Mindsets of Possibility

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What we perceive and understand, as design educators, learners, and practitioners, and apply through our activities, is a manifestation of our mindsets, in the context of our times. Designed elements of fashion shape and are shaped by us, and in turn, contribute to or detract from thriving in more than human life systems. Our ability to live well depends on the recognition of ourselves as part of ecological systems, i.e. acting in the world, rather than on it. An exploration of interdependence in relation to fashion design education draws on aspects of aesthetics, biological and life sciences, philosophy, economics, art, cultural studies, eco-feminism, de-colonisation, engineering and more. The ecological and social crisis within which fashion activities take place relates to errors in our perceptions of ourselves and our habits of mind, as described by Gregory Bateson (1972). Design as a means to evolve habits of mind offers a provocation to fashion academics, to explore links between design, dress, and life.

Mindsets of Possibility draw on a longstanding practice in fashion design, research, and education, grounded in participatory, transformation design principles. Through this practice, I have been able to gather, and reflect on ways in which a range of undergraduate and post-graduate students approach fashion design in the context of our times. As a stubborn optimist (Figures, C. and Rivett-Carnac, T. and 2020) I am keen to flip the question of how designers can solve complex problems of extractive and exploitative symptoms and related errors in our habits of mind, to explore how the crisis changes what and how we teach and learn fashion designing as an exploration of possibilities. This is not to make light of the complexities of the crises, but to recognise a future wellbeing that might be evolving.

This heuristic model of eight mindsets of possibility was developed through analysis of a five year programme, co-created between academia and industry, involving 1600 students, between 2016 and 2020. The study was based on a selection of bachelors' and masters' students' submissions (shortlisted by tutors and industry partners for excellence in design for sustainability) and is being used in teaching at undergraduate and post-graduate levels at the university where I am based and in programmes with design teams in a range of industry settings, from micro to global enterprises.

These mindsets intersect designers' values with a sense of criticality in terms of intentions and consequences of design. Thus personal and systems wide complexities of fashion's entanglement in social, ecological, cultural, and economic dimensions of life are seen through an exploratory lens. These mindsets are purposefully seen as modes of enquiry, rather than detailed methodologies, so that they can be interpreted by a range of tutors and learners.

Resourcefulness
A mindset that recognises thriving as a process of creatively interacting with what is present, rather than focusing on what is missing. A practice of ingenuity, where fulfilment is found in uncovering value in places, objects, materials, and processes that are commonly ignored or culturally, economically, or otherwise dismissed. Curiosity, intrigue, and experimentation is nourished by concepts such as radical repair as a political and aesthetic statement, and communities of active resourcefulness, such as the repair cafes network. Examples of student work include foraging principles applied to fashion design, fibreshed projects that are defined by the resources and skills base of place and the diversification of materials development, including seaweed and fish skin.

Resilience
A mindset in which 'winning does not tempt that [person]. This is how [they] grow: by being defeated, decisively, by constantly greater beings'. (Maria Rilke 1901)
A practice that involves reflexive understanding of how to adapt in an ever shifting environment. It involves coping strategies based on adaptation and a recognition that failure is expected in a complex world. Rather than seeing subjects and products or materials in opposition to other elements (i.e. bouncing back from an opposing force) this mindset overcomes the subject/ object divide by understanding resilience as an iterative process of relational adaptation and emergence. Examples of student work include immersive, situated practice with customers, connecting the denim ecosystem at regional level, developing practical skills to develop agency, dignity, and achievement.

Equity
A mindset that recognises human and more than human rights to safe, healthy and fulfilling living and working environments. Through a recognition of the intersectional nature of social, climate, racial, gender, class and other forms of discrimination, there is an active seeking of ways to de-centre and de-centralise sources of knowledge and understanding. This involves valuing a plurality of

approaches, working through the knotty entanglements of human relationships with care and careful consideration of ways to honour knowledges. It involves actions that prevent the perpetuation and reproduction of dominant ideas that contribute to the social and ecological wellbeing crisis. It takes a non-judgemental approach in recognising the potential in all people. Examples of student work include measuring impact from the perspective of those living in vulnerable conditions, ways to dissolve the wealth-poverty divide, and design for the 99% rather than the 1% of wealth holders.

Authenticity

A mindset that engages in rigorous processes to act with integrity, honesty and accountability. It draws on widely recognised elements of authenticity relating to history, skills and resources (often connected to location) in conjunction with developing trust through relationship building and skills documentation. Open working, the use of tools for transparency and traceability and strong governance and accountability practices all contribute to a sense of design credibility. In this mindset, nothing is original, as all is entangled, derived, and shared (Akómoléfé 2013) including each of us as humans. At the same time, everything is original as life continues to be reconfigured and is never static. Examples of student work include design with extended time, materials based analysis of Lapis Lazuli and the bio-kitchen, involving wearers in the creation of fashion materials and objects.

Sufficiency

A mindset that explores ideas of balance and satisfaction, through interrogation of what living well means and looks like in fashion terms. Recognising that design always takes place in the context of constraints, that living systems have boundaries, and design seeks to improve situations, sufficiency can be seen as the context of design. This mindset draws on reference points that relate to science-based understanding of a safe operating space for humanity in climate and biodiversity terms, economy-based understanding of life quality in wage and conditions terms and social science studies of societal markers of thriving. It explores consumerism and practices of giving and receiving, recognising citizens as contributors as well as recipients of fashion products and experiences. Examples of student work include fashion fasting and sacrifice, wardrobe audits and servicing and extinction monitoring.

Activism

A mindset that explores agency, negotiation, mobilisation, and commitment, draws on a long history of fashion as a means for changing legislation, and social norms. Dressing and undressing to create a spectacle in the name of justice has demonstrated the power of fashion in changing policy and socially accepted behaviour. This mindset expands the role of the designer as documentary maker, provocateur, and creator of the embodiment of values. Standing up for what you believe in and maintaining empathy for others, this mindset is activated by professional and citizen fashion designers, using the term ‘fashion designer’ as a broad description of all those who make decisions relating to the clothed body. In consideration of ways to encourage change beyond niche audiences, the mindset draws on Camus’ articulation of rebellion (Camus, A. 1951) as practices that amplify wellbeing and call out exploitation through negotiation and peaceful resistance. Examples of student work include the use of peace silk as a literal and metaphoric approach to practices and policy commitments, and skills development in the Indian transgender (Hijra) community.

Collaboration

A mindset that is open to questioning of methodologies that are recognised in one field, but unknown or invalid in others. It is understood that working across disciplines and other traditional

boundaries involves more than sharing knowledge and experience, it is about explaining perspectives and logics and being open to questions and critique. This mindset is about a thirst for this questioning, careful communication, and the ability to let go of accepted norms, to learn from other disciplinary, cultural and sector approaches to co-creation. Collaboration is not the same as consensus, and it is much more than convening a diverse group to work together. It involves methodologies and practices that honour all present and those absent from a project. It is about taking lessons from Indigenous traditions and rituals including the 8 ways approach to pedagogy. Examples of student work include dissolving hierarchies through co-design, embodiment of vulnerability and co-inquiry with citizen designers.

Ecological thinking
This mindset takes a living systems approach to design, drawing on practices grounded in deep ecology, Næss, A., Rothenberg, D.,1989, interdependence and reflective, situated practices, Snyder, G., 2010. with reference to key texts in systems thinking (Capra, F., Luisi, P.L., 2014.) This includes being attentive and the ability to hold intention lightly, so that meandering opens up new possibilities without distractions leading to confusion. This mindset, as the others, has myriad reference points and guides that can help to retain openness to times of discomfort and disorientation. Whether exploring posthuman approaches to knowing and being or following the path of permaculture practice, this mindset expands what it means to design fashion in ways that are, as yet unknown and temporalities that are, as yet, uninhabited. Examples of student work include post-carbon fashion and pattern and print making with microbial pigments, stimulated by sound vibrations to form beautiful, coloured patterns.

These mindsets can apply to fashion related habits of mind and of dress at a personal level, relating to identity, belonging and social interaction, fulfilling livelihoods and a source of creativity; at a societal level, relating to vibrant cultures, resilient communities, craft and digital skills for wellbeing and at biosphere level, relating to regeneration of soil health, protection of biodiversity and demonstration of carbon positive practices.

What is perhaps most exciting about the mindsets approach to teaching and learning is that it is informed by participants, and if access is expanded, and the model openly iterated, can contribute to a de-centred approach to thriving across geographies, generations, and life situations.

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