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SLOW + FASHION—an Oxymoron—or a Promise for the Future ...?

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Abstract

Conceptually, the slow food movement provides the point of departure for this article, which asks if the slow approach can offer a sustainable solution for fashion. Three “lines of reflection” are addressed: the valuing of local resources and distributed economies; transparent production systems with less intermediation between producer and consumer; and sustainable and sensorial products that have a longer usable life and are more highly valued than typical “consumables.” Each is investigated using examples that together address the possible global dominance of fast fashion, provide more sustainable ways of approaching fashion, and

concentrate on the implication of fashion as actual material garments, which are used and discarded. The approaches mentioned simultaneously challenge existing hierarchies of designer, producer, and consumer; question the notion of fashion being concerned exclusively with the new; confront fashion's reliance on image; present fashion as a choice rather than as a mandate; and highlight collaborative/cooperative work—providing agency especially to women.

KEYWORDS: design, fashion, slow fashion, sustainable fashion

Speaking of fashion in the context of sustainable practices is a challenge. In the early twenty-first century, as fast fashion has become a commonplace on the high street, global brands such as Zara and H&M clamor for greater shares of the market. Technology has facilitated “just in time” manufacturing and has enabled faster retail turnover. Styles, and moreover clothes themselves are being produced with shorter lifespans than ever before. Cheap fabrics, low salaries, and worker exploitation continue to be both the products and also the casualties of the fashion industry. But as the industry functions globally on an increasingly vast scale its implications are enormous and a growing cause for concern. One which has in part been responsible for a number of designers, in different locations, beginning to take a “slow” or more sustainable approach to designing and making clothes. The slow approach presents a prospect of fashion minus many of the worst aspects of the current global system, especially its extreme wastefulness and lack of concern for environmental issues. But is the coupling of fashion, with its implications of the passage of time and change, with slowness, too much of an oxymoron?

In this article the slow approach is introduced and presented as something more than a literal opposite to fast fashion. The term is used to identify sustainable fashion solutions, based on the repositioning of strategies of design, production, consumption, use, and reuse, which are emerging along side the global fashion system, and are posing a potential challenge to it. The slow approach offers more sustainable and ethical ways of being fashionable that have implications for design, production, consumption, and use. The fashion system has begun to embrace the term “slow fashion” according to articles and blogs appearing on the Internet (Martin 2005; Sayer 2007). A “Slow Fashion” show was staged in London in 2004 (<http://www.sustainable.ie/convergence/6/slow.htm>). The term “slow clothes movement” was apparently coined by Angela Murrills, a fashion writer for *Georgia Straight*, a Vancouver-based online news magazine (Richmond 2006).

Conceptually the point of departure for slow + fashion is the Slow Food movement, which originated in Italy twenty years ago. The movement is providing a framework for more sustainable living, based on approaches to food production and consumption. Parkins and Craig

write of slow living, in their book of the same name, as “a process whereby everyday life ... is approached with care and attention ... an attempt to live in the present in a meaningful, sustainable, thoughtful and *pleasurable* way” (Parkins and Craig 2006: ix). My introduction to the application of slow food principles to design came in October 2006, when I was invited by Ezio Manzini to attend the “Slow + Design” symposium in Milan. The “Slow + Design Manifesto” (2006) presented at the symposium, described the slow approach as offering the time to produce, appreciate, and cultivate quality. The symposium helped to develop my own thoughts on fashion and sustainability. In particular, the three “lines of reflection” introduced at the symposium have served to structure this article: the valuing of local resources and distributed economies; transparent production systems with less intermediation between producer and consumer; and sustainable and sensorial products that have a longer usable life and are more highly valued than typical “consumables.”

Each of the lines of reflection is investigated using examples that challenge the possible global dominance of fast fashion, provide more sustainable ways of approaching fashion, and concentrate on the implication of fashion as actual material garments, which are used and discarded, rather than only as fashion images. By considering them with reference to examples of current practice we are able to move beyond the theoretical framework to uncover not just potentialities, but what already exists. These are evolutionary approaches, posited on new relationships between human beings, the display of their self images and the actual clothes they wear. They are providing models also for more socially aware design. The outcome enables us to uncover new ways of thinking about fashion and sustainability, which draw both on theory and on practice. These slow approaches:

- challenge existing hierarchies of “designer,” “producer,” and “consumer;”¹
- question the notion of fashion being concerned exclusively with the “new;”
- challenge fashion’s reliance on image;
- present fashion as a choice rather than as a mandate;
- highlight collaborative/cooperative work—providing agency especially to women.

The Valuing of Local Resources and Distributed Economies

“Think globally and act locally” has become a popular slogan that identifies the local as a site of resistance against global culture, where consumers are assumed to have a sense of global responsibility, and new

articulations have occurred between “the global” and “the local” (Hall 1992: 304). Typically the fashion subject follows global fashion—that is styles that are current internationally, by consuming clothes that are designed, manufactured, and retailed in more than one place or country. But environmental and social concerns more and more haunt the textile and clothing industries, which produce around 7% of all world exports manufactured by 26.5 million, mainly women, workers, many of whom are paid below living wages and suffer sweatshop conditions (*Well Dressed* 2006: 8–9). One emerging creative strategy is to take a “local” approach to designing and making fashionable clothes. Definitions of the “local” are relative as well as problematic, and can be applied to a specific geographical site as well as to particular human organization (Parkins and Craig 2006: 72).

The local must be defined more than at the level of locale. It is “attributed with meaning through the complex composite of flows of people, goods and services and representations that occur from, to and between it” (Parkins and Craig 2006: 72).

The utilization of localized physical and social resources can provide an alternative to standardization, centralization, and moreover, to identical products. This gives rise to ideas of “multi-local society” and a “distributed economy” where the global is comprised of a network of local systems. Whatever is available locally is used to best advantage and what cannot be produced locally is exchanged and shared giving rise to a simultaneously local and cosmopolitan society—where “cosmopolitan” connotes diversity, as opposed to the sense of homogeneity implied by “global” (“Slow + Design Manifesto” 2006: 4). The examples provided in this section address two aspects of the local—that of local cultural based production and the use and reuse of local resources, but also have relevance to the next two “lines of reflection.” The unifying factor is that they, together, represent evidence of the emergence of slow approaches in fashion.

In recent years the referencing of cultural traditions and practices has been notable in the work of Brazilian designers attempting to establish a Latin style, as in the case of Rosa Chà or Alexandre Herchovitch (Brandini 2008), and also to create socially responsible designs. While Chà and Herchovitch are not immediately associated with sustainable fashion practices, involvement such as theirs with the distinctiveness of local culture is, as I argue here, important for developing slow and sustainable attitudes (see also Fletcher 2008: 146). Perhaps best known in this context is the work of the Brazilian product designers Fernando and Humberto Campana who have combined found objects with new technologies to create what has come to be identified as a “definitively Brazilian” approach to design (<http://www.designmuseum.org/design/fernando-humberto-campana>).

In fashion, the designer Carlos Miele has attempted something similar. His work is also of more general interest as he functions within the

Figure 1

Women workers of Coopa-Roca
with designer Carlos Miele.
Courtesy of Carlos Miele.



global fashion system from a base in New York, while retaining Brazil as his production and cultural base. Since 2000, Miele has worked with Coopa-Roca, a women's sewing collective in Rio de Janeiro, to custom make garments using craft techniques traditional to Brazil (Figure 1). Coopa-Roca is particular in being based in Rocinha, the largest *favela*, or shanty town, in the world (Macedo 2006). Established in 1981, the collective enabled women of the *favela* to use and learn regional sewing skills, and to share ideas, materials, and sewing machines. Originally, they made quilts, pillows, and other patchwork items from scrap fabric, to add value to "rubbish," which they transformed into useful

objects (Thompson 1979). Gradually, the women gained financial independence through their income and also improved their self-confidence. At first the collective's retail activities were limited to public art fairs and kiosks in shopping malls, where their products sold, but were seen as somewhat quaint. But in 1994, assisted by Maria Teresa Leal, a local middle-class woman with a background in art education and the social sciences, they began to work with designers and as a result their products entered the international fashion system. At first fashion designers provided the cooperative workers with pro-bono lessons in basic clothing production and current fashion trends.

Now designers from other fields, such as the product designer Tord Boontje (<http://www.tordboontje.com>) commissioned Coopa-Roca to create original hand-made items that reference local cultural practices and employ craft techniques. Miele, for example, has included patchwork, lace making from the north eastern Brazil, crochet from southern Brazil, knot-work, and *fluxico*, a technique employed to make fabric rosettes, into his seasonal collections (Figure 2). Such developments were initiated in 2000 when Maria Leal invited Brazil's key designers to offer ideas for clothing, furniture, and installations, which were then made by the collective and shown as *REtalhar* (the Portuguese for "patchwork" and "to give a new shape to something"). The show enabled members to expand the range of their products, and to establish on-going relationships with designers and subsequently to employ their own creative director.

The initiative has also been positive for the *favela* where other small businesses have begun since to provide legal sources of income to the originally drug-based economy. The organizational model that brings designers of international standing to work with and respect a local cooperative has proved successful. It has assisted in revaluing and sustaining cultural practices, often by reviving what were considered lost hand skills.

While the hand made is much more labor intensive and inevitably more expensive than the machine made, certainly if the workers are to be paid a fair wage, the association with designers has enabled the products to find consumers who can afford them, and who will also value them. As Stuart Hall has noted:

The case for local or regional economy as the key unit of production has been forcefully made by the "flexible specialization" thesis ... This perspective stresses the central and prefigurative importance of localized production complexes. Crucial to their success, it is suggested, are strong local institutions and infrastructures: relations of trust based on face to face contact: a "productive community" historically rooted in a particular place; a strong sense of local pride and attachment (Hall 1992: 319, quoting Robbins).

Figure 2

Dress featuring *fluxico*, Carlos Miele, Fall/Winter 2005 collection. Courtesy of Carlos Miele.



Such “productive communities” have begun to be established elsewhere, which link local communities with more transparent production systems and less intermediation to produce garments that have greater cultural and material value to the consumer. Some examples are quite culturally specific in origin, but can reference wider cultural groups in their transformation into new products. This is true of Sari, a London-based organization that employs a specific cultural domain within the indigenous Indian community. Since its launch in 2002, it has recycled

saris into accessories to raise money for children in developing countries. It has met with an enthusiastic response from the Indian community and now retails online (<http://www.saricouture.com>).

Worn Again is another London-based organization that makes new products from 99% recycled materials, which would otherwise end up in landfill, with the added objective of "improving social, economic and environmental conditions in regions where we operate while building a profitable business" (<http://www.wornagain.co.uk/meetdesigner>). They recycle materials as diverse as men's suits, shirts, car seats, and prison blankets, to make sports shoes. They work with a family-run factory in Portugal, although their first shoe collection was made in a factory in Guangdong in southern China. Longer term, their aim is to achieve more diverse production models that support local economies. Unlike design, which is theoretically possible in most locations, local manufacturing is more difficult, especially nowadays when a high percentage of the global production of clothing, footwear and accessories has moved to the Far East. Worn Again retains a vision of bringing their production "as close to the consumer as possible" (<http://www.wornagain.co.uk/meetdesigner>) which they do by offering to repair and ultimately to recycle their used shoes. The local provides greater agency to individuals and working collaboratively engenders a sense of responsibility and trust. As has been remarked of slow food:

Producers feel a responsibility to produce healthy, wholesome food that will be eaten by people whom they know. Eaters feel a responsibility towards producers who are members of their community (Parkins and Craig 2006: 75).

Referencing local cultural practices has likewise been a manifestation of a contemporary search for authenticity (Appadurai 1996). Knitting, for example, which had virtually died out as a skill and a hobby, has undergone a surprising revival in the home, and at the level of small workshops and the batch production of relatively high value items, and as a medium for artists (Gschwandtner 2007; Parkins 2004). The current fashion for hand-knitted items remind us how fashion not only interfaces with cultural practices at the commercial level, but is itself a cultural practice, which has been acknowledged as emerging on a local level, as in the case, for example, of subcultural style (Hebdidge 1979). The examples discussed also take a collective approach, which acknowledges how the production of clothes and fashion is very much community dependent—a fact often intentionally obscured by the fashion brand.

The World Wide Web has been used as a metaphor for a system where tangible resource flows remain dominantly local, but where design and knowledge travels (P. Kisch, "Slow + Design Manifesto" 2006: 11). For fashion the Web has gained more than metaphorical significance, it has become a key channel for the dissemination of fashion ideas, as well as

generating new means of fashion consumption through eBay, Bluefly.com, and numerous other websites. eBay in particular has given agency to the user, who can both buy and sell in a leisurely way from their home, office, or from anywhere they can go online. In these distributed economies, the product passes directly from the seller (who may also be the producer) to the buyer, and is therefore subject to less intermediation than in conventional retail. As part of this process knowledge can also be transmitted about the purchase, which can draw attention to the place and methods of production, the conditions of the workers, or its environmental impact. More transparent production systems and less intermediation also provide greater opportunities for collaborations between designer, producer, and user, which, in turn, can bring new definitions to those roles.

Transparent Production Systems and Less Intermediation between Producers and Consumers

Transparency is used here to address fashion practices that do not seek to obscure the origins of the products and producers with a generic “designer” or brand name. It refers in particular to smaller scale enterprises where the line between consumption and production, so well-defined in the global fashion industry, blends and morphs. At the level of the fashion product, the application of slow principles benefits when “production” does not only connote mass-manufacturing. As already noted, referencing local cultural practices provides for more transparent production systems, often using hand skills, which can address a contemporary search for authenticity. The revival of knitting has been mentioned. Like other craft processes knitting provides the potential not only for transparent production, but for design to become de-professionalized, and for designer, producer, and user to be one and the same person. Practices of sewing and knitting also have histories as community based activities, especially for women. These are being revived in the knitting circles that are being formed to provide technical instruction and social interaction as part of the knitting revival. It has been remarked that the very process of knitting is part of its appeal, representing, as it does, an alternative temporality to the accelerated speed experienced in other areas of life (Parkins 2004: 432–3).

Sewing clothes, by contrast, requires more detailed skill, more cumbersome and expensive tools, and more financial investment, and thus has not undergone quite the same transformation of interest. Mending has died out for similar reasons, but more especially for its associations with poverty and need. Why mend clothes, would be the question, when new fast fashion can be had at prices that will suit most pockets? Some lay the cause of this type of thinking with design. Alistair Fuad-Luke has commented

how "Design facilitates mass production and rapid turnaround of new styles ensuring shorter product (market) life cycles and encouraging consumption for fashion's sake rather than for real need" (Fuad-Luke 2004: 1.4). The slow approach is undoubtedly a challenge for fashion designers; nevertheless, it is one that some designers are taking up.

In New York, *Slow and Steady Wins the Race* is a conceptual clothing line, intended to slow down fashion's built-in obsolescence (Stanfill 2007). It was created by young designer Mary Ping, as an "anonymous" label "to push and produce interesting and significant pieces from the simplest and most inexpensive fabrics and materials" (<http://www.slowandsteadywinstherace.com>). To do so Ping has produced small collections, which she initially made herself from plain cotton canvas, with the intention of limiting each collection to 100 pieces. Her third collection focused on expensive designer label handbags, which she remade in cotton muslin, canvas or twill, adding minimal details and hardware to create the iconic identities of the brands such as Chanel, Gucci, and Hermes. Ironically, her reinterpretation of the 2003 Balenciaga motorcycle saddle bag became enormously popular when it appeared at the beginning of an episode of the popular television series *Sex and the City* (Figure 3). As a result Ping revised her limit to 3,500 units, a number which enabled her to make a profit, without saturating the market. But there is potential danger in attempting to challenge the fashion system from within, as has been experienced by designer Natalie Chanin.

Best known as the co-founder of the brand Project Alabama, Natalie "Alabama" Chanin can be described as a designer dedicated to integrating slow principles into fashion, using local resources and transparent production systems to create more sustainable and sensorial garments. Her designs for hand-sewn garments constructed using quilting and stitching techniques from the depression-era south have been lauded for both their beauty and sustainability. Made from recycled materials by artisans located near Chanin's home in Florence, Alabama, Project Alabama designs earned her accolades from peers as a finalist for the Cooper Hewitt National Design Award for Fashion and her selection as one of ten fashion companies for the Council of Fashion Designers in America/Vogue Fashion Fund in 2005. But in the Fall of 2006, Chanin separated from her original business partner and left the company, which moved its manufacturing to India.

Her new company, Alabama Chanin, was established in Florence in 2007 and now produces limited-edition, handmade jewelry, clothing, home furnishing, and textiles using recycled materials, made by members of her original local female workforce. These artisans, who represent a generational span from women in their early twenties to those in their late seventies, produce garments in the spirit of the traditional American quilting bee. The garments emphasize quality of cut, detail, craftsmanship and style, but they are inevitably expensive (Figure 4). Buying these clothes is an investment, which distinguishes them as a new form of

Figure 3

Inspired by “Balenciaga” bag (cotton canvas), Slow and Steady Wins the Race, “Bags” collection, 2002. Courtesy of Slow and Steady Wins the Race.



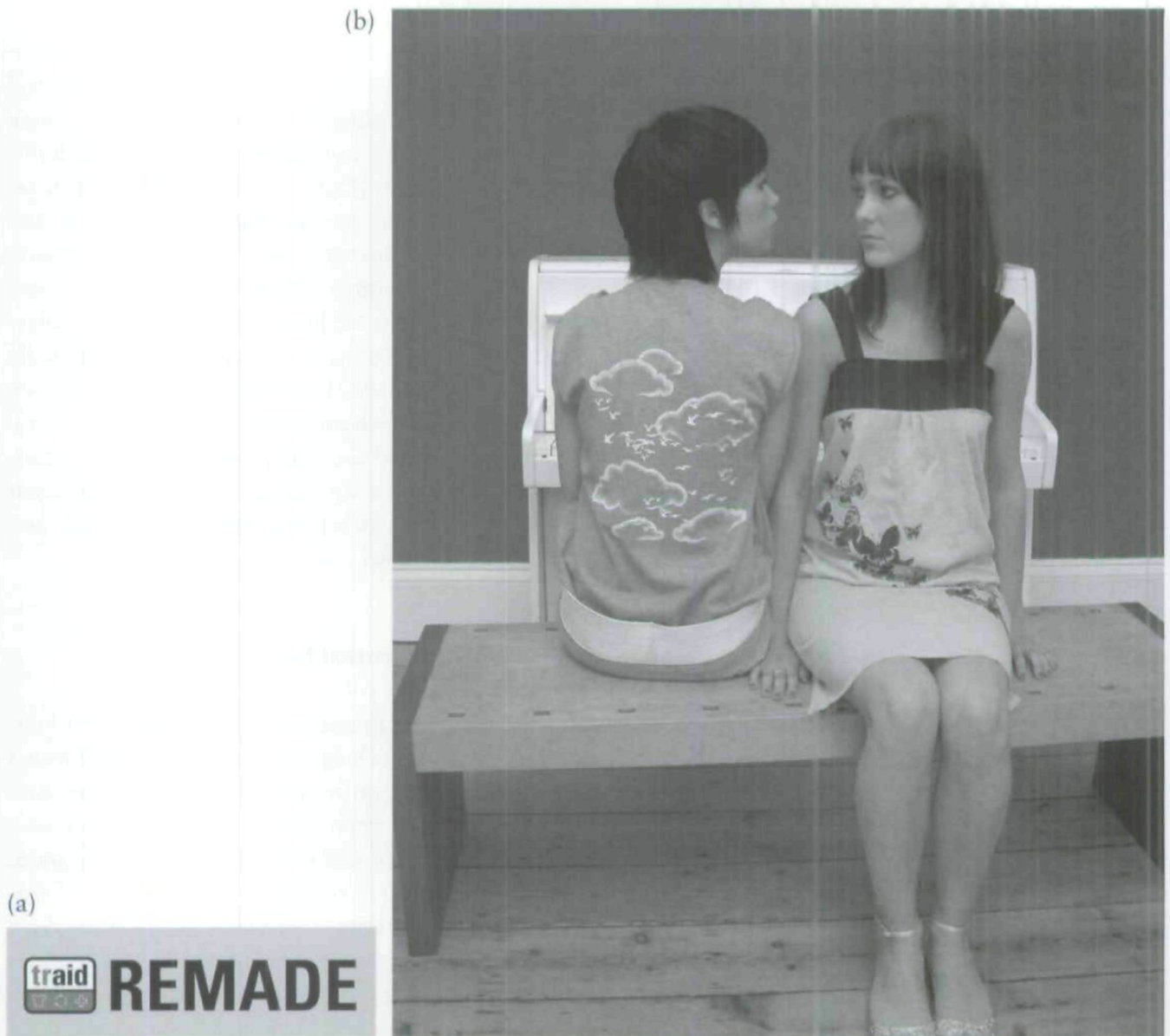
couture—new, in attempting to bring an ethical consciousness, but traditional in being custom-made by hand, for individual clients. While operating within the fashion system, retailing in fashion stores and promoting the brand through conventional means such as trunk shows, Alabama Chanin is at the same time raising questions about the nature of the fashion system, especially the dictates of fast fashion. This is fashion predicated not on fashionable people being seen as “fashion victims,” “... but as people selecting styles on the basis of their perceptions of their own identities and lifestyles. Fashion is presented as a choice rather than a mandate” (Crane 2000: 15). Alabama Chanin creates garments that are intended to last, to be cherished, and to build their own cultural memories.



Figure 4

Dresses from "Revolution," Alabama Chanin, Fall/Winter 2008 collection. Courtesy of Alabama Chanin.

In London, Junky Styling employs a similar philosophy relative to the wearer, in providing a service of deconstructing and reworking previously worn clothing. The venture began in the early 1990s, with its two women owners who had seen textile recycling being effective in cities such as San Francisco and Tokyo, altering men's suits to wear themselves at London clubs. Their service enables clients to bring in unwanted, quality garments for "wardrobe surgery." Not only are the garments transformed, but the customer can have an active part in the process as a co-producer, who is also guaranteed of an individualized and original piece. The products are not cheap, £30 (US \$60) is charged to reshape a pair of jeans, and £200 (US \$400) to refashion a trouser suit, but the results are intended to last. Junky Styling employs a skilled work force and has developed a concept to promote original "slow" designs that have longevity, rather than conforming to rapid fashion trends. Yet it has been able to position itself within the global fashion system, and has shown at London Fashion Week. The fashionability of the garments is reinforced by the custom of clients such as celebrity Gwen Stefani and model Kate Moss (Kay 2006).

**Figure 5**

(a) TRAIIDremade logo. Courtesy of TRAIID. (b) TRAIIDremade garments. Courtesy of TRAIID.

Remaking, historically the means of extending the life of garments, has regained credibility as a means of recycling. Since the 1980s, vintage boutiques, high-street thrift stores, yard sales, and online shopping have served a vogue for nostalgia and subcultural style (McRobbie 1989; Palmer 2005). Ethical retailers have appeared on the high street. One such retailer is TRAIID (Textile Recycling for Aid and International Development) that sells “new recycled garments” that have been redesigned and reconstructed (<http://www.traid.org.uk>).

Established in 2000, in response to the enormous waste created by the fashion industry, TRAIID recycles garments, collected from around

900 public collection sites across the United Kingdom to support global socially and environmentally responsible causes. An estimated two thousand tonnes (4,400,000 lbs) of used fabrics are transported to a central warehouse and sorted by hand according to quality and style. Clothing that is torn or stained is reconstructed and redesigned and sold under its recycled fashion label TRAIIDremade (Figure 5). Not only does this re-value discarded clothes, but it revives cultural traditions of sewing and mending. The transparency of the enterprise is reinforced by a mission to educate the British public on environmental and world poverty issues (<http://www.traid.org.uk>). Like Junky Styling, TRAIID does not eschew the fashion industry; rather it acts to draw attention to its potentially negative social and cultural dimensions, by working within the culture of that system. Acknowledging the fashion system, and also the cultural significance of shopping as a leisure activity, provides a way of challenging the system from within. A transparent approach also demands a more frank recognition of fashion as being dependent on actual, tangible objects, not only their sign value.

Sustainable and Sensorial Products

Giulio Ceppi has described “sustainable sensoriality” as the way of understanding a product from the knowledge of how it is made, through its raw material to the end product, rather than just through (the exaltation of the experience of) consumption (“Slow + Design Manifesto” 2006: 20). For mass-produced fast fashion the metaphor of speed serves as a smoke screen for the harsh realities of the sourcing of materials, means of production, conditions of workers, distances traveled for distribution, and other less than acceptable factors. A slow or more sustainable approach focuses greater attention on valuing and knowing the object, and demands design that generates significant experiences, which are not transformed into empty images for rapid consumption (“Slow + Design Manifesto” 2006: 6).

The CEO of the high-end cashmere company Loro Piana has referred to “permanent fashion,” for quality items that are not intended to be thrown away every season (Martin 2005). Hand-made items, such as the Hermes Kelly bag for example, can be considered investments, which have remained fashionable. Here, the sustainable argument is a simple one; when the product is an investment, has functional longevity, and also remains “in fashion,” it retains its attraction for the particular consumer or user beyond the fashion season. For this to happen the subject-object relationship needs to be more substantial than that of the typical transitory, fashion item, which appeals largely through its visuality or image. Hand-made items in particular, and here we can include *haute couture*, the pinnacle of the fashion system, can offer something specific to the individual, in terms of fit and appearance. Such garments

and accessories are investments—emotionally as well as economically, and acknowledge that the materiality of what we wear on our bodies is part of their significance, as Juliet Ash as remarked:

... because clothes are *of* human beings as much as *the property* of human beings. Clothes relate to our feelings more than perhaps any other designed artifacts, and thus require “subjective” as well as “objective” analysis (Ash 1996: 219).

The emotional attachment between human beings and clothes offers potential for designers wanting to explore fashion as a sustainable practice. Rebecca Earley, textile designer, educator, researcher, and curator of the UK Crafts Council’s 2006 exhibition *Well Fashioned: Eco Style in the U.K.* observed:

... fashion by its very definition isn’t designed to last long. Consumers often wear garments too little, wash them too often, and at too high a temperature. All bad news for the environment. Can designers help to change the situation? Can clothes be designed that help us develop an emotional attachment to them, that have stories and origins that make us want to cherish them and look after them? (<http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/wellfashioned/flashioned/flash/profiles.html>).

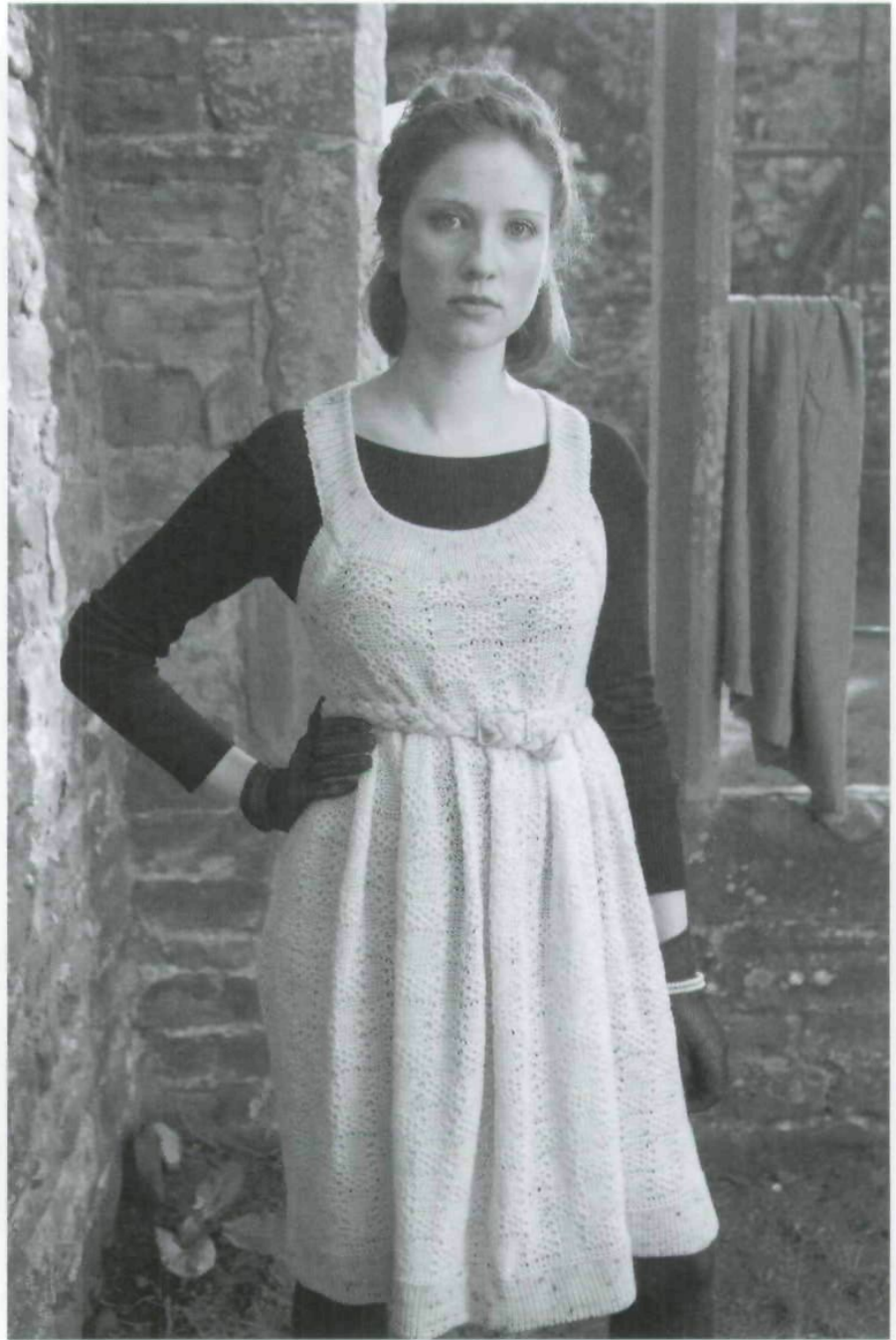
Earley has addressed this in her own practice in a variety of ways, including the Top 100 project that recreated one hundred second-hand polyester blouses, providing them with “added value”—by re-cutting, shaping, and over printing. She referenced cultural memory more personally by including in the project blouses owned by Christine Risley a deceased textile designer, educator, and embroiderer, whose personal collection of objects served as visual reference for their redesign and remaking. Earley is one of a number of designers who are recycling textiles and garments to create emotionally and culturally rooted solutions to sustainable and socially responsible fashion (<http://www.beckyearley.com>).

Another British designer, Amy Twigger Holroyd seeks, in her knitwear label Keep & Share (Figure 6), to encourage people to buy less by forming a strong bond with individual garments, through consumption and use. She designs garments to be worn in different ways, by people of different sizes, and different genders. The versatility provides greater opportunity for items to be shared or handed down or on to someone else. The premise is that to want to keep something one has to know it, like it and see its creative possibility.

What is emerging here is the potential of “slow products” to inculcate a “new beauty” in fashion, based not purely on the visual, but also including sensorial aspects that acknowledge the existence of the many abstract and emotional factors that underpin the choices of what people

Figure 6

Reims Dress (wool, linen, alpaca) in cream/ecru tweed, Fall/Winter 2008 Keep & Share collection by Amy Twigger Holroyd. Photography by Meg Hodson. Courtesy of Amy Twigger Holroyd.



wear. In the process the sensory aesthetic changes from one that prefigures sight and “senses of distance,” to favor the “senses of proximity,” taste, touch, and smell (Parkins and Craig 2000: 92). Historically, the senses of sight and hearing, which operate across distance and can be remembered at will, were ranked highest as being more intellectual and linked with philosophical contemplation and abstraction. Ranked beneath them were smell, which functions at a relative distance, followed by taste and touch as the lowest senses, which necessitate a direct contact

between human beings and the material world (Stewart 2005: 62). Slow food reverses this elitist politics of the senses to reevaluate the sensory experience of food, and the very pleasure of taking time to appreciate it. Is it too difficult, then, to draw parallels with fashionable clothing?

To do so would be to reassess the power of the visual in fashion, which has been described as a mass spectacle (Griffiths 2000: 69). It is the spectacular that Ezio Manzini and others have argued as dominating contemporary design practice (“Slow + Design Manifesto” 2006). Yet as design theorist Judy Attfield has argued:

Having lost faith in the modernist concept of originality that is supposed to emerge from their own *tabula rasa* imaginations, contemporary designers seem to be more interested in finding authenticity outside themselves in the materiality of “thingness” that resides in the real world (Attfield 2000: 60).

Elizabeth Wilson has drawn attention to this “thingness” in fashion, as magic qualities. She cites Richard Martin’s belief that the fashion object could be a “powerful force” because of its capacity to remember and also to subvert (Wilson 2004: 383). Martin attempted to uncover these attributes in his 1998 exhibition *Fashion and Surrealism*. Wilson brings it to bear, optimistically, as a way of addressing the baser, or faster, aspects of fashion, and to acknowledge fashion’s ambivalences:

Fashion, the epitome of consumerism, is also its stealthiest critic, and in its obsession with what Freud referred to as the “refuse of the phenomenal world,” of the disregarded, the marginal and everyday—including in this case, our garments—surrealism gives us hope, suggesting that there are gaps in the apparent seamlessness of consumer culture through which we can escape into re-enchanted worlds (Wilson 2004: 383).

An Oxymoron—or a Promise ...?

Only some of the potentialities of slow + fashion could be introduced in this short article. However, it has demonstrated how theoretically, the slow approach offers some alternative ways of addressing issues of fashion and sustainability at a relatively grass roots level. The three lines of reflection: the valuing of local resources and distributed economies; transparent production systems with less intermediation between producer and consumer; and sustainable and sensorial products, have provided one possible conceptual framework—but there will be others that will take the discussion further forward.

Many of the examples cited here as slow approaches to fashion are relatively small scale, nevertheless they suggest at least the potential of

repositioning the fashion system (or at least some parts of it). They offer collaborations that challenge existing hierarchies of "designer," "producer," and "consumer," and provide agency at the local level, especially to women. They reuse materials in ways that question the notion of fashion being concerned exclusively with the "new." By focusing more on the materiality of objects, they question fashion being predicated on the image. In this refocusing, "fashion" is presented as an individual creative choice rather than as a group mandate. Slow + fashion refocuses our attention on earlier definitions of the term "fashion" to do with making—clothes and identities, rather than only with looking.

The challenge now is how to extend the slow concept on a larger scale. But signs of change are already evident. For over a decade the fashion system has had to pay greater attention to consumer interest in used clothes, in custom designing, and recycling. Conditions of anonymous workers are coming to the fore at the consumer level with fair trade products. Each of these approaches demands the greater attention or mindfulness that underpins the slow approach. Slow + fashion is not an oxymoron, rather it offers an approach for a more sustainable future, but one which also demands a redefinition of fashion that acknowledges the slow principles and practices that have been described.

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Note

1. In doing so I acknowledge the existence of other intermediaries in the fashion industry, including stylists, photographers, and retail buyers, who all have an impact on the decisions and choices made by designers, producers, and consumers, but who are outside of the scope of this article.

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