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The Fashion Industry Is So Yesterday

The first students will be soon be starting their studies under KADK's new study programme for fashion designers, based on the welfare system's grand idea of equal opportunity for everyone. Focusing on inclusion, responsibility and sustainability is a necessary response to an irresponsible corporate and consumer culture.

By

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COVID-19 gave Denmark's fashion industry pause for a few months' this spring when it experienced the truth of just how financially vulnerable it actually is. Simply because years of focusing on a trend-driven seasonal mindset cause the industry's products to lose value very quickly because they are no longer in fashion. During the lockdown, unsold clothing mounted up, because shops were closed and orders were cancelled in the Far East – with appalling human consequences. A letter from the industry to the Danish government included the following statement: *"If our products don't get sold immediately, they have lost all value. That's a fact of life in a business that earns its living from changing seasons."* This statement says it all about what is currently the biggest problematic issue in the fashion industry: we have all helped to create a downward spiral in which the resources used to make the clothing are drastically undervalued throughout a garment's life cycle, in terms of both planetary boundaries, workforce and consumption.

As consumers, we are conditioned to think that clothing's biggest value lies in the buying experience, which primarily involves finding clothes that are as inexpensive as possible. This trend started with the Marshall Plan's streamlining of the industry in the 1950s and escalated with the development of 'fast fashion', when virtually all production of clothing was relocated to the Far East in the late 1980s. This process was turbocharged in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008, when the industry responded with increasingly bigger and more frequent collections made from steadily cheaper materials. Each person in Denmark buys 10.9 kg of clothing a year on average, which represents 2.1 million tonnes of carbon emissions a year. Denmark's clothing consumption is 35% above the world average and the highest in the Nordic countries, whereas 80% of the clothing discarded in Denmark still has 70% of its useful lifetime left (Danish EPA, 2018). Globally, we buy 60% more clothing a year and wear it half as long as we did only 15 years ago (Greenpeace, 2017).

Precisely because we, as consumers, have grown accustomed to buying lots of clothing as cheaply as possible, any company that tries to implement sustainable initiatives is not rewarded, because we are unwilling to pay the added amount it costs to ensure a positive climate impact or proper working conditions throughout every link of the production chain. This explains why, in 2019, it was found that consumers are unwilling to pay more for sustainable fashion but will gladly do so if

the parameters are 'quality' and 'value for money' (GFA). At the same time, the world's attention is now focused on the industry's adverse climate impact, one result of which is the expectation that textile waste will be increasingly regulated. With this regulation, based on the fact that textiles must now be included in household waste-sorting systems, it is only a matter of time before politicians work out who should pay when vast volumes of clothing have to be sorted and converted. This is also reflected in a growing public debate and heightened consumer awareness of the industry's adverse climate impact, in ever widening circles beyond the host of critical scientists and young activists in the mould of Greta Thunberg.

As if this was not enough, the Black Lives Matter, Queer and #MeToo movements have sparked soul-searching in an industry that has had the ideal of Western civilisation as its crucial focal point over the past few centuries. One star fashion designer after another has had to ask forgiveness for what (in their own opinion) are seemingly good marketing concepts, yet which are out of step with a reality in which decolonisation is a white-hot issue, both tangibly and in the abstract. The fashion industry and the styles for which fashion is famous are based on a French ideal that everyone in the world ostensibly seeks to resemble and aspire to. Or, at least, that was true in the world of yesterday. The current turbulence with tsunami-like waves is forcing a sometimes unsympathetic industry to realise that it is simply not inclusive enough when it comes to defining gender, cultural affinities, skin colour, ethnicity, age or body types. Modern fashion's excluding quality is sewn into every piece of clothing, because it is fabricated and designed for a narrowly-defined ideal clientele whose numbers are minuscule. Everyone else is structurally and systematically barred and excluded, and the very fit and style of the clothing is infused with the message that the wearer must optimise himself/herself to resemble the body of a Western model by pursuing an insatiable desire to buy the latest new trends.

But clothing is important on a far more profound level. Clothing is a medium – like food – that all of us are in contact with every single day. In many respects, it infuses meaning into how we perceive ourselves and interact socially in the world we live in. Even so, there are many different reasons why we dismiss the value inherent in the clothing we wear. In real life, fashion as we know it today is usually associated with something irrational and stupid – not something to pay attention to if you are a reflective person. The notion that new fashion trends are not rationally grounded but exist solely to drive a capitalistic growth project is rooted in our cultural history dating back centuries. Similarly, the idea of clothing as a frivolous feminine pursuit still influences how the fashion industry is perceived, both from within and without.

All of the above emphasises how crucial it is for the fashion industry to initiate a sustainable transformation process here and now. Even if we have to drag them screaming and kicking to do so. Accordingly, at KADK, we have deemed it necessary to radically reorganise our clothing and textiles master's programme so we can make lemonade during this downward spiral. For years, students enrolled in the clothing and textiles programme have expressed a lack of motivation to work in the fashion industry, simply because they fail to see the point of helping to destroy our climate by what they do. Also, they fail to see the value of reproducing narrow definitions of beauty and of who has the right to be beautiful. It is one of the saddest things in the world to see such talented young people, who love their field and feel passionate about it, but who are completely unable to see the purpose of contributing to a mindless throw-away culture. Who

consider common styles irrelevant and fashion's reproduction of mindless trend logic as utterly repugnant, or in any case neither artistically nor mentally inspiring.

These young people are also the ones who must go out and become the next generation of fashion and textile designers and give us new artistic styles by interpreting the world we live in, created through threads and textiles. These are the same young people who will go out and work at our businesses and create brand-new formats and ideas that we need if we hope to get through this fundamental crisis, where fashion plays both an important and an underappreciated role.

All these arguments mean that we, as a school of excellent artistic calibre in the area of clothing and textiles, have asked ourselves what we can do to help upgrade knowledge in a sector perceived as superfluous, irrational, frivolous and increasingly directly harmful to our environment and climate. And how it is possible for us to do this on a specifically Danish platform building on our own design traditions. Therefore, as a school of design, we have rummaged through our national treasure chest in an attempt to revitalise the Danish Design concept in relevant new clothing. We asked ourselves – in our part of the world and in this country – precisely how we can contribute to educating young people and motivating them to resolve the industry's problems *through* their profession – and not by turning their backs on it. We have done this with humility, as this is a great legacy to deal with and there is no shortage of praise for Danish Design's magnificent characteristics and results. In our opinion, at any rate. Yet what is it, after all, that makes our tiny corner of the world map so unique that we can actually use this uniqueness in a necessary sustainable conversion process, specifically concerning the fashion industry?

The most frequently-quoted researcher in the world in the field of sustainable fashion – Professor Kate Fletcher, PhD, Centre for Sustainable Fashion, London College of Fashion – sees our welfare system as an enormous untapped potential, as we do. This is also why we are pleased that she has been our external consultant and 'litmus test' for all our good, yet smug, ideas about the outstanding qualities of Danish Design. The master's programme *Fashion, Clothing and Textiles: New Landscapes for Change* emerged from a development process that took place during the world's deep corona slumber over the winter and spring. The grand idea is that, instead of training master's students to work in a Parisian, Milanese or New York fashion mill, we want to create a brand that emerges from our master's students themselves, a brand that is so powerful that Milan, Paris and New York City will come knocking on *our* door. Because it is not possible to brand oneself as being almost as good as the best, a strategy that has otherwise been attempted from the Danish side in the past. But it is possible to establish a brand for yourself by having something that others do not.

The key to our new master's programme thus lies in the welfare system's grand idea of *giving everyone equal opportunity*. This is the concept that produced our national interpretation of the Arts and Crafts Movement, a democratic project that resulted in our beloved, famous FDB furniture, for example. It is embodied in this same lyrical modernism that gave the world Wegner's 'Wishbone Chair' (iconic for Danish Modern), Børn Wiinblad's widely well-loved decorative porcelain and Werner Panton's space-out plastic universes. But it has also given us phenomenal co-creations that started out as design research experiments with user-driven design development in Sweden and Denmark in the early 1970s, and which today are globally ubiquitous in

organisational outlooks and as approaches to innovation processes at both systemic and product levels. Thus, it is not only about how 'democratic design' equates to price-related accessibility, which was inherent throughout the twentieth-century project of giving everyone an opportunity to buy new things and lower the cost of production. It goes much deeper than that. And based on this perception, we have attempted to provide an educational response to the fashion industry's crisis which not only deals with localising the DNA of Danish fashion design. Associate professor Marie Riegels-Melchior (PhD), SAXO Institute, made a substantial contribution through her research as part of the upgrading of Danish Fashion Week in the 2000s by creating, among other things, the *Danish Fashion Institute*, led by Eva Kruse, which has now branched out into the GFA organisation running Copenhagen Fashion Summit.

Our master's programme seeks to build on all this work by means of an incision that defines with greater accuracy a unique Danish approach to the world, which can be pursued by the ethnicities, genders, ages and cultures residing here at any time. By turning 'Danish' from an adjective – defining what it is to be Danish – into a verb, i.e. what it means to 'dane' – we have created a master's programme based on user-driven design development through interdisciplinary collaboration projects, keenly focused on revitalising textile expertise, and also on know-how that was lost when the production process was sent out of the country more than thirty years ago. And which we now need in order to reinvent our fashion industry, to ensure that it enters the future with renewed vigour.

We regard the Danish fashion industry of tomorrow as a vast, demographic project that flattens the curve (as we learned to say during the pandemic): create fewer, but better, products, infused with far greater value during their service life than today, as part of a circular economy, simply because someone wants to circulate them. The most climate-positive circulation of clothing is, in fact, to keep using the product as actively and for as long as possible. In other words, the most sustainable garments are the items you have in your own wardrobe. And if they have to be discarded, it is best if they can be used by others who will appreciate them. In other words, clothing must be well designed and produced so it does not lose value. With our strong Danish user perception, our intuitive understanding of the interconnection between shape and function and of the significance of aesthetically appealing design in developing a new paradigm, we can join forces with industrial players to create a new sector which, as it was just a few decades ago, is far more about the clothing's *utility properties* in an existing holistic perspective than its novelty value. This is primarily achieved by means of good, targeted products and a new revitalised resale and service sector that can help us keep our clothing in use through repair, maintenance, adjustment and alteration.

We have done it before, and we can do it again. As a small, agile country, Denmark has previously shown itself to be capable of rapid transformation in response to pronounced changes in external framework conditions, when we moved production out of the country. We have all the tools and a mindset that enable us to react quickly to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis. At KADK, we have rolled up our sleeves, and we look forward to welcoming the first students on 1 September this year.

We wish you a rewarding fashion week!