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Circular Fashion in the Capitalocene: Value-creating Actors, Activities and Types of Fashion Design on the Resale Market

Prepared by: Mette Dalgaard Nielsen

Nordes Doctoral Consortium: Short Paper

Conference Theme: THIS SPACE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

As a symbolic reflection of the Nordes conference theme *THIS SPACE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK* it seems that there is no time to halt and take a step back in the microcosm that shapes the context of my PhD project: the fast and linear growth paradigm of fashion. In a capitalist system where speed, novelty and change are the main competitive parameters, to-do lists never end, calendars are packed and the idea of pausing stays illusionary. That is how a fashion designer and production manager describe their reality in an interview I conducted in the Fall of 2021: if they ever approach a blank space, it is already gone.

While time emerges as a scarce resource in today's fashion world, the industrial fashion paradigm is a human invention which makes time scarcity a result of specific forms of organising rather than a necessity. When it comes to preserving the world that we live in, on the other hand, time scarcity is realised through these very forms of organising which makes threatening 'tipping points' loom as the Earth tells us that the capitalist paradigm is created for a world that does not exist (Latour 2014; Schultz & Latour 2022).

I will take advantage of the blank space offered by Nordes and explore how the concept of circular fashion design, i.e. lasting design that performs well in circular resale business models, can be reconceptualised as a co-dependent and world-making phenomenon that paves the way for new understandings of garment lifespans and design strategies for longevity. As the Earth has entered the *Anthropocene*, a new geological epoch, researchers argue that the *Capitalocene* describes the climatic condition of the planet more adequately as its crises are caused by capitalism rather than human activity as such (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018; Patel & Moore 2020).

I base my academic work on the idea that design relies on the normative imperative to combat vital challenges of the Capitalocene epoch (Papanek 1971 [2019]; Engholm 2022). Ecological issues lie close to my heart and play a fundamental role in my PhD project which

is part of *TraCE* (*a Transition towards Circular Economy*); a large-scale, cross-disciplinary and -organisational research and innovation partnership that is set to move the Danish plastics and textiles industries toward full circularity (IM4 2021).

As part of a politically prioritised partnership based on certain agendas about circular development, my project includes various stakeholders, including 18 project partners in the shape of fashion and textiles businesses. Hence, my project was born with the expectation of delivering operational results through new insights about resale which is widely acknowledged as a readily applicable and efficient solution for a circular fashion future (ibid). Anchored in the business partners and based on the purpose of TraCE and its belief in resale as an enabler of circular development, I ask the following research question:

What *actors, activities and types of fashion design* create value(s) on the fashion resale market?

I draw on central actor-network theoretical (ANT) concepts which means that *actors, activities and types of fashion design* are perceived to exist in interconnected networks rather than in themselves (Latour 2008): following ANT, the three phenomena can only be understood through each other and the interrelationships with their environments which has the epistemological consequence that they are always moving and subjects to change in their ontological beings (Yaneva 2009).

Through a qualitative methodological framework of fieldwork (Hastrup 2015), netnography (online ethnography (Kozinets 2019)), small-scale wardrobe studies (Skjold 2019; Fletcher & Klepp 2017), partner interviews and workshops (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2015), I have gathered data as a research assistant since the Fall of 2020 while starting my PhD project in September 2022. Going forward, I will collect more case-specific data by following brands and fashion designs in resale environments (e.g. online resale platforms, flea markets and secondhand shops) and use autoethnographic approaches to explore pressures within the network-like organisation form of my project (Kristiansson 2006).

Based on empirical insights from my initial explorations, this short paper is complemented by an ANT-based *Web of Longevity*. The web represents the genre of speculative research and reconceptualises circular fashion design as an *effect* of heterogeneous mechanisms

rather than a *cause* of design strategies for longevity and material attributes alone. While the web remains in a prototype state, it serves the purpose of showcasing circular fashion design as the result of a co-created and volatile *arrangement* (Law 1994); that is a fragile and non-linear concept that may occasionally be under control but relies on multiple mechanisms that shape garments as dynamic beings with unpredictable trajectories (Fletcher 2017).

I will end the short paper by stating that resale is not an innocent concept which requires for everyone to be careful when perceiving it as a circular solution: resale will not provide meaningful circular change unless it is systemic and serves the purpose of bringing fashion “Down to Earth” (Latour 2018). Fashion must be redesigned to fit within earthly limits rather than expecting infinite growth and eternal expansion on a finite planet (Fletcher & Tham 2019). Being part of TraCE I aim to provide insights that can qualify the meaningful circular transition of the destructive fashion industry which may require more blank spaces that remind us of the vulnerable existence of the status quo: while the Capitalocene fashion paradigm may appear like the only possible fashion world, the ANT perspective tells us that other fashion worlds are waiting to be arranged.

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