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SPEAKER INTERVIEW

From Constraint to Creative Brief: Laetitia Forst on the Case for Design-Led Circularity

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Could you start by introducing yourself and your research at UAL, and give us a sense of the panel you'll be contributing to at the Textiles Recycling Expo EU?

My background is in textile design, I trained as a print, knit, and weave designer before getting interested in sustainability and pursuing academic research. This early training gave me an overview of textile techniques which I find very useful in my current research in circular textiles. In my role at UAL I explore design for circularity, covering themes such as systemic design, design for recyclability, or design for disassembly. The projects I have been involved in are tight collaborations with



*Laetitia Forst, Post Doctoral Research Fellow,
UAL*

industry partners, with a core agenda of supporting a transition to circularity and regenerative practices in the fashion and textiles sector. I'm very excited to contribute to the "Looking forward: designing sustainable and recyclable textiles" panel at the Textile Recycling Expo alongside industry stakeholders to discuss how design decisions such as mono-material, design for disassembly, or next gen material choices can support impact reduction. I think that the combination of deep dive research with real-world challenges faced by brands and manufacturers can lead to exciting debates.

Design for recyclability is sometimes framed as a constraint on creativity but many in the field argue the opposite. Where do you sit on that, and what does genuinely recyclable textile design actually look like in practice?

Constrained creativity has been part of artists, writers, and designers' toolbox for most of the modern era (for example with the Oulipo movement in literature in the 1960's). But for designers in today's polycrisis, it's not just a trick to overcome a blank page, it's essential. Since the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, and repeated international scientific publication (e.g. IPCC reports), it is undeniable that we operate in a bounded and interconnected system, where the design decisions we make have impact beyond our sector or even beyond our understanding. So if boundaries and constraints are essential, the question is then, how do we work with them? Designers have been singled out as key actors in a shift to sustainability, and I believe it is precisely because of that ability to make a constraint into a creative brief,

using the limits of a system or a material as a starting point for something beautiful. There is a quote by Victor Papanek in *The Green Imperative* (1983) that I use often:

"The rise of a new aesthetic that is formed by environmental and ecological considerations will be unpredictable in its shapes, forms, colors, textures and varieties and - at the same time enormously exciting."

I feel that this encapsulates the shift from design that serves humans at the detriment of all other species, to a form of design that is beautiful and pleasant to all. We are starting to see many examples of these 'unpredictable shapes, forms, colours, textures and varieties' in the new materials and processes that will be on display the Textile Recycling Expo.

Your work sits at the intersection of research and the fashion and textiles industry. What are the most compelling questions your research is currently exploring, and what's driven your focus in that direction?

By working in research, I have the luxury of exploring a range of fundamental questions shaping the fashion and textiles sector. These include explorations of different scenarios for regenerative business practices, or asking how we might classify and quantify the effects of design for recycling. At the core of my work is an underlying question which goes along the lines of 'what can creative textile designers contribute to circularity' I have been exploring the translation of technical textile and environmental challenges to hands-on textile creativity since my doctoral research. In a way, this started with my exploration of design for disassembly: when looking at recyclability challenges, mono-material design is an obvious answer, but it sat at odds with my experience of creative textile design, where combinations of colours, textures and fibre types are key to the production of beautiful and desirable materials. I explored design for disassembly as a way of getting the best of both worlds: optimal function and aesthetics with fibre, yarn or fabric combinations, but unhindered recyclability at end of life with easy separation. This work started from very tangible, sample-scale developments of circular, disassemble-able textiles, but reached well beyond the fabric to challenge systems of production, use, collection, and sorting in a circular economy speculation.

There's often a significant gap between what's technically possible in a lab or research setting and what gets adopted at commercial scale. In your experience, where does that translation tend to break down?

While scaling next-gen materials remains a challenge, designers are key to building bridges between lab and commercial availability. In theory, you can make pretty much anything in a petri dish, the real question is: how can it find value in real-world applications? The idea of 'adequate' design is central. No material is inherently sustainable, it is only in its ability to deliver a function with lowest possible impact that it can achieve that label. So it is for designers to specify accordingly and ensure that the right resource is allocated to the right function, combining performance in production with longevity in use and efficient end-of life management. It's important that innovative materials should displace a polluting contender with a viable and adequate alternative. Of course there are many technical challenges in up-scaling due to yield and costing challenges, but from a design perspective, there is a great opportunity to make materials work for a given context.

Blended fibres remain one of the industry's most persistent recyclability challenges. From a design perspective, how much can be solved upstream and what does that require of designers, brands, and manufacturers?

Blended fibre can occur in textiles for a range of reasons and the response to that challenge should consider these. In some cases, fibres are combined just because 'that's how it's always been done'. The default composition is a blend when a mono-material could work the same and at the same cost, but the question of the fabric's recyclability has never been asked. In these cases, an honest discussion with suppliers can go a long way to resolving the issue. In other cases, the blend is there to respond to a functional or aesthetic requirement, and the strategy to redesign it toward recyclability is different. This is a place where structural textile design (the design of woven, knitted or other fibre and yarn structures within a fabric) can enhance performance without mixing resources from different recycling streams. Alternatively, designing for disassembly can help fulfil the performance requirement while offering the option of taking resources apart at end of life. These approaches need close collaboration between textile designers, fashion designers, production teams, and recycling systems to ensure that the recyclability intention carries through each stage of the lifecycle.

UAL occupies a unique position, sitting across art, design, and applied research. How does that environment shape the way you approach problems like sustainability and recyclability and what can industry learn from that kind of thinking?

As an arts and design specialist university, UAL provides a unique environment to do research into sustainability. I came to UAL as a design practitioner eager to unpack some of the challenges I was observing in my industry. I was welcome and encouraged to use my design skills in this endeavour. Practice-research is central to many of the projects I have undertaken since I joined in 2016, and this includes participatory, collaborative design, or studio-based textile experimentation. In this type of work, it is impossible not to collaborate, and UAL's perspective on bridging disciplines is represented in its research culture. I am an active member of three research labs: The Active Materials Lab, which combines fashion design and STEM disciplines, The Design For Social Innovation and Sustainability (DESI) Lab, which contributes to a global network of socially engaged designers, and the Complex Collaboration Research Hub, which explores how to collaborate when responding to today's polycrisis. These are but a small part of the incredible research community accessible to staff and students at the university, bringing together different perspectives on circular and sustainable design.

Looking at the broader landscape, which emerging materials, technologies, or design approaches are you most excited about right now?

What interests me the most are materials and processes which offer an opportunity to break away from exploitative globalised supply chains, those that can reconnect us to materiality and place. In the next-gen material space, this is not necessarily the newest plant leather or seaweed thread, but perhaps those that, through material innovation, question resource availability and ecosystem balance. I am also interested in how textile processes can shape new supply chain systems, with structural textile design affording impact reduction while delivering best performance. I think these types of innovation show how design can bring about an exciting type of ingenuity that challenges modes of production beyond a simple material switch.

In the field of design strategy, I also have an eye on what new training and recommendations are made available to design decision makers to support responsible practices. With incoming regulation, there is a growing need to provide clear and actionable guidance, so it's very instructive to see how different brands or organisations are pulling their knowledge together and sharing it in the right place in the garment lifecycle.

Finally, what brings you to the Textiles Recycling Expo EU, and what do you hope to get from being part of the conversation there?

It will be incredible to get a chance to see all the latest innovation in terms of materials and processes in the flesh. After years of reading about certain technologies, what a pleasure it will be to handle some of the samples. As a researcher, I am also there to ask questions and stay present in the discomfort of some complex issues. I'll be attending the conference programme and striking up conversations in the breaks. It's a wonderful opportunity to get so many textile recycling actors of change in the same place, I hope we can strengthen existing connections and find new ways to collaborate.

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