

FASHION AS A PRACTICE OF CARE

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Abstract

The contribution questions the possibility that fashion and its objects can be interpreted as a practice of care, agents capable of stimulating a positive change in the relationship between people, environment and territories. Within the theoretical framework of fashion futuring, the design and social innovation workshop Talking Hands is analysed as a case study of redirection practices, which are expressed in participatory design dynamics, relationships between the subjects of creative and production processes, new narratives and synergies between people and communities.

Keywords: Care, Fashion Futuring, Participatory Design, Relationships, Territory

Theoretical Framework

In 2022, the design theorist Ezio Manzini published an essay in which he questions – and questions us – on the possibility that fashion and its objects can become agents for positive change, to reweave the web of life which, in recent years, we have so recklessly torn apart (Manzini, 2022). Manzini's reflection is part of that emerging strand of thought that no longer limits itself to investigating how fashion can diminish its negative impact on the environment and on people (Fletcher, 2010; Tham, 2012), but instead tries to understand how it can produce a positive effect on the present and the future. This perspective introduces the concept of care as an element to be placed at the centre of reflections on contemporary fashion and its necessary reorientation (The Care Collective, 2020). The idea of care is understood here, according to the reading provided by Joan Tronto (2013), as an action to maintain, continue and repair our world. Manzini's focus on fashion objects as positive agents of change is an evolution, on the one hand, of the critique developed by Mol, Moser and Pols (2010) on the fact that care is often mistakenly distinguished from artefacts, which are considered

apersonal and “cold” in comparison to the intimacy assumed in care; on the other, of the theories on the new materialism elaborated by Anneke Smelik (2018) in the context of fashion studies, which are contributing to bringing matter and bodily experience in its weaving interconnections with the world back to the centre of the debate.

In recent years, the idea of the future and its very existence are at the centre of theoretical reflections in design and fashion. Relevant in this sense is the contribution of Tony Fry (2014), who elaborated the concept of “futuring” to define a new design approach capable of providing new trajectories and redirection practices in relation to environmental, economic, and social issues. In this framework, design is considered as the catalyst for change, because of its influence and relevance to economy, industry, technology, ecology, culture, community, territory. It has the task of considering and promoting the concept of “sustain-ability”, which includes the actions and skills to materially sustain life, cultures, ideas, imaginaries, environment, people. These are redirection practices, able to change paradigms and outline new scenarios. Futuring has recently been introduced in fashion studies (Payne 2019; Vaccari and Vanni, 2020;

Franzo 2020a), with the aim of interpreting emerging phenomena in this field and overcoming dualisms: between sustainable and unsustainable, material and immaterial, local and global. Fashion futuring, as well as its initial elaboration in the field of design, is relevant because it recognises the designer's ability and responsibility to act on the present, modifying current processes and ensuring the possibility of a future. It is therefore an act of care, returning to Manzini, that urgently requires a different approach to fashion design and production.

Within this theoretical framework, therefore, the contribution analyses a case study in Italy, Talking Hands, with the aim of verifying the thesis that fashion can be a practice of care and a positive agent for the environment and people. The analysis of this single case study, a fashion and design brand, can help to define an innovative model to be reproduced in other contexts in order to support the future of Made in Italy (Morelli & Sbordone, 2018; Franzo, 2020b). The decision to work with this case study derives from its uniqueness in Italy, since no other similar examples in terms of design approach, participatory dynamics and creative melting pot emerged during the desk research. In fact, the focus

of these projects is often mainly oriented towards the social implications and design is reduced to almost only a pretext; the case identified, on the other hand, is characterised as an example of contemporary fashion design, which feeds on the different individual cultural experiences. Through an interview carried out in February 2021 with Fabrizio Urettini, the founder of Talking Hands, useful information emerged to outline an innovative model for fashion design and new roles for the people involved, providing answers on the hypothesis that fashion is a practice of care in a futuring perspective.

A Case Study of Participatory Design

Talking Hands is a permanent design and social innovation workshop, founded in 2016 in the small town of Treviso in the Veneto region. The project is run by a group of refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, engaged in several activities, including design, production, and distribution of a collection of clothes and accessories. The managers of the fashion workshop are two young people from Gambia, with previous



Fig. 01



Fig. 02

experience in tailoring in their country of origin. Italian designers, students, activists, teachers, and photographers also collaborate on the project; people – both volunteers and migrants – contribute for a limited period, then leave space for others to arrive and collaborate, depending on their time, experience and goals.

Each project developed by Talking Hands is the result of a small creative and production chain, involving people with different degrees of experience and skills, supporting an improvement of competences in different disciplinary fields. The process of value creation is thus entrusted to individuals, the creative community and the social network (Meroni, 2007: 182). This case study was identified because it innovatively combines cultural capital, technical skills, and different approaches to design and manufacturing.

What emerges prominently from the case analysis is the participatory dimension of the project that occurs at every stage of the creative and production process. The selection of fabrics is the first moment of exchange between the different people involved in the development of the collections. Lanificio Paoletti in Follina, near Treviso, joined the project, providing its own fabrics, which were left over

from warehouses that could not be sold due to their scarce footage; the decision to use waste material is positioned in a vision of environmental sustainability, contributing to the poetics of the project (Binotto & Payne, 2017). Lanificio Paoletti is significant in this collaboration because it stands out for its continuous search for connections with territory, designers and artists, promoting awareness of contemporary issues. One example is the annual event *La Via della Lana*, during which the factory opens its spaces to the public, transforming itself into a temporary incubator where exhibitions and seminars are held (Franzo & Moradei, 2021). Talking Hands and the collaboration with Paoletti were presented in this event, helping to disseminate the value and research that characterise the project [Fig. 01].

The analysis of Talking Hands shows that an initial selection of materials to be used for the garment is made by a textile designer, who assesses their technical characteristics according to the type of garments to be made. The final choice, also motivated by colours, textures and textile designs, is made by the different people involved; in some cases fabrics are combined with each other as a patchwork and the combination is decided by the

young Africans. Italian fabrics are also combined with cottons with colourful Wax prints, typical of the countries of origin of the refugees involved in Talking Hands. The fabrics, therefore, already express the meeting of different ideas, sensitivities, visions, and cultures.

The design phases present similar dynamics of collaboration between the various subjects, each free to propose and develop their own ideas, which are then evaluated by the group. The development of the patterns takes place under the guidance of a pattern-making teacher from whom the migrants learn rules and techniques; but, at the same time, they are free to experiment and develop ideas by working directly with the materials, by hand or

by machine, without first defining the pattern, which is produced later. In this case, an approach to fashion design based on fabric manipulation and moulage techniques is adopted, i.e. as it is usually done in their places of origin. Two different approaches to the creative process thus intertwine and contribute to the growth of the project [Fig. 02]. The video and photo shoots involve the people who designed and made the garments, making them wear the garments and posing both inside the tailoring workshop and in other contexts. The images often show several people holding hands, emphasising the collaborative and participatory spirit of the project [Fig. 03]. Even the moment of sale involves the various protagonists of the project, through participation in markets, fairs, temporary exhibitions; in this way a direct contact is established with the client and his feelings, the project goes beyond the spatial delimitation of the tailor's workshop and extends to the community. A fashion project such as Talking Hands, therefore, becomes a place for sharing values, ideas and knowledge; everyone brings their experience, makes it available to others, participates in a common goal, and leaves traces of themselves even after they have left and made room for others. They take care of each other, their specificities and interests.

Relationships and Territories

The case analysed is a useful example of how it is possible to create new networks of relationships within a community through design (Montanari & Mizzau, 2016). It promotes synergies with local companies and it is open to the territory, especially in a city – Treviso – where the migration issue is often at the centre of political, cultural and social confrontation (Moretti, 2019). It should also be remembered that the province of Treviso was for decades an important industrial district of the fashion system, but in recent years it has suffered a severe crisis in terms of employment and turnover and it is looking for a new identity.

This phenomenon is part of the interest in the Italian province that has been emerging in recent years, both by researchers who are investigating its peculiarities and by brands and companies that choose to relate to this territorial dimension (Manfredi, 2019; Vaccari & Franzo, 2022). The experiences that arise and develop in the Italian provinces are increasingly significant for their ability to be local but, at the same time, become a



Fig. 03

potential model on a national scale. In this sense, Talking Hands, while relating to a specific territory, can provide the tools for new relations with different contexts.

This project is able to combine the cultural capital of a territory, welcoming people of different nationalities, experiences, cultures and goals in the same place (Conti & Panagiotidou, 2020). It becomes an attraction for professionals and companies in the surrounding area, who decide to make their materials, time and skills available. Even more significant, however, is the opposite movement: the idea of getting refugees out, asking them to cross the city, to be among people, to establish new relationships. Fabrizio Urettini, in fact, decided to start home deliveries, bringing the young people and the objects they created, often very colourful, into the centre of Treviso. In the interview he observed that this moment seems to turn into a parade, attracting attention, some laughter, but also many conversations: “the relational bridges we so desperately wanted to build”. The analysis of this phenomenon finds a valid support in the words of Morelli and Sbordone, who state that “social cooperation, aimed at local development, makes its action on the territory

explicit through a dense network of material and immaterial relations between people with different skills, degrees of knowledge, and the places deputed as centres of productive and cultural activities” (Morelli & Sbordone, 2018, p. 178).

A further initiative aimed at acting in the territory is the decision to move the embroidery workshop to a public park for an entire summer. As Urettini recounts, once a week the migrants worked outdoors, on concrete ping-pong tables [Fig. 04]. The handicraft work turned into a relational device able to activate social transformations and foster participants’ self-esteem, attracting the attention of the people present in the park, fascinated by the display of embroidery and crochet skills (Gauntlett, 2011; Hackney 2013). There were exchanges of opinions, discussions about techniques and a natural involvement of the community; embroidering outdoors, in a group, in a public place, is a clear action of craftivism, a movement that activates elements of solidarity, anti-capitalism and environmentalism through craft and manual practices (Greer, 2014).

The desire to be visible, to show one’s image, leads back to the idea of futuring according to which the designers are tasked with developing



Fig. 04

powerful narratives, visions of the future or the ‘not yet’, amplifying and connecting grassroots efforts undertaken by local communities and organisations (Manzini, 2015). Talking Hands already declares in its name the intention to be a place of storytelling, encouraging participants to use design and manual activity to tell their biographies, places of origin, experiences, goals. These voices overlap and combine to define an original and unique story, based on diversity. On the website, all the participants in the project are presented without hierarchy, narrating a community that relates and participates in the same objective. Roles are not defined, the traditional figures of the creative and productive process of fashion are no longer recognisable, including the designer who is transformed into a collective identity. In Talking Hands the whole group collaborates together in the phases of material selection, design, pattern development, tailoring and sales, under the coordination of several guides. This case study demonstrates what Manzini (2015) argues, namely that in the 21st century an ‘expert’ design is emerging, which is proposed as a set of skills, sensibilities and cultural tools, stimulating and supporting wider and more articulated co-design processes. The awareness of a new model of relations emerges from Urettini’s words: “We believed it was important for the working group to be accompanied by professionals for various reasons [...]. For us, it is of fundamental importance to create opportunities for horizontal dialogue and to operate in a transcultural context without losing sight of the objective of making the most of the different players involved with our projects and to re-imagine the material world through a synthesis of the applied arts”. Talking Hands is therefore an example of the potential of recognising the most promising social dynamics and working with them, of connecting the human capital of a place to develop a narrative through a design project.

Conclusions

The contribution aimed to demonstrate how the experience of this unique case study, interpretable as an example of futuring, can be scaled up and replicated in other contexts, becoming a virtuous model capable of sharing values, ideas and knowledge. Fashion design has the potential to be a practice through which to care for people and the environment. It represents an opportunity to

create new relationships within a community and to enhance the cultural capital of a territory. It should be emphasised that this case study is not so much a model because of its economic or industrial size, but because of its innovative cultural and social approach through fashion design. Objects play a decisive role in countering dominant visions, developing a culture of diversity and a more inclusive society. Design is the tool through which to plan and create relational networks that form new communities, synergies with local businesses and interactions with the territory.

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Figure Captions

Fig. 01: Presentation of Mixité collection during the 2019 edition of La Via della Lana event, at Lanificio Paoletti in Follina, Treviso. Ph: Francesco de Luca.

Fig. 02: Fabric cutting phase. Ph: Francesco de Luca.

Fig. 03: Mixité Collection, 2019. Ph: Francesco de Luca.

Fig. 04: Embroidery activities by Talking Hands collaborators at the public park in Treviso. Ph: Francesco de Luca.