Frantic Fashion & Australia's Invisible Designers

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Frantic fashion and Australia's invisible designers: Conversations on sustainability in the mass market

(Views expressed in this article are the personal opinion of the author)

Introduction:

The majority of Australians will work, sleep and die in the garments of the mass market. Yet, as Ian Griffiths has termed it, the designers of these garments are 'invisible' (2000). To the general public, the values, opinions and individual design processes of these designers are as unknown as their names. However, the designer's role is crucial in making decisions which will have impacts throughout the life of the garment. The high product volume within the mass market ensures that even a small decision in the design process to source a particular fabric, or to use a certain trim or textile finish, can have a profound environmental or social effect. While big companies in Australia have implemented some visible strategies for sustainability, it is uncertain how these may have flowed through to design practices. To explore this question, this presentation will discuss preliminary findings from in-depth semi-structured interviews with Australian mass market fashion designers and product developers. The aim of the interviews was to hear the voice of the insider – to listen to mass market designers describe their design process, discuss the Australian fashion industry and its future challenges and opportunities, and to comment on what a 'sustainability' for their industry could look like. These interviews will be discussed within the framework of design philosopher Tony Fry's writing on design redirection for sustainability.

Background and Methodology

It is important to begin by framing my use of the term 'sustainability'. In the last twenty-five years, the word 'sustainability' has moved past its simple meaning to represent an emerging meta-narrative: that human society needs to make concerted changes in order to sustain and protect the natural environment, the world.s finite resources, and a decent quality of life for all people. As Tony Fry has phrased it, "without sustain-ability we have nothing," hence, "it is not a matter of the imperative of sustain-ability being balanced with other political demands but rather that it rules them as sovereign" (2009, 48). A critical notion of Fry's is that "design designs," or in other words, designed objects go on to design other consequences that their designer never intended (2009, 30). Fry says it is partly this unacknowledged ability of design to go on designing that has led humankind to the current state of what he calls "defuturing" (2009, 6). Equally, it is only the recasting and redirecting of the very nature of design that can halt this defuturing. Fry calls for a redirective design practice, which he defines as, "akin to a new kind of (design) leadership underpinned by a combination of creating new (and gathering old) knowledge directed at advancing means of sustainability while also

politically contesting the unsustainable status quo" (2009, 57). Hence, redirective practice "takes design beyond a disciplinary model" and becomes a meta-practice that can enable conversations and engagement across design disciplines (2009, 56).
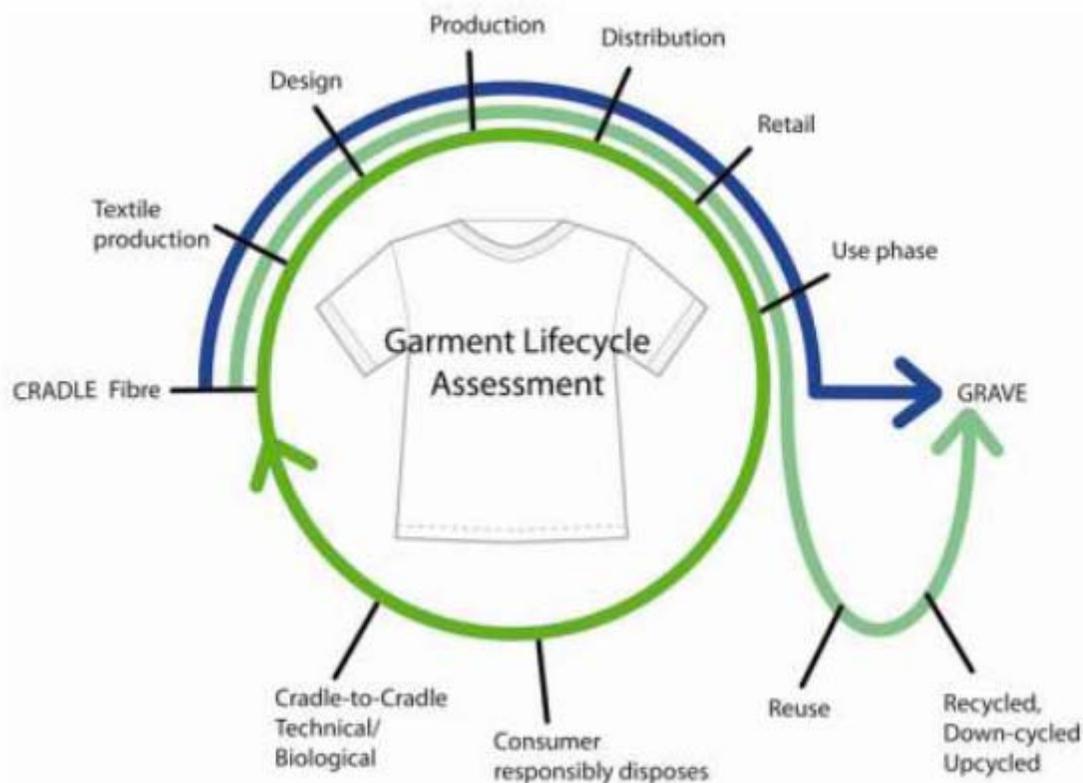

Figure 1: Garment Lifecycle Assessment (illustration by Alice Payne)

To conceptualise the steps which may be taken in a redirected practice in the context of fashion design, I draw on the notion of lifecycle thinking (see Figure 1). While lifecycle assessment is a quantitative tool used to assess the environmental inputs and outputs of a designed product (Vezzoli and Manzini 2008), lifecycle thinking can be applied in a qualitative sense to enable designers to explore the impacts of the garment throughout its life and subsequent lives, and to identify places for intervention (Figure 1). For instance, a designer can ask: what are the impacts of the fibre and textiles used to make the garment? What are the outputs of the garments – what are its environmental impacts during its use phase, how can it be reused, or eventually disposed of? Speed is also a consideration; for example, faster items could be designed to disassemble at end of life or designed to be closed-loop recycled, while slower, classic pieces could be repairable, alterable and designed to last (see McDonough and Braungart 2002; Fletcher 2010; Gwilt 2011).

Applying Fry's design philosophy to the mass market fashion industry is problematic, not least because his definition of design is poles apart from the rapid, often derivative design of the mass market (which arguably can be closer to styling). Particularly, fashion's artificial cycles of production and consumption work directly to preserve what Fry calls "the defuturing status quo" (2009, 136) by pushing through ever-greater amounts of product in the service of profit. However, while the underlying paradigm of the mass market fashion industry may conspire against redirected practice, my interest in this paper is to explore the view and practices of the individual mass market designer within the existing fashion system. In this way, the potential for a future redirected practice can be gauged.

To do this, I will draw on data gathered from semi-structured interviews with Australian designers and design room managers, which I conducted during 2010 – 2011. The aim of the interviews was to map existing design processes in the Australian mass market, as well as to discuss the implications of future environmental challenges. Before I interviewed designers individually, I gave a short presentation to the design team in which I defined 'sustainability' as the need to respond to global challenges such as climate change, rising population and resource pressures. I used the illustration of the garment lifecycle (Figure 1) as a way to demonstrate possible points of intervention in the design of the garment. All companies and participants involved in the project will remain anonymous, as I wished to encourage designers to speak openly about their concerns and views without potentially damaging the reputation of their company in any way.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, a context to the interviews by describing the Australian mass market design process with particular regard to the impact of offshore sampling and production will be provided. Secondly brief description on the three companies who participated in the study will be given and they will be positioned within the broader Australian mass market. From here the views and actions of individual designers in the context of redirected practice will be discussed.

The Australian mass market fashion industry

Australia is a small player in the global fashion system. However, the volume of product generated by mass market fashion companies in Australia is still significant. For instance, according to Jo Kellock from the Council of Textiles and Fashion Industries of Australia (TFIA), one billion units of apparel are imported into Australia from China each year (Kellock 2011). Australia's mass market industry is somewhat unusual in the global context in that it is dominated by local players. The global fast fashion giants as Zara, H & M or Gap have yet to establish a significant presence, with Gap only opening its first Australian store in 2010 and Zara opening its first store in 2011.

The three companies I visited represent a cross-section of the Australian mass market, a summary of which is contained in Figure 2. Company A is a self-described fast fashion wholesaler, which produces sixty to ninety garment styles per month. Company B is a

discount department store with over 4000 product lines, a portion of which are designed in house, while the remainder are sourced from suppliers and strategic partners. Company C is a mid-market retailer and wholesaler comprised of three brands, two of which I had access to. Label C2, offers a collection for an older, more classic market, while Label C3 is a fast fashion label, and a direct competitor of Company A. Across the three companies, I conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews. Participants included design room managers and designers across womenswear, menswear, fast fashion and footwear. Collectively, these designers design and develop fashion products for over a dozen different labels.

Figure 2: Map of the Australian Mass Market (illustration by Alice Payne)

Before conducting the fieldwork, I explored the public face of each company for signs of engagement with environmental sustainability. By and large, Australia lags behind the EU and the US in implementing policy to tackle wasteful and unethical environmental and labour practices in the fashion industry. In fact, fashion researcher Sylvia Walsh places the current efforts of Australian companies to respond to environmental sustainability firmly within the realm of "greenwash" (2009, 28). Of the three companies I visited, discount retailer Company B is the only company to publically demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability, in part through displaying a corporate social responsibility policy on its website. Also, the company has released organic cotton collections in the past, and has introduced biodegradable shopping bags and in store signage encouraging consumers to launder garments on lower temperatures. These activities are part of a company-wide strategy which, to a limited degree, takes into account a wider view of the garment's lifecycle by considering the input phase (impacts of cotton production) as well as the use phase (laundering behaviour). However, neither Company A nor Company C have implemented any such strategies publically.

All three companies are manufactured exclusively in China. Of the three companies I visited, only Company A continues to maintain a sample room in which the designer can work with the patternmakers, cutters and machinists to develop and fit a portion of the toiles. It is no longer cost effective to develop samples in Australia. Instead, prototype garments are developed in China and freighted to Australia for fitting, or, in the case of Company B, fittings are conducted exclusively via video link with Hong Kong. Arguably, as a result of this separation from design and production, designers are less likely to be engaged with the physicality of the designed garment. Hence, seemingly small design decisions – whether deciding on the width of a facing, the lay of the pattern pieces on the marker, or the choice of a thread or interlining – are effectively off-shored along with the patternmaking, sampling and manufacture. In the context of a redirected design practice for sustainability, these seemingly inconsequential decisions may have far-reaching consequences later in the garment's lifecycle.

Voices of the invisible designers

Across all three companies I found a wide variety of views and responses to the question of fashion and sustainability. Rather than divide the findings by company, I have grouped them according to the nature of the designers' response. The first group of designers were cynical about the notion of sustainable fashion, and rather than discussing the challenge within the scope of their design process, instead discussed it in terms of politics – the macro-economic challenges of consumption and economic growth. The second group of designers were concerned by the environmental impact of the fashion industry. However, although they felt unable to shift their design process in response, they had made changes where they could – in their personal consumption habits. The third group contains individuals who were gravely concerned about the challenges faced (and caused) by the industry, yet had found ways within the constraints of their process to make positive changes.

a) Politics of design and sustainability

From a number of designers in all three companies, I met with a degree of cynicism and pessimism regarding the notion of fashion and sustainability. David, a menswear designer at Company B, spoke about the issue in terms of macro-economic questions:

> It's completely throwaway now, hey you ask me how to change that, (laughs) I don't reckon you can in a hurry, because you've got businesses that are sustained on that high turnover of product, and making their money from it... Economies are run on that... and that goes deep into how our society is run, what's our model of economic growth... (2010).

David's comment relates to fashion theorist Sandy Black's notion of the fashion paradox, which she defines as "the economic importance of the fashion industry set against its inherent obsolescence and waste through constant change" (Black and Eckert 2010, 813). Set against the broader context of design, arguably fashion's logic of perpetual change has infiltrated the majority of product design, with built-in-obsolescence a

necessary strategy to encourage greater consumption and hence continued economic growth (see Lipovetsky 1994; Jackson 2009). David described how his design decisions ultimately fed into this wider goal of the company, hence his emphasis was on rapidly developing cost-effective products which would sell in order to maximise profits. He added,

> I mean they are really big, deep questions ... because you know businesses are driven by the dollar. Full stop. It's not going to change. High turnover of product in fashion. It's not going to change. So what do you do? Well, I think there is growing concern. I think you have to look at the customer (2010).

However he added that while environmental strategies may make the customer feel better about the retailer, "How much effect it actually has, I don't know. Because I think a lot of people actually shop because they want to shop and they want the latest, or they want something new" (David 2010). While David felt concern regarding the environmental impacts of the fashion industry, he framed the problem within a broad socio-political context in order to demonstrate that the system itself was structured around unsustainability. This suggests an underlying assumption that the actions and decisions of the individual designer can carry little weight within the context of the larger system.

In Company C, head designer of Label C3 Michelle also saw the notion of sustainable fashion as an inherent contradiction, saying,

> I can't ever see, in my lifetime, a head of a company wanting to make particularly sustainable garments because it is undermining their reason for being in the industry. The reason why we are here is to sell garments to people. So if you make garments that don't destruct, or that last a lifetime you'll do yourself out of an industry, it doesn't make sense (2011).

Michelle then asked me to suggest the circumstances in which a company would become more concerned with these issues. I suggested external circumstances such as resource scarcity or customer demand. Michelle responded,

All I can see consumers demanding is pricepoint. They will only do things where they can help in a daily sense (2011).

Michelle added that, in her view,

> The supply being cut off, it doesn't seem imminent, it seems like it's going to be decades away to me. There's going to be a lot of people, but I see people making adjustments as you go along. If you don't have enough cotton, you'll move to something else, they'll use bamboo, we've clearly got enough supply of water... to me the supply is endless, by the time it gets to 2050, we'll be finding a way... (2011).

The views of both Michelle and David highlight that, implicitly, design redirection is a political project. Contained within it is a particular world view – that the current trajectory of design is unsustainable. Michelle remained doubtful as to the legitimacy of this view. She commented,

> I don't find the waste of all this stuff, the way we go about it so morally reprehensible that we shouldn't do it. People have to wear clothes, people have to live and people are going to consume it and if they don't consume it from us they will get it from someone else (2011).

b) Disjunction between design practices and personal convictions

In a number of designers, particularly the fast fashion designers, there was a significant gap between their actions as designers and their actions as consumers of fashion. For example, head designer Sophie from Company C discussed the purpose of Label C3 saying, "it is a chuck out label, because it is affordable, girls will wear it and they will chuck it out" (2011). However, she tries not to consume in this way herself, saying,

> For me myself, I don't chuck out any of my clothes. I will either donate it to St Vinnies, or I will just keep it until it comes back into trend, into fashion, because usually it does. I've got so much 80s sort of clothes that I have bought second hand and now they are fashionable (2011).

Similarly, design assistant Kristie at Company A described how her design process was constrained by fashion trends, yet in her own engagement with fashion as a consumer, she chose to wear vintage clothing and to "wear it out" rather than dispose of it (2010).

The disjunction between actions in the workplace and actions outside of it was revealed differently in the comments of Kylie from Company A. Junior designer Kylie designed her own label as a side project. She was developing an organic menswear range with her partner. She discussed sustainable fashion in terms of ethics – ethical sourcing of organic fibres and ethical manufacturing in partnership with classic clothes designed to last. Of her side project she said,

> We are designing stuff that ... would be quite classic so then you are increasing the life span of that garment... each piece has to be quite versatile [so] it can go from day to night so you are increasing it [the life span] again. I want to create piece that guys have in their wardrobe for a long time (2010).

Significantly, her fast fashion day job was tacitly excluded from this view of sustainability. Kylie did not reflect on the differences between her two design agendas - the reasons were self-evident in her description of the restraints of cost, time and trends.

When interviewing the fast fashion designers, all identified low price and trends as the main design constraints they faced. Also, they were all operating in a highly pressured environment, with both Company A and Company C releasing approximately sixty to

ninety styles monthly. Company A has a design team of six, and as Company A design assistant Kristie described the workload, "we always struggle, even if there is one person away in the design room it just ruins your whole [day]... all that work is just added onto everyone" (2010). These pressures were in even greater evidence at Company C's Label C3, which has a design team of two. Head designer Sophie commented, "We don't have a lot of time to do each process, it is really fast" she added, "it's pretty crazy, I don't sleep a lot to tell you the truth (2011).

c) Engaged and actively searching for solutions

In each company, there were designers who could see the scope for change within their design process. Crucially, all approached sustainability in different ways and had different and quite specific ideas. While the ideas may not be innovative in and of themselves, their significance lies in the personal initiative and passion of the designer. These designers believed that the industry was damaging, and as such they considered the changes which they personally could make within the limits of their company's structure.

Company B's footwear designer Pete had worked in Europe and the US as a footwear designer, in companies ranging in market level from haute couture to the discount mass market. He was gravely concerned about pollution from synthetic materials in footwear. His experience working with factories in Taiwan affected him viscerally, as he described how he would be "gagging" due to the extent of the air pollution. He said,

> One of my biggest concerns -I was just talking about this the other day -I mean we are developing synthetic materials to make a cheaper product but we are polluting the air, developing these materials. Like for example when I go to Taiwan to see the factories, there are days Alice, I can't even believe... it's disgusting (Pete 2010).

He added, "I felt bad ... what are we producing? The end result is, like, a cheap pair of shoes" (Pete 2010).

Pete's response to his experiences of factory conditions was to actively research alternative materials for Company B's footwear, although with mixed results. He cited Stella McCartney's record of sourcing synthetics which were environmentally friendly. However, he acknowledged that using these materials in his market level was a challenge, saying,

> But where technology is right now we can't afford it. You know the price is just astronomical. Then you sit back and you look at that and you go, well that's not really fair is it because basically what I'm doing is I'm sort of contradicting myself, I'm trying to produce a fabric, a material that's inexpensive, but I can't afford to produce it to save the air? (2010).

Pete's action was rooted in his own experiences of air pollution, and he felt a moral obligation to actively source alternative materials. Although this was proving to be a challenge for his market level, he was still continuing his research. As such, he described how he was in the process of sourcing recycled tyre rubber for use as outer soles for a portion of the summer sandals. Also, he had shared his concerns with some of his former colleagues in a US company (also footwear designers) and they were also concerned about the pollution from synthetic materials, but had a different approach. As Pete described,

> they decided you know because of what I have just been saying they were doing the opposite, they are going to start using animals again, but using the animals that are overpopulated that can use tanning process that can deal with the skins of those animals that we do have to, sort of like, curb the population ... certain buffalo, certain bison things like that (2010).

He added, "as it turns out that process of tanning with skins like that is apparently less detrimental to the environment than developing all these polyurathanes so it's interesting... that's something I would really like to look into in the future, that's one of the goals"(2010).

The interview with Pete was significant because he did not focus on the larger macro-problems of fashion and sustainability; instead he focussed on the challenge which he could directly influence – the material of the footwear he designed. Pete was one of the few designers in Company B who handled and fitted the footwear throughout the development phase, as opposed to fitting the prototype via video link to China. Pete also travelled regularly to the factories and described how the best part of the design process for him was handling the shoe and trying out new ideas with the factory production team. Arguably, his physical closeness to the actual product he is designing enabled a greater connection with and appreciation of its materiality. For Pete, this has flowed through into a concern regarding the impact of the synthetic materials and an active attempt to reconsider his material choice.

In Company A, Hannah, the design room manager, was passionate about the challenges of fashion and sustainability. Like Pete, she had considered the issue carefully, but in the context of the fast fashion product which her company developed. To her, recycling was the way forward for fast fashion, both using recycled materials to begin with, and also recycling the garment at end of life. This notion parallels the work of Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham in the Lifetimes project (2004), in which they identified various rhythms of use for fashion garments. As a 'fast' product, the environmental impact of fast fashion products can be mitigated through exploring various recycling options throughout the lifecycle, including both input and at end-of-life.

Although she had not explored recycled fabrics, Hannah had recently taken an idea for a recycling scheme to the Company owner and to the General Manager, where old

Company A clothing could be returned via the webstore and donated to charity. The owner had expressed some interest, and Hannah was hopeful she could convince him.

Another suggestion of Hannah's was a garment loan service where,

> you pay a certain amount, like a monthly subscription to a brand maybe and then you pull out your wardrobe for that week and then maybe you return that and pick up something else and then they are responsible for dry cleaning it (2010).

While she wasn't proposing this for Company A, it demonstrates her interest in services as an alternative to the current model of product development, consumption and disposal. Unlike Michelle from Company C, Hannah demonstrated that design thinking need not be embedded in product, as exchanging products for systems can be a means to reducing the ecological impact of the physical garment. Two of Hannah's suggestions, the recycling scheme and the hire scheme, were system-led solutions which are a design intervention within the system of fast fashion, rather than an intervention in the design of the product. Importantly for a redirected practice, design solutions need not rest solely with the physical product, but can equally rest within the systems which support the product.

Conclusion

In the Australian mass market, there have been limited attempts to engage with the challenge of fashion and sustainability. Within Fry's notion of redirective practice, sustainability becomes the overarching imperative, so that all design decisions flow from the need to balance the destructive/creative dialectic of designing. The companies I visited are a world away from this point. The mass market fashion designers I interviewed felt largely unable to redirect their practice, as they are „locked-in. to a particular mode of design development by the larger constraints of trends and speed of production. However, many designers felt gravely concerned about fashion's endemic waste and pollution. For some, this concern translated into changing their actions outside of the workplace, whether as consumers or designers. Other designers were, in some cases, concerned enough to make decisions, conduct research or open conversations within their team with the express purpose of tackling the challenge of fashion and sustainability.

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