

Global Fashion Conference 2018



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The Global Fashion Conference is held bi-annually, bringing together an international cast from fashion and design academia and the fashion industry itself to explore the 'dynamics, challenges and propositions' of fashion and sustainability. This year the conference was held over two days, 31 October – 1 November at the University of the Arts London in their campus just a few steps from Oxford Circus, the epicentre of London's high street fashion retail.

The two-day event titled "What's Going On" attracted speakers and contributors from around the globe. Dilys Williams, professor of fashion design for sustainability at the University of Arts, set the tone of the conference with her welcoming speech calling for a fashion system that honours nature and the rights of all human beings. British MP and Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Mary Creagh, then opened the conference as Chair of the UK Environmental Audit committee currently investigating the fashion industry.

Kate Fletcher's thought-provoking presentation took us from the catwalk out to the countryside, speaking of our disassociation from our environment, where our human-centric society views nature as property, with humanity having a sense of entitlement and superiority over it. Our anthropocentric culture seeing nature as a resource of interchangeable units but has no sense of limits.

Otto Von Busch, from Parson's New School of Design New York, gave an energetic presentation on the psychopolitics of fashion: is fashion social combat – driven by a desire for recognition or fear of rejection? His witty dialogue 'we are born free but held up by fashion chain stores' eliciting chuckles from the audience which ebbed into an uncomfortable acknowledgement. He was not the only one to challenge the audience, fashion designer Katharine Hamnett CBE boldly stated: "Sustainability Certification is a conspiracy to do nothing." Rallying the audience further, she declared: "We need radical change now! We need new laws to control the clothing industry, and it's not controlling itself. Humanity will be lost if not."

The head of sustainable sourcing at luxury conglomerate Kering, Australian conservation biologist Dr Helen Crowley, suggested "nature doesn't scale well, but it replicates beautifully – that is how we achieve scale when you have things that work, just replicate that work. Replication of a lot of things will accelerate our journey to a sustainable future."

Mornings were individual presentations and panel sessions by the who's who of fashion. "There is not going to be business unless we reconcile with the environment," said Osola De Castro, founder



of Fashion Revolution, about the tragic deaths of thousands of workers in Bangladesh in 2013. "Sustainability is not a trend, the excess is." He continued to call for mandatory transparency, no more opaque supply chains or selective reporting that cherry picks data.

The narrative at this conference focused on the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report warned there are only a dozen years

for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5C and as a major producer of carbon, potentially quarter of the carbon budget, what ramifications this has for the industry. The other hot topic being the morality of excess perpetrated by the industry, particularly excess production and this issue of the end-of-life of clothes. High profile cases such as Burberry and H&M burning tens of millions of dollars of slow

stock turning the issue to a moral debate over resource use. Lynda Grose Chair of the Fashion Programme at California

College of the Arts highlighting the words of Vetements CEO Guram Gvasalia: "We have gone from conspicuous consumption to conspicuous production."

The afternoons broke out into parallel presentations of the ninety fashion research papers accepted by the conference,



investigations into a vast array of topics from new materials research, fungi and bio clothes, whether infusing spirituality into design practices could improve the sustainability of the industry, to the latest in end of life technologies, such as H&M's fibre to fibre technology plant in Hong Kong and my research into New Zealand's post-consumer clothing, 'The Textile Reuse Programme: Building macro circular systems for used clothing', which documents the findings and evolution of the Textile Reuse Programme (www.textilereuse.com) evolved.

A range of participatory workshops was also offered in the afternoons such as "Invent your own

fashion economy – sustainability in a post-consumer utopia" to "Companionship with nature" ecological philosophy encouraging fashion practitioners to reactivate engagement with the natural world to improve environmental and social outcomes.

The conference did not steer away from the issues facing the industry. Representatives from global brands such as Kering and Stella McCartney participated in the

discussions; corporate sustainability positions seem to be held predominantly by women, while CEO's of fashion brands predominantly male, their absence was noted.

I spoke with Helen Crowley at the Gala dinner, she did not believe that legislation alone would solve the issues, that real advancement towards a sustainable industry would not happen until investors saw the value in the proposition. With only 12 years up our fashionable sleeves, the task for the sustainability sector is to make the business case compelling.

I attended the conference thanks to the support of the British Council and Callaghan Innovation.



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