

# INTERVIEWS



## KATE FLETCHER

Kate Fletcher (PhD) is a Professor at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK and Oslo Metropolitan University in Norway. Her work, including that on systems change, post-growth fashion, fashion localism, decentring durability, Earth Logic and nature relations both defines and challenges the field of fashion, textiles and sustainability. She has written and/or edited 13 books available in eight languages, and in 2022 she was identified by author Margaret Atwood as a visionary. Kate is a co-founder of the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion. Her most recent work is about design, clothing and nature.

***The concept of prosperity is often associated with economic growth and the success of a product on the market, neglecting or downplaying the impact on the environment and people according to a model that has long been considered unsustainable. What is your definition of prosperity and what do you think are the tools and approaches to develop it?***

In 1992, a book was published called 'Wealth Beyond Measure'. Its lead author was the ecological economist Paul Ekins, and in 200 highly illustrated pages, key concepts in economics and ecological economics are unpacked for non-specialist readers. In one illustration there's a wheel, an old wagon wheel style of wheel, with each of the spokes representing a different contributing factor to prosperity. In the illustration, the wheel is distorted, egg-shaped, with the one spoke bigger than all the others. This spoke is production and income and it is drawn like this to show that these factors have been exaggerated over others, like the quality of the environment, health and care for the future have been. This picture has been handed down to us in the global North and neoliberalism has normalised it. It is worth asking ourselves: how do we understand prosperity? Is it something related to economics? Or is it something broader? Does our notion of prosperity radically extend to include all species and care for the Earth? This is where I think prosperity finds its roots, in a non-hierarchical, respectful and reciprocal relationship with the living land. This, of course, is not new insight. First Nations and indigenous cosmology (which precedes the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment) is typically based on inter-generational wisdoms that had always been tethered to lands, waters, animals and bigger worlds we cannot name or know.

***How is it possible to rediscover and encourage new sensory and direct experiences with clothing and the body, creating a new relationship between the human and the non-human?***

Clothing is a membrane between body and world. It mediates our experiences. It can be a route to greater understanding of where we are and how we are. Understood like this, fashion knowledge becomes situated knowledge, situated in the lived experience of the body moving through the living

world. The dressed body then becomes a way to unlock ontologies and epistemologies of connection and relationality to nature. It becomes about ways of being that are rooted in awareness of our deep dependence on the ecological systems that support our lives and our clothing lives. Granted this is not the traditional starting points for fashion scholars and practitioners. But I find it liberating. A literature review in this case is an engagement with what we wear and where we are realizing that the two things cannot be separated. And that when we work in this way with situated understanding we may begin to act as more resource-constrained members of the ecological community.

***The debate on sustainability in fashion often only finds technocentric answers, focusing on individual aspects of change such as innovative materials, circular processes and lifecycle assessment. Do you think this is enough or is a deeper change in the cultural and symbolic models of fashion necessary? And, moreover, does it still make sense to use the term 'sustainability'?***

Individual product improvements and technofixes are part of response to ecological and social injustice in fashion, but they are certainly not all of it. They are useful when deployed in time-bound, specific, targeted ways. But they will not deliver the systemic overhaul of the sector that is necessary for ecological health and more resilient communities. Without challenging the social objective of economic growth - without getting that deep - things will, at best, get worse more slowly. There is a dynamic future for fashion ahead, though it will necessarily become a sector with a smaller metabolism and it will need to serve new functions. It will also encompass different activities, different roles, different allocations of time between paid and unpaid work, different relations with nature.

Is the right term for this 'sustainability'? Perhaps. I don't mind so much what we call it - the thing that matters is the experience to which the word points. What is important is that action is enabled and we feel the effects.

***For some time now you have been emphasising the link between fashion and the ecological crisis, highlighting the need to overcome the dichotomy between humans and nature. As you have written in your previous contributions, it is essential to be aware that the systems responsible for the serious***

***threat to our planet Earth are human-made. How can this change of perspective translate into concrete practices for designers and companies in the fashion industry?***

It is about a switch from seeing things as separate, as isolated parts or elements organized in a hierarchy; to seeing things as connected and with no one thing more important any other. If the needs of humans are not outranking those of river, what happens to the design brief? If using all the fabric in a order – not wasting any – is essential in order to honour the resources invested in the making of this fabric, then what happens?

***Do you think that fashion can stop being the cause of environmental and social crises and become a vehicle for shared well-being? Where can we start?***

Certainly this is a shared endeavor - yet we have to start individually, we have to do our own developmental work of finding a link, a connection with the ecological systems that support our lives, no one can do this for us. And then from a place of deep understanding and connection we dress ourselves and start to think about and practice fashion from this changed starting point. This is not about needing to find wilderness or untamed nature. This is about recognizing that everything, including us, including fashion, is interconnected, and then acting accordingly.

***You have long explored the concept of 'fashion localism' and design in response to the territory. How can we rethink the fashion system to incorporate dynamics more rooted in specific places and ecological contexts?***

Localism is recognised as a central tenet of sustainability that will, it is hoped, solve at root many of society's theoretical and practical problems. Its promise arises from two main sources: first, the different ways power is divided when the scale of living is revised - smaller, local scales change the influence that people have over decisions that effect their lives; and second, the recognition that a community's well-being depends on the health of the ecosystems it lives within, which that same community is uniquely placed to understand and influence. So re-scaling fashion and adapting it to place offers the prospect of self-determined jobs, greater agency within communities and healthy

ecosystems. It is a holy grail of sustainability action and place of great hope and possibility for those invested in the work of deep and lasting fashion change.

***Fashion design is often seen as a force for innovation and change. However, in a context of ecological emergency, design that slows down, reduces and simplifies may be necessary. How do you see the future role of the designer in this transition? And what is the role of fashion education in training more responsible professionals?***

What we know about the future is that it will be less certain than ever before, more ambiguous, less predictable. And so in this future what we need are the skills of resilience, of grounded imagination and a willingness to engage in diverse experiments in living differently. These are, roughly speaking, design skills. The future has plenty of scope for designers, though not perhaps in the old places. Designers going forward will take roles as facilitators of change, as visualisers of new stories, as experimenters, as educators. Certainly fewer new material products will be made, but there will be plenty of manipulation and organization of existing material stocks...