

Manifesto

1st January 2019

Planetary systems are under threat. Fashion and clothing products and activities contribute to the destruction of these systems. They also contribute to the increasing disconnection between humans and Earth.

We, the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion, recognise that the response of the fashion sector to the intensifying ecological crisis has been – and continues to be – over-simplified, fragmented and obstructed by the growth logic of capitalist business models as they are currently realized and practiced. Further we recognize that uncritical research findings, duplication of research, reduction and misuse of scientific and technical knowledge reinforces and speeds up this over-simplified condition in the fashion industry.

It is our view that concerned fashion and clothing researchers can no longer remain uninvolved or complacent and that as researchers, we need to conduct ourselves in new ways. We call on fashion researchers to unite for concerted action and leadership over the use of scientific and artistic knowledge that is more relevant to and commensurate with the multiple crises we face. For us this action requires both that something fundamental is disrupted and something significantly different is offered. We are committed to examining and accelerating the uptake of diverse 'other ways' in the fashion sector.

The Union of Concerned Researchers proposes to:

1. Create an 'activist knowledge ecology', that is, to develop a system of knowledge about fashion sustainability that is concerned with how knowledge is organised and shared as well as the data points themselves, and to direct such a system purposefully towards fostering change;
2. Advocate for whole systems and paradigm change, beyond current norms and business-as-usual. This includes rejecting overly-cautious economic, legislative and policy frameworks;
3. Diversify the voices within fashion and sustainability discourse, to reflect multiple perspectives beyond the dominant business approaches presented, including but not limited to the global south and indigenous communities;
4. Express our determined opposition to ill-advised and destructive fashion projects;
5. Formulate visions—and corresponding research practices—that allow for the possibility of enacting new relationships between humans and Earth in the context of fashion;
6. Take a leadership role in debating existing and new ideas and creating action around fashion-sustainability themes, especially in areas where the generation of new knowledge is of actual or potential significance;
7. Devise means for turning research applications towards the underlying root causes of pressing environmental and social problems, including but not limited to climate change, wealth inequality, biodiversity loss, and plastic pollution;
8. Organise, when determined desirable and feasible, fashion researchers to translate radical step change into effective political, and other, action;
9. Review and revise, when deemed necessary, this manifesto.

UoCR

Photos by Anna Rosa Krau

Interview by Ania Zoltkowski

UNION OF CONCERNED RESEARCHERS IN FASHION

The Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion was formed in 2018 by Mathilda Tham, Lynda Grose, Timo Rissanen, and Kate Fletcher, and inspired by the Union of Concerned Scientists, formed in 1969 in the USA. They have published a radical manifesto of change that focuses on fashion and sustainability and are calling for fashion academics around the world to unite and push for drastic changes in the industry in new ways.

ANIA ZOLTKOWSKI: Stemming from conversations at the *Global Sustainable Fashion Conference* in 2018, as well as the dismay regarding the current fashion industry initiatives towards sustainability, you recently formed the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion. What do you intend to create through the UCRF? UCRF: There is a shared understanding globally that the current actions to mitigate unsustainable practices are inadequate to the actual crisis and scale of the problems we face. Incremental improvements in product impacts simply do not keep up with the scale of business growth. Researchers know this and many industry representatives working within companies know this, but we/they are 'trapped' in a fashion business system that requires us/them nevertheless to continue to produce more stuff at increased volumes.

We recognize that challenging the growth logic in the fashion system is a difficult conversation to have, and we also recognize that we are not able to delay the conversation any longer. We formed the Union in part to provide a platform for researchers and others to express and share concerns, ideas, and actions that go beyond the scope of what current (growth) business models can attain.

ANIA: The Union advocates for paradigm and systems changes. Can you paint us a picture – what is your vision for sustainable and flourishing fashion futures? UCRF: Fashion – clothing and adornment in all its social, cultural, psychological and other contexts – is inherently human. Fashion is infinitely more than an industry, more than business. We call for a paradigm that acknowledges this, a paradigm that does not reduce people to consumers and the earth into a set of resources for us to 'use sustainably'. This must be a visionary, as much as a critical, work.

A fashion system within such a paradigm is one where clothes are worn well, shared and perhaps resold many times over, where the social and cultural value of fashion as a social process and interface is celebrated more than the acquisition of a new piece, where companies compete with each other to produce fewer new clothes and yet flourish, and where the human consumption of natural resources is in steady-state with earth's natural metabolism to replenish itself.

Ultimately, it is a profound transformation in our shared understanding of what it means to be a human being on earth and what qualities of life and being fashion contributes to. In outlining a vision for Transition Design, Terry Irwin

calls for "a posture of humility, reverence for nature and an acknowledgement of human ignorance." Accepting our utter interdependence on the life that makes up earth's biosphere opens up this new vision. ANIA: For too long, the fashion conversation has excluded Indigenous groups and people of colour worldwide. How can future fashion systems reflect multiple perspectives beyond the dominant business approaches presented that perpetuate colonialist ways of being? UCRF: There is a tacit consensus that the phenomenon we call fashion is a Western concept and with this comes many unchallenged assumptions that tie it to a colonialist view of the world, with 19th- and 20th-century perspectives on culture and development, and economic models based on extractive economies. With many other consequences, many of which are faulty, this perspective limits what fashion can be and makes it almost impossible to get out of a view on sustainability that preserves colonial hierarchies and processes of extraction. The continuous scandals of cultural appropriation are just one instance of this. So, the decolonization of curricula within Northern/Western universities is a welcome turn over the last years.

But it is important to also move

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beyond policing to look at qualities of life beyond control, extraction, and accumulation. There are movements outside the global North and West that already exist, one such being Buen Vivir. As these “ways other” are brought more into the limelight, we will see alternate models of commerce emerging, deploying a different set of values, fostering other forms of communal values within which a radically different culture of fashion can thrive.

ANIA: Within your manifesto, you state that “the UCRF recognises that the response of the fashion sector to the intensifying ecological crisis has been – and continues to be – over-simplified, fragmented and obstructed by growth logic.” What does this mean and why is it important for us to explore post-growth fashion systems?

UCRF: The existing approaches of business break down actions into manageable parts. This is reflected in measures for advancements and standards focused on improving identified ecological measures of individual products. As stated above, incremental improvements in product impacts simply do not keep up with the scale of business growth. We are losing ground on actual ecological and social gains by using this method of taking action. In other words, current business approaches to sustainability fail even by their own measures.

The stance of UCRF is that the current business approaches are not an end in themselves, rather they are a means to get us to more mature stages of sustainability; new forms of fashion that are truly matched to the constraints and capacities of natural systems. This is not anti-commerce per sé; it demands completely new forms of commerce that truly can get us to a “steady-state” economy.

ANIA: What are the Union’s ideas to formulate new visions that allow for the possibility of enacting new relationships between humans and the Earth, in the context of fashion?

UCRF: A first step to deal with fashion’s impacts is to move beyond perceiving fashion solely as an act of consumption (fashion is much more than shopping), whilst also working within our current system.

Some ideas might include: developing measures that link production to real-time capacities and constraints of nature; finding ways of defining quality and life-expectancy of clothing and linking this to life use of clothing; zero waste, zero carbon, zero water, zero toxic chemicals in manufacturing, expressed in multiple ways through individual facilities, partnerships, and municipalities; finding alternatives to the current trade-based business model, which rewards cheap labor and cheap raw materials, rather than quality and craftsmanship; opposing the singular focus

on fibre comparisons to a wider discussion on the much more damaging dyeing & finishing and other phases that are willfully ignored; looking at how localism, in the form of fibre sheds, biospheres and re-shoring, can shift power from global companies to smaller-scale actors.

UCRF also acknowledges that we must move beyond our current system to observe and learn from other ways of being human besides commerce, as expressed not least by Indigenous and tribal communities, or in other value systems that exist in the shadow of the fashion industry.

ANIA: What are the actions you plan to take to start to bring about these ideas, and how can we get involved?

UCRF: Our near-future plans include starting a dialogue with funding organisations who support research and projects around fashion and sustainability. Our intention is to advocate for systems change, long term projects, and those that bring different sorts of value, other than just economic value into this work.

You can get involved by signing the manifesto and keeping abreast of our activities via our blog. We also encourage responding to the Union’s calls for action and suggesting projects to UCRF that are aligned with our overall mission.

concernedresearchers.org

