which acknowledges the emotional bond between human subjects and material objects. In developing alternatives and redefining the fashion system, this embodied and emotional dimension is important for a more sustainable relationship and ethical engagement with fashion and a more humanised value chain. In Part III, I will further zoom in on the physical and material dimension of fashion, with a special focus on the senses.