

# OTHER SYSTEM

## BETWEEN WASTE AND APPROPRIATION

### AN ANALYSIS OF A DIFFERENT SCENARIO FOR THE FASHION SYSTEM

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## Abstract

Fashion industry is one of the sectors that has the highest environmental impact, furthermore, because of its supply chain, the increase of textile and clothing waste production has become a huge global concern. The fashion system must play an important role in the path towards sustainability giving the waste a bigger value than the one it has today. Luckily, new ways of production are spreading out, giving life to the “Other system”: a different, circular path that encourages an innovative eye on fashion wastes.

Waste has been commonly considered as an unwanted or unusable material. Following the attempt to highlight the value of waste, this study investigates three research questions:

Are there any different ways of fashion production?

What are the links between them?

What are the differences between the “Other system” and the traditional fashion system?

For this research seventeen case studies have been considered, including textile producers and vendors, fashion brands and textile artists.

**Keywords:** Waste, Sustainability, Fashion System, Pre-Consumption, Post-Production

## Introduction

Nowadays the fashion market demand seems to be on continual growth, even though the fashion industry is a sector with a high environmental impact. As a matter of fact, the current consumer society imposes that everything old needs to be thrown away, consequently, these mechanisms of rejection create the distinctions between the productive and unproductive, the included and excluded, causing a new reality made of waste (Bourriaud, 2016). What Bourriaud calls “the exform” is a sign or form seized by exclusionary stakes, cultural, social, or political: the exform appears as a moving territory in which the exform exists and it is suffused by centrifugal forces, the unwanted and the official, mechanisms of rejection and rehabilitation. This duality Bourriaud talks about can be identified in some new territories of exploration in the fashion world, especially in newborn fashion brands and industries. The fusion of power and toxicity that the fashion industry must face nowadays can find his origins in the organosphere, the ecologies of humans and their entanglements with the environment. Wasteocene is the term Marco Armiero uses to identify

the contemporary society, characterized by the imposition of wasting relationships on subaltern human and more-than-human communities that implies the construction of toxic ecologies made of contaminating substances and narratives (Armiero, 2021).

An analysis conducted by the author aims to identify the waste of the fashion system, dividing it in pre-consumption and post-consumption: while the first one is linked to the fashion industry; the latter is connected to the fashion consume. With regards to the pre-consumption, there are two main division into primary and secondary waste. The primary waste of a textile manufacturing are production residues, sewing wastes, ends sides of bobbins, discarded fabrics, cloths and fabrics, fibres and yarns, damaged fabrics, chemical wastes; while the secondary ones are distaff, cones, pallets, containers and drums, dyes and chemicals, plastic wrap, cardboards, paper, and intangible resources of energy. Furthermore, for clothing companies, the primary waste category includes fabrics and scraps, sewing threads, trimmings, patterns, and fragments, while secondary waste includes cones, pallets, shipping packaging, wrapping paper, sacks, bags, and plastic wraps (Tartaglione & Corradini, 2013).

Even though multiple studies are trying to optimize re-use techniques, the complex production model of the fashion industry is still generating tons of wastes that could be used again in the production cycle. All things considered, reusing fashion pre-consumption wastes could be considered as a “stage transition”, as also claimed by the cradle-to-cradle method (Braungart & McDonough, 2002). The C2C theory implies a waste free create system and investigates a regenerative design. As a result, everything that is born can be born again, remaining in its cradle, therefore the materials used by the supply chains are reinserted in the subsequent production cycles. Currently, the Italian fashion and textile sector offers three main trends to the use of waste: to extend the end-of-life of textile products, to reuse the textile product as a secondary raw material for other production cycles, to address the waste in material and energy recovery processes. Secondary raw materials, also called MPS, consist of waste material from the processing of raw materials or materials derived from waste recovery and recycling. Properly processed, it is possible to obtain a material that is practically the same as the one to be extracted, while respecting the environment and avoiding the withdraw of now-limited raw materials. However, there are still few initiatives aimed at revaluing pre-consumer wastes. In fact, considering the amount of material, there seems to be a gap between supply and demand: brands tend to prefer the new, addressing to companies that produce under demand. Choosing the perfect fabric, the exact colour and pattern, still turns out to be the most efficient way to make a collection, giving the possibility to have unlimited length, reduced time set aside for research, and it makes the risk of unforeseen problems smaller. This may seem the best choice, on the other hand it is feeding a system that has been showing its flaws in recent years. In fact, the dominant production system in recent decades has been characterized by a “linear” type of economic model, causing mass-producing fashion products, stimulating enormous waste production, including the waste of raw materials and energy. It is estimated that most Italian companies have an overproduction of 20 percent.

While some types of post-industrial waste can be recovered through upcycling projects, others remain as new untouched materials. There could be several reasons of their disuse, such as a flawed tint, a misprinting or just the production of too many fabrics and textiles compared to the demand. The real problem seems to lie in the system itself, if the

surplus materials are not used at the time they are produced, no industry will ever buy and use them. Specifically, fashion has an inner contradiction: each fashion is sold as eternal, on the contrary it will easily be replaced by the next one. Fashion’s only constant is its inherent change (Simmel, 1996). The succession of collections generates unused or unsold material, as a result this is stored until the stock costs became so high that the only solution is getting rid of it, also if it is unused.

## Case Studies

The focus of this study is on pre-consumer and post-industrial wastes and the central point is to investigate the change of the production ways adopted by some fashion industries and brands to exploit and reduce the over production. All the case studies considered are creating a new path towards sustainability that in this paper is called “Other system”. Twenty case studies have been analysed and interviewed, including textile producers and vendors, fashion brands and textile artists. Some case studies have been chosen for the following main reasons:

- Innovative production ways to reduce and optimize wastes
- Responsible materials selection
- Introduction of new policies for the clients
- Transparency

Nevertheless, to make a clear comparison about the differences between some companies’ structures and others and to analyse the critics of the nowadays fashion system, some case studies follow a more traditional fashion industry scheme.

Except for the textile art field, the interviews for the case studies have been driven by seven questions:

- - Where do the fabrics and textiles used for your industry come from?
- - In your industry, what is waste?
- - What happens to the waste your industrial or manufacturing process produce?
- - What is the outcome of your production system?
- - Are there some unsold pieces? What happens to them?
- - Who is your final client?
- - How would you describe your clientele?

From these few questions it becomes easier to understand the structure of a company and its similarities and differences from the other types. Some deeper questions have been put for the case

studies that had a more innovative approach than the others:

- How does your clientele respond to your different approaches?
- Why would you say that your client is conscious and what do you think the characteristics of a conscious consumer are?
- What are the problems in adopting a production method that moves away from the traditional ones? How does this impact on the profits?

After the collection of all this information, the data have been divided per categories following the business name. The [fig. 01] illustrates the variety of the business considered in a diagram.

The first type of company analysed is fabric and textile deadstock. Two stockists accepted to answer the interview, and it has been sufficient to understand how their activity works. The aim of a fabric stock is to collect unsold and rejected fabrics from different manufacturing companies and resell them to other companies, small brands, or independent designers, following the theory of the lean consumption. These B2B companies sell out deadstock fabrics, recognising the potential that waste material has. In addition, it emerged that their type of customers is not only companies, but also shopkeepers who resell in their shops the

variety of fabrics they can find out of deadstock. Consequently, two shopkeepers have been interviewed. Both declared they only select and purchase top-quality deadstock fabrics from the unsold of large Italian companies, reselling it and giving a new chance to be used. Of course, also a fabric shop produces wastes, which corresponds to the unsold pieces. To get rid of them they donate scraps to art schools or as a gift to their clients.

The next target sample to be analysed consists of a group of Italian textile manufacturing companies. During all the production stages of the mills taken in analysis there are different types of wastes.

Even though there are no effective plans to reduce or reuse their wastes, there is a strong desire for reactivating them through their donation to young designers, universities, and artists. However, one case study differs from the others: an Italian woolen mill in Follina, near Treviso, hosts artists and designers for short periods (from six months to a year) to let them work on their wastes with special projects. This type of support not only generates new connections between the industry and young creatives, but also it is useful to reactivate unused spaces and materials they have in their mill.

Therefore, the following group of companies analysed is composed by big and small fashion

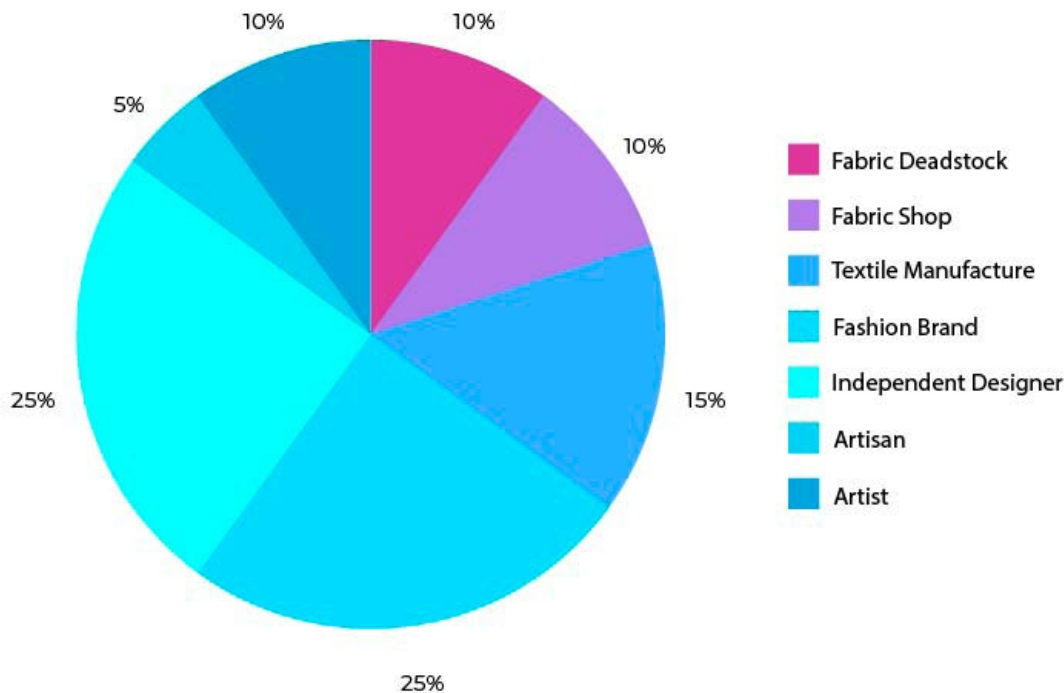


Fig. 01

brands, independent designers, shoes designers, accessories designers, and artisans. These case studies have been chosen mostly because of their proposals of an innovative approach that aims to avoid waste and to use deadstock materials. In particular, the two tendencies analysed are: the use of applications like labelling or to cover and style the hangers. Some brands differ from the others in terms of seasoning. New attempts to change the fashion seasoning has been identified, such as creating a unique collection that can last the whole year through evergreen fabrics and new technologies and designs. Finally, two artists have been interviewed to understand the differences between the use of waste in the fashion and in the art worlds, offering new alternative scenarios to work with.

## Results

The final aim of this research is to investigate if there are new business realities that could create an alternative fashion system. The “Other system” is a symbiosis of more actors from the fashion world that cooperate to reach not only a more sustainable production but also a more inclusive and responsible fashion system. The case studies analysed are some actual companies that are exploring better methods to face the needs of nowadays society.

Each case study differs from the other in terms of prominence, business name and clientele. Nevertheless, some trends emerged from the data collected and are useful to define the “Other system”. To identify and promote these movements, six categories have been created and named as follows:

- Between limits and creative opportunities
- Other time and post-production
- Research and waiting times
- The exception of accessories
- Beyond fashion

“Between limitation and creative opportunity” highlights the obstacles which could be encountered when working with wasted materials. The limitation is the main obstacle, and it involves both inventive and practical requires. On the one hand, a creative limitation has been found in some case studies, on the other hand the practical issue of reproducibility can hold back the profits. However, some designers can exploit the limitations as an incentive to their creativity and see in the lack

of reproducibility the opportunity to make their pieces unique. In addition, in some case studies the problem of lack of materials made the designers explore and exploit some techniques such as the patchwork or embroidery to guarantee the same fabric and aspect on a larger scale of production. The relationship between the “Other system” and the time needs to be analysed. In fact, fashion seasons conflicts with the market of waste. Even if fashion market needs to change periodically, the power of the market of waste is to cross the temporalities, so what chronologically belongs to the past can be re-actualised in the present, becoming the current fashion (King, 2000). In addition, nowadays media impacts the time in fashion: real-time communication plays an important role regards the evolution of tendencies and the perception of new trends. The speed of the images flow, which is available daily through personal technologies, exasperates the perception of a programmed obsolescence and erases the distances between past, present, and future (Casu et al., 2018). The case studies have revealed different interpretations of time: the adaptability to every season, the evergreen product in terms of beauty and elegance and finally the collision between a material from past collections and a new item. As a result, the “other time” could be a term used to depicture the temporality that emerged during this study. Specifically, the products analysed are made from dead materials from past collections, taken up and made current. Their temporality is suspended in a fluid collection where there is no longer any distinction between past, present, and future. For example, some brands’ strategies encourage a permanent collection, leaving the seasonality of fashion, they adopt a periodic addition of garments and accessories that creates a unique collection which does not belong to a single season nor year. This concept of time assumes the characteristics of the post-production art (Bourriaud, 2016), which confuses the temporal universes with current and simultaneous references between past and present. “Research and waiting times” is the result of an analysis of both the company strategies for the supply of materials and the client attitude. For the companies, it is important to underline how much the choice of fabric and materials can be influenced by the time. In fact, it tends to be quicker for both the buyer and the seller to have a catalogue of fabrics ready each season with the guarantee of unlimited availability, colour variants and different fabric weights. According to the data collected,

the decision to buy deadstock fabrics requires a longer research time and many risks such as limited availability, possible damaged or faded materials, limited colour choices. However, there are solutions identified by some case studies to make the research faster, for example choosing simple colour palettes and materials. Waiting times, on the other hand, are linked to the customer attitude. In fact, in some of the “other system” companies’ strategies there is the pre-order and the after-sales service. Thanks to the pre-order strategy, the fashion brands know how many items they must produce based on the buyers’ pre-orders, avoiding over production. While the after-sales service is a way to teach the consumer how to care for personal products and try to extend the life of a product as much as possible.

In contrast to the themes discussed so far, the world of shoes and accessories runs in a different way. In fact, the problem of reproduction identified before seems not to be so hard because of the few materials used for each piece. Even though the shoes and accessories brand analysed have different sizes of production and their products are positioned in different types of markets, the results of the interviews are mostly in line.

Finally, the universe of fashion waste used in the art world has been analysed. The relationship between art and waste is very complex: art denies the existence of waste as itself since nothing and no-one can be considered as non-interpretable. The artworks circulate in a hybrid universe between product and waste, on the one hand using leftovers, on the other giving it a value (Bourriaud, 2016).

## Conclusions

The first aim of this work has been to analyse and define the fashion post-production waste. Research and interviews were carried out to make clear how the fashion system works and what type of changes could drive us to new future possibilities. Subsequently, it has been necessary to understand if the pre-consumption waste could still be used in the fashion industry and how could this be possible. This research has re-evaluated textile waste showing its possibilities and eliminating the negative meaning linked to the name it brings. Fashion wastes can be reinserted into the fashion market or become part of artistic projects. Unused materials can be reintroduced into a new life cycle without the need to fear the passing of seasons and trends. The “Other system” highlights some new strategies

that could help to face the actual environmental crisis encouraging an innovative eye on the fashion system. There appears to be a good possibility that the “Other system” could open to a new perspective on the production and consumption of fashion, reaching what the philosopher Leonardo Caffo, in his book *Velocità di fuga*, calls “stability”. The idea of stability requires a social movement that clashes with the traditional idea of progress, that is aware of the contemporary problems. Instead of rushing towards the progress, Caffo invites everyone to stop and rethink the present looking at the future with a conscious idea of stability (Caffo, 2022).

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## Figure Captions:

Fig. 01: From the author, Business name analysed, 2022.