

FASHION FOR DEMOCRACY: DESIGN FOR BETTER LIVES Positions & Provocations

A 'colorful white paper' on the current
fashion democratizers

by Beneficial Design e.V.

Fashion For Democracy: Design for Better Lives

Positions & Provocations

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Photograph: Prof. Friederike von Wedel Parlow (L), Lou Croff Blake, Christine Fehrenbach (R)
Credit: Ben Kuhlmann



Forward from the organizers

It has been a joy and privilege to work with so many types of people in and around fashion. We so greatly value the time and energy that everyone has taken for this project, and each exchange leaves us feeling more inspired.

This work on the Fashion For Democracy project began in 2024, but it pulls from our collective experience in our professional work, in academia, and in our own lives. We see this as the moment to bring together as many groups as we can to build on the foundation of the sustainability, craft and design, and social justice movements, to work towards a cooperation for truly fair fashion. We decenter the industry and the major players, and look to fashion as an ecosystem, not a machine.

As initiators of an intercultural project, we want to open with an acknowledgement our own situated perspective as fashion scholars and professionals working in Europe, with ancestry in the global north. Our privileges in this context include the resources we have to reach out to others and create platforms for exchange, as well as our research backgrounds and strong professional networks. While remaining aware of our subjectivities, we seek dialogue with those from many other backgrounds. We hold the pluriverse, as described by Arturo Escobar¹ and other scholars, as the starting point for collaboration, acknowledging that fashion's history and future are steeped in the many coexisting worlds that we humans co-create. We encourage our peers to join us in this radical curiosity for plural perspectives, especially when it comes to designing solutions to our earth's problems. We remain open to learning and growing with the feedback from others.

This publication shares the research from the past two years, and the processes and findings our first Agora on 12. December, 2025, a hybrid event hosted at The Designhaus at Hessen Design in Darmstadt, Germany. We include input from our community members, which explore different perspectives on the theme. We also share the second draft of the Proposed Principles of Fashion For Democracy, a living document that was peer reviewed during our workshop.

We thank you for your time spent reading this collection of input from our community and synthesis of our work thus far.

– Prof. Friederike von Wedel-Parlow (*Beneficial Design e.V.*), Lou Croff Blake (*Beneficial Design e.V.*), and Christine Fehrenbach (*Hessen Design e.V.*)

Fashion For Democracy Collaborative

A shared vocabulary for the topics in this document, authored by our team and our

A.

Accountability (n.)

The state of being responsible for your actions and the requirement to provide a satisfactory explanation or justification for them.

Sevgi Karkin, Yugen Company

Advocacy (n.)

Speaking up on behalf of an issue or cause. Advocacy can be specifically political, such as calling a political representative about an issue they will vote on, or can be social, such as speaking up on an issue within a community setting. Advocacy and storytelling can go hand-in-hand when it comes to spreading awareness on an issue – advocacy gains traction when it is formulated in a well-crafted narrative.

The 8 Principles of Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

Agency (n.)

The ability to act with free will and self-determinism. This does not imply acting selfishly; if all have equitable agency within a group or system, it means each acts as a node in a social ecosystem, advocating for their own needs and responding to the needs of others.

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Alternative fashion practice (t.)

Group or solo work that offers a mode of 'doing' fashion that rejects the participation in Dominant Fashion – and alternative to the industrial system. Examples: crafting communities (and "craftivism"), small businesses with locally-m

Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

Alternative fashion system (t.)

A coordination of entities producing fashion or managing fashion's impact (such as waste) that

rethinks industrial, corporate systems of fashion. Examples: transparent and collaborative supply chains, textile waste collection and processing, designer networks, repair cafés and tool libraries, clothing rental systems.

Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

Anonymity (n.)

1. A situation in which someone's name is not given or known.
2. The condition in which material origins, labour relations, and cultural meanings are detached from the finished product and left difficult to trace.

Sevgi Karkin, Yugen Company

C.

Call-in (v.)

Following a wave of 'cancel culture' where communities would exile perpetrators of harm, 'calling-in' brings perpetrators into dialogue for accountability, rather than expulsion as punishment. This enables a learning moment for behavior change, rather than making the perpetrator feel like a victim, possibly cementing the bad behavior as a pattern. In severe cases of misconduct, calling-in may not fulfill the needs of the injured party.

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The Commons (t.)

Spaces and resources that are available to everyone for free. This can refer to governmentally organized resources (i.e. public parks and public libraries), as well as to independently organized resources. There are also many digital commons, online databases that house resources for public free viewing or download. The commons rely on the responsible engagement and maintenance of all who participate.

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orative Glossary (A-G)

n. – noun
v. – verb
adj. – adjective
t. – term

community.

Co-prac (t.)

Community of practice. A group of individuals who connect around a specific activity. In alternative fashion, this may be anything from crafting, to reading and research, to activism.

Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

D.

Democratic fashion (t.)

Fashion that is governed by the people's majority, specifically stakeholders and communities of practice, rather than by corporations and the elite. Derived from the etymological essence of "democracy," which originates from the Greek demos, people, and kratos, rule. Fashion that is ruled by the people.

Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

Disclosure (n.)

Sharing information with a wider group. In this case, regarding operational information, decision-making pathways, budgets, and more.

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Discoverability Equity (t.)

The principle that visibility in fashion should not be proportional to marketing spend. A small, independent brand making something genuinely valuable deserves the same chance of being found as a conglomerate - if the infrastructure is built fairly.

Kseniya Dockhorn, Mix'n'match

Discovery Gap (t.)

The distance between what a person is looking for and what they actually find - not because the right product doesn't exist, but because search infrastructure wasn't built to understand human intent. In fashion, this gap disproportionately affects shoppers with less conventional bodies,

budgets, or tastes, and the smaller brands made for them.

Kseniya Dockhorn, Mix'n'match

Dominant fashion (t.)

Industrial, corporate fashion systems operating on a large scale. These are the fashion producers responsible for the majority of fashion's negative impact, as well as the majority of the profit (which is distributed wildly unequally)

Fashion For Democracy & Beneficial Design e.V.

E.

Elite pacts (t.)

Deals and decisions made behind closed doors by those who already hold power and privilege. This not only excluded the majority, but also reinforces the hold on power by those who already wield it.

Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

Equity (n.)

Considering needs-based solutions, in which those with less systemic privilege and resources receive an appropriate distribution of power needed to level the playing field. While "equality" means that everyone gets the same thing, equity means that each one gets what they need to join with an equal stance.

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G.

Glocal (adj.)

The combination of 'global' and 'local.' It refers to a positioning and awareness of being locally focused, while remaining globally connected, and acknowledging the broadening ripple effects that local initiatives might have. It also means remembering to stay engaged at the local level in

Fashion For Democracy Collaborative

A shared vocabulary for the topics in this document, authored by our team and our

an age when so much can happen purely online, detached from our own geographies.

Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

I.

Inclusivity (n.)

Equitable opportunities to participate, no matter background or identity. While “diversity” refers to the neutral fact that there are many types of people, inclusivity promotes the engagement of all types of people. It is the so-called “seat at the table,” with an active role and a voice in decision-making.

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Indigenous knowledges (t.)

The cultures, methods, and technologies of a region that predate colonial, industrial, extractivist treatment of a place and people. These knowledges often contain information on how humans may live as harmonious members of the local ecosystem. Indigenous knowledges do not exist without those who inherit them; indigenous community members must therefore be considered leaders.

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Inter-local (adj.)

Belonging shaped through the meeting and negotiation of multiple local contexts and lived experiences.

Daniel Caulfield-Sriklad, Critical Fashion Practitioner

Inter-reliance (n.)

Acknowledgment that all individuals depend on each other within a collective. We are each accountable to each other, and this human-to-human (or human-to-ecosystem) accountability exists regardless of power distances.

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Intersectionality (n.)

The different ‘categories of diversity’ that all humans experience (i.e. gender, ethnicity, ability, religion, socioeconomic status, education, etc...) blend within each person, creating infinite, complex experiences of humanity. As Kimberlé Crenshaw notably pointed out, being a Black woman is an experience that contains more than that of simply being Black or being a woman. Our intersecting part of ourselves, and all of the privilege or marginalization tied to each part, combine to create unique identities.

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L.

Living document (t.)

A document that remains open to edits after it is published. It can either imply future published drafts, or a format (such as a web page) that will be edited and changed even after it has been made public.

The 8 Principles of Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

P.

Peer Review (t.)

A process, often used in academic writing and research, in which other experts in the same field will read, feedback, or edit a work before it is published. Used more broadly, it is a process in which members of a community give feedback on a document.

The 8 Principles of Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

Plurality (n.)

1. The state of being plural, or existing in more than one form.

2. The recognition that fashion can be made, understood, and valued through multiple practices,

orative Glossary (I-Z)

n. – noun
v. – verb
adj. – adjective
t. – term

community.

perspectives, and ways of knowing, rather than one dominant model.

Sevgi Karkin, Yugen Company

The Pluriverse (t.)

The understanding that our world is made up of many realities, each with its own unique set of values, beliefs, needs, and visions of a positive future. These many realities may be divided geographically, or they may coexist in the same location. Realities within the pluriverse overlap, often sharing as many similarities as they do differences. They impact one another, and co-evolve.

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Power distance (t.)

The imbalance of power between two individuals (i.e. a boss to an employee). Power distances exist on a spectrum from very large or can be horizontal and mutual.

The 8 Principles of Fashion For Democracy, Beneficial Design e.V.

R.

Regenerative sustainability (t.)

A model of sustainability that focuses on healing the planet and people rather than “doing less bad” or offsetting human impact (i.e. carbon offsets).

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Reparations (pl. n.)

The resources delivered to an injured party by the wrongdoer. Reparations can be financial or a material resource (such as land), but they could also include commitment to better behaviors, such as educating oneself, participating in community service, and working with the injured party to meet their needs.

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Resource (n., v.)

When thinking in terms of redistributing resources, we expand beyond our definition of ‘resource’ to include the material and immaterial. Material resources include money, physical spaces, food and water, material goods and feed stocks for production, and other tangible assets. Immaterial resources include time, labor, knowledge, energy (relating to rest and workload), emotional energy and support, networks, and opportunities.

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Re-story-ation (t.)

A term coined by Robin Wall Kimmerer that reworks the word “restoration.” Re-story-ation is the process of advocating for environmental repair (restoration), inciting action by changing people’s perceptions. New narratives on our relationship with the earth are foundational to creating behavior change.

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T.

Town hall (t.)

Organized meeting format where individuals may voice concerns openly to decision-makers and peers. Peers may respond, and votes may be held.

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Traceability (n.)

The ability to see all information in the steps of creating a product, from where it is assembled, to where the components are made, to the raw ingredients.

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Part 1:
Defining New Ways Forward: Fa

What is Fashion For Democracy
AGORA #1: Hybrid Gathering



ashion For Democracy

y?

Artwork credit: Beatrice Steimer

What is Fashion For Democracy?

Democracy (n.)

/di'mɒkrəsi/

"Literally, rule by the people. The term is derived from the Greek *dēmokratia*, which was coined from *dēmos* (people) and *kratos* (rule)."

–*Dahl et. al, 2025*

Fashion By and For The People

Who is fashion for? The most logical answer should be: everyone. All peoples, in some way or other, fashion material onto their bodies. The result is a non-verbal language of identity, often with the added benefit of shelter. The cultural phenomenon of fashion is ubiquitous – not just as a commercial sector, but as a personal and collective daily activity. We all "do" fashion every time we get dressed. Personal adornment is a global cultural connector and is as diverse as the many peoples in our world.

And yet, it is no secret that our current system of creating fashion is governed by multinational conglomerates, who employ massive supply chains, contributing to global resource extraction and pollution, while hundreds of thousands of fashion and textile laborers operate in unsafe, wage-slave conditions. European and North American fashion is largely produced in countries in the Global South (also referred to as the Global Majority) for enormous profit margins. Meanwhile, heritage production techniques (in all cultures) are often relegated to the category of 'hand-craft' rather than fashion.

At the same time, the EIU's global Democracy Index cites that in 2024, democratic governance hit a historic low. The EIU states, "Only 45% of the world's population lives in a democracy,

39% under authoritarian rule, and 15% in 'hybrid regimes' that combine electoral democracy with authoritarian tendencies."² This is not to say democracy is inherently virtuous; we remain critical of the reality that Global Northern countries continue to institute democratic governments in Global Southern countries as a means of seizing political control, with effects similar to colonization. But we also ascribe to the belief that democracy, as an organizational model, enables more egalitarian decision making. We are inspired by the most literal definition of a democracy; its etymological breakdown gives us, "rule by the people."³

Adding intricacy to the simple 'rule by the people' definition, political theorist David Beetham writes that a democracy is a "mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control, and the most democratic arrangement to be that where all members of the collective enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision making directly - one, that is to say, which realizes to the greatest conceivable degree the principles of popular control and equality in its exercise."⁴ This notion of popular control and equality is exactly what our paradigm of industrial fashion lacks.

We instituted the project Fashion For Democracy: Design for Better Lives (FFD) as a translation of people-led governance into fashion production and culture.

The project encourages societies to move away from corporate monoliths, and aims to empower those working on the small scale – the sustainable scale, and the community scale. We learn from the procedures of democracy for how to better self-govern at this scale, and we investigate how we might expand inclusion of who gets a 'vote.'

*Sevgi Karkin, Yugen Company.
Position on Fashion For Democracy.*

5

Redefining Democratic Fashion

This project stands in revision of the so-called 'democratic fashion' of the 20th c., in which major labels made trend-focused apparel affordable to the masses. In this older understanding of the term, financially accessible high-street design transitioned fashion from a luxury for the wealthy elite to a common resource; affordable fashion became a socially equalizing force, blurring the visible markers between classes.⁵

The result of the 20th c. concept of Democratic Fashion is our modern-day consumption culture, as the global north embraced fast and ultra-fast fashion business models. Contemporary fashion may have started with the aspiration of accessibly-priced style, but the profitability of it resulted in a race to the bottom. We now face the social and environmental consequences of this model, both in fashion production and in waste.

Instead of centering price-point as fashion's democratizer, we are interested in how principles of democracy can be translated from political systems to the structures of fashion communities and businesses.

Core pillars of democracy clarify how fashion may be practiced and produced beyond industrial capitalism. This translation of democracy into fashion contexts begins with acknowledging the diverse needs of those within a society, and hinges on equitable considerations of those needs with fair structures of decision-making, participation, and accountability.

Our definition of democracy is situated within a fashion pluriverse, in which diverse and co-existing perspectives create the richness and resilience of our global fashion communities, practices, and systems.

Our Landscape of Alternative Fashion Systems and Practice

In order to study how fashion may be more democratic, we look beyond design as an isolated discipline that governs production processes, and instead focuses on alternative fashion systems and practices.

We define the 'alternatives' to dominant fashion as the projects (initiatives, organizations, networks, and small businesses) that operate



Photograph: Indigo project at Studio Palha, credit Danyang Cao, via Zinzi de Brouwer, Studio Palha.

on grass-roots levels. These initiatives offer alternative modes of participating in fashion to civil society, reworking how fashion can be experienced and wielded.

Alternative fashion includes a broad range of formats, including skill-shares, repair cafés, heritage artisans, radically ethical small brands, academic and independent researchers, activist networks, NGO's, political lobbies, and more. Some of these 'alternatives' predate industrialization, while others are born from internet-era globalized communities. And our conception of these fashion 'alternatives' is framed by principles of democracy.

Visions and Goals

As an initiative, Fashion For Democracy seeks critical, eye-level approaches to creating positive change through alternative fashion systems and practices. We bring together regional and global perspectives, to find common terms with which we may discuss a democratic future.

The aim is to multiply universally beneficial social, cultural, and environmental impacts by promoting sustainability and equity in fashion, from public access to fashion knowledge to practice, craft, and production. FFD is committed to measurable democratization, to ensure equal voting power and inclusive representation.

Fashion For Democracy on The Ground

Uniting the margins of fashion, we organize Agoras, events, and student projects to test modes of pursuing democratic principles within fashion design and culture.

As an official part of the World Design Capital Frankfurt RheinMain 2026, we build upon their annual theme Design For Democracy: Atmospheres for Better Life. Our project points to fashion as a quintessentially undemocratic industry, which, in its current state, perpetuates unsafe and unfair labor practices, environmental devastation, and hierarchies with drastic wealth and power gaps – within corporations, and between countries. A great amount of legislation, activism, and design solutions already exist that address these issues, but the effect is slow and does not reach to the root of the problem. Fashion For Democracy uses the framework of

Key terminology

Dominant Fashion:

The industry. Mass-produced, profit-focused, majority environmentally unsustainable, with power chains from CEO's at the top and factory workers and farmers at the bottom. Often, designers and decision-makers in the global north who set up supply chains in the global south.

Alternative Fashion:

Those working on the small scale. Community focused, inherently more environmentally sustainable, with relationships and organization that have less hierarchical power chains. Can exist anywhere, and often operate on the local scale. Alternative fashion encompasses craft and small-scale production as well as research and activism.

Democratic Fashion:

Fashion that is governed by the people's majority, specifically stakeholders and communities of practice, rather than by corporations and the elite. Derived from the etymological essence of "democracy," which originates from the Greek demos, people, and kratos, rule. Fashion that is ruled by the people.

From the Community Glossary, pg. 3-4

egalitarian organization as a parallel pathway, supporting the alternatives to 'dominant fashion' that may offer societies (both as consumers and as producers) better options.

Our aim is to create a dialogue between practitioners from different cultural contexts, different mediums, and different social demographics, to understand how we might multiply the impact of alternatives to dominant fashion. We also call in this intercultural community to find an aligned, yet situationally flexible, set of core principles of Fashion For Democracy.

Fashion For Democracy

AGORA #1: Hybrid Gathering

Focus: Alternative fashion as an avenue for democracy

On the twelfth of December, 2025, a community gathered online and in person the Designhaus by Hessen Design. This was the first meeting of individuals who align on the prospect of a new meaning of Fashion For Democracy, which honors the universal needs for fairness, agency, and pluralities in fashion. This topic crystallized into a specific focus on alternative

fashion practices, under the hypothesis that non-industrial, community-focused fashion may be the key to our democratic fashion future. To explore the possibilities of alternative and democratic fashion, the three-hour hybrid workshop led participants through three phases: input from speakers, collaborative work, and a final discussion on positions and provocations.

AGORA guiding research questions

1. What alternative fashion practices exist globally and what democratic principles do they employ?
2. What defines an alternative fashion practice outside of a European fashion context, and how do groups in other cultural contexts practice democratic principles? How do we build awareness of all those within the alternative fashion pluriverse?
3. How do alternative practices redistribute economic power from corporations to communities? How do alternative practices meet the needs of the participants, offering something better than corporate fashion?
4. What strategic alliances and infrastructure would enable alternatives to gain market share from industrial fashion? How do resilient democratic fashion networks help to dismantle large, extractive fashion?
5. What policies and infrastructure support transitions to democratic fashion economies?

Introduction & Input

The afternoon kicked off with introductory words from Christine Fehrenbach, the CEO of Hessen Design e.V. and Fehrenbach. Holistic Sustain, and Prof. Friederike von Wedel-Parlow, CEO and Founder of Beneficial Design e.V., extending a warm and enthusiastic welcome, and sharing the positioning and goals of the afternoon.

Two dozen participants, representing 11 countries, introduced themselves to reveal the experiential and cultural diversity within the group. Once the room was acquainted and aligned on the day's duties, guest speakers gave presentations to add inspiration, context, and critical inquiry. Felix Kosok (World Design Capital®) familiarized guests with the WDC's positioning on Design For Democracy: Atmospheres for Better Life, and spoke to the history of fashion as an agent of social change. Dr. Francesco Mazzarella (London College of Fashion, UAL) spoke on the potential of growing democracy through specific projects and case studies that develop precise values of democracy. Finally, Zinzi de Brouwer (Studio Palha) presented on Studio Palha, her residency program that unites Mozambique's design, craft, and textile artisans with visiting designers from the global north, sharing the interwoven Mozambican craft, philosophy, and lifestyle.

Workshops & Discussion

The second half of the event was focused on participatory work. Lou Croff Blake (Beneficial Design e.V.) kicked off the workshop portion of the event, facilitating the group work on a shared Miro Board, where participants were invited into one of two discussion tracks.

The first track addressed the theme "Principles and Practices," leading with a peer review exercise of 8 Proposed Principles of Fashion For Democracy. These principles function as continually-evolving guidelines for working democratically in any fashion-related project or community. The review of the principles was followed by a group mapping exercise, which consisted of sharing and clustering alternative fashion projects and initiatives on a global scale. In addition to geographic mapping, participants rearranged the same projects and initiatives in a 'counter-mapping' exercise – organizing them

"Beneath the shallow definition of a design problem, a chasm of real and contended social issues opens. Small, market-oriented tweaks won't do. The designer needs to make social considerations in order not to perpetuate exploitation and injustices, class systems and social status hierarchies. Instead, they must start addressing deeper social and ecological concerns."

– Otto von Busch, 2023, pp. 10

by relation to one another, closing the physical distance between.

The second track focused on “Power and Pathways.” Groups began with an exercise to brainstorm resource redistribution, bringing materials, tools, spaces, and power from those who have surplus – in particular, from the mainstream fashion system – and delivering the resources to those who are working on the margins who could benefit. This rapid-fire brainstorming led to a second similar exercise, which flipped the equation in reverse: what would a future look like which alternative fashion is the norm and is well-resourced, with those at the margins having what they need? Tracing steps backwards, what would need to happen in order for us to arrive at such a future?

At the end of a rigorous hour of breakout sessions, participants reconvened to share their findings with the full group. With this extensive fresh input, a lively and thoughtful discussion finished the afternoon with equal measures of optimism, inspiration, and bold confrontation of fashion’s current social and environmental challenges. Participants shared their positions and provocations on Fashion For Democracy, both in Miro board notes and in a lively discussion. This final chapter of the event cut to the core of the project’s vision: practitioners from different corners of the world in dialogue about fashion, its positive values, and the changes they wish to see.



The organizers began the afternoon with a welcome and seated at the Designhaus at Hessen Design in Darmstadt.



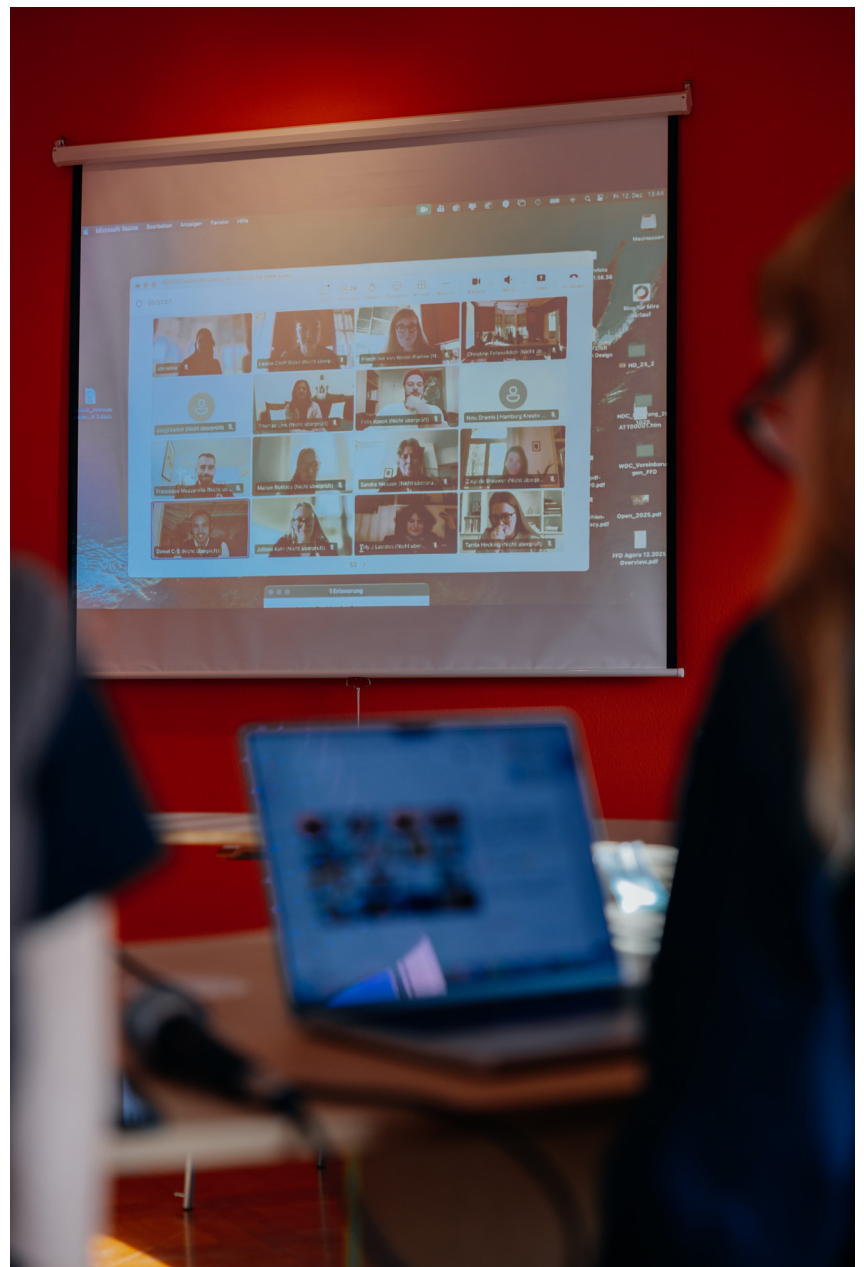
Guests gathered after the meeting, continuing the conversation.



Opening words on Fashion For Democracy, Frankfurt, Germany.



Conversation over refreshments.



As a hybrid event, a video call was the central discussion space. Participants joined from all over world, meeting virtually and collaborating on the workshop activities from many contexts.

AGORA Participants



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The background of the slide is a photograph of a tropical sunset. The sky is a warm, hazy orange. In the foreground, there are palm trees and several thatched umbrellas, likely made of dried palm fronds, which are silhouetted against the bright light of the setting sun. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

Part 2: Perspectives on Democratic Fa

Zinzi de Brouwer
Dr. Francesco Mazzarella
Felix Kosok

A photograph of a tropical scene at sunset. In the foreground, there are several thatched huts with steeply pitched roofs made of palm fronds. The huts are silhouetted against the warm, golden light of the setting sun. In the background, there are tall palm trees and a dark, silhouetted hillside. The overall mood is serene and tropical.

ashion

Photograph: Solar Craft Hub, credit Dilayla Romeo, via Zinzi de Brouwer, Studio Palha

Zinzi de Brouwer

Studio Palha

Inhambane, Mozambique

Zinzi de Brouwer (she/her) is a Creative Director and founder of Studio Palha, an equity-centred design studio led by matriarchal artisans bridging craft and fashion in the Global South. Her work blends research, community design, and decolonial futures, creating narratives that foster healing, well-being and structural change. Featured in VIEWPOINT, Vogue, and global institutions, she develops strategic cultural tools that re-imagine regenerative, relational futures beyond extractive paradigms.



Photograph Credit: Dilayla Romeo David



Photograph Credit: Studio Palha

What is Studio Palha, and why did you found this project?

Inspired by the mountains, which serve as antennas between sky and Earth, they are regarded by certain Indigenous communities as bridge-makers: weavers between time and space. Studio Palha was born from a desire to build bridges. Ones that seek to dissolve boundaries geographically, emotionally, and mentally.

Growing up in Mozambique and witnessing the matriarchal weaving communities of my birth country, I came to understand craft as a living archive of cultural heritage and tradition, holistically embedded in the environment of where local communities live, work, breathe, play. At the same time, Mozambique carries the deep imprints of colonialism and the civil war that followed in the late 1980s. These histories and their ongoing ramifications inevitably shape the social and cultural landscapes. In this context, Studio Palha emerges as a cyclical, process-oriented practice. One that creates multi-dimensional spaces where craft, care,



Photograph: Solar Craft Hub, credit Dilayla Romeo



Photograph: Soldering for the Solar Craft Hub, credit Dilayla Romeo



Photograph: Light by the Solar Craft Hub, credit Dilayla Romeo

Indigenous technologies, and ancestral memory can come together. In this sense, the work is also grounded in what Bell Hooks described as a practice of love and care⁶ that can transform how communities come together and imagine shared futures. For me, it is also a way to deconstruct inherited systems of separation and to radically imagine new ways of gathering, ones that promote sovereignty while nurturing systems of care and communion.

How does the project's intercultural exchange impact the participants, and how does this impact spread?

If one can unpack the meaning of impact in this context, the exchange values internal transformation and long-term responsibility over measurable output. Furthermore, by placing it under a decolonial framework Studio Palha aims to unlearn the adopted hierarchy forms (that are deeply rooted in the fashion industry), whilst honouring plural knowledge systems and adopting a cyclical approach to time (fusing past, present and future). Although the transfer of knowledge is of importance during the design residencies we curate, we rather emphasise creating physical, emotional and spiritual meeting points in which different ways of knowing and learning come together. A decolonial perspective asks us to step away from the assumption that one system of knowledge could dominate or "educate" another. Instead, it invites a process of witnessing, listening, reciprocity, and mutual recognition. For the participants, the impact is therefore highly intrinsic. It often begins as an internal process, questioning inherited frameworks, becoming aware of the histories embedded in materials, techniques, and aesthetics, and learning to value knowledge that has historically been marginalised or overlooked. This kind of transformation is subtle and profound at the same time, because it reshapes how individuals relate to their practice and to one another. As Bayo Akomolafe (Nigerian writer) often suggests, the work is not always to force change within existing systems, but to create spaces where different possibilities can emerge through encounters, care, and attention. There is also a long temporal horizon guiding the work.



Photograph: Dyed material at Studio Palha, credit Yosser Dekker

Many Indigenous and decolonial perspectives remind us to act with responsibility toward the generations that will follow us. We often hold the intention that the work we do today should contribute to conditions in which the next seven generations can thrive. In that sense, the exchange plants seeds. Its true impact may not be visible immediately, but it continues to unfold through the practices, relationships, and values that participants carry forward.

What is your (and Studio Palha's) vision of true democracy within fashion?

Studio Palha's vision emerges from a relationship with the Earth itself. With its fibers, plants, animals, water, soil, the very hands that transform them. So in this aspect, it recognises the universality of the systems that make fashion possible. Clothing begins with nature, with the elements, with living ecosystems and with materials that carry ancestral memory and rhythm. When we truly acknowledge this, the conversation

shifts from access and distribution, toward responsibility and reverence. This I see translated in a fashion system that can honour the sources of what is worn, decentralising consumption and prioritising stewardship. In doing so, we come to recognise what many First Nations cosmologies have long held, that nothing exists separate from nature. Indigenous technology emerges from this relational understanding. It may in fact be the earliest technology, one grounded in an ongoing dialogue with the elements and the living systems that sustain us. If this kind of reciprocity is present, the decisions that follow based on how we source, produce and distribute, naturally aim to create more equitable and harmonious conditions for all forms of life to thrive.

Dr. Francesco Mazzarella

London College of Fashion (UAL)

London, United Kingdom

Francesco Mazzarella is a design researcher, educator, and activist. As Reader in Design for Social Change at London College of Fashion, UAL, he explores how fashion activism can be used to create counter-narratives towards sustainability. Francesco's research spans design activism, textile craftsmanship, decolonising fashion, design for social innovation and sustainability. Francesco is a member of the Design Council Expert Network, Fellow of Advance HE, Co-founder of the DESIS Cluster 'Design from the Margins' and of the Cumulus Working Group 'Design Education for Social Change'.



Photograph Credit: JC Candanedo

Community Power: How to Transform Local Landscapes

Fashion is not just an industry; it is a powerful form of civic action. It operates as a system of communication, identity, labour, land use, and governance, shaping how people relate to each other and to the environment. In a time of escalating climate breakdown and social injustice, the political agency of Fashion matters more than ever. This raises urgent questions:

How might we bring alternative fashion systems together as agents of democracy? How can we strengthen processes that allow more people, communities, and ecosystems to thrive? And what can we learn from each other as we do so?

I acknowledge my positionality as a design activist, researcher, and educator, with lived experience of migration across multiple countries. I also acknowledge the power and privilege I hold as a Reader in Design for Social Change at London College of Fashion, UAL. Yet, with this position comes responsibility: to redistribute power and create conditions that enable others – particularly marginalised communities – to craft their own life journeys.

Fashion and society have always been intrinsically linked. Designing and making clothes are social and economic acts, involving millions of workers globally. Buying, wearing, and engaging with clothes are also social practices through which we express identity and belonging. Clothing functions also as a cultural "masquerade", enabling identity negotiation and social mobility. When approached with care, agency, and equity, Fashion has the potential to support social sustainability and a just transition from extractive to regenerative economies.

We are witnessing a growth of fashion activist practice, from historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi to contemporary movements like Fashion Revolution and Fashion Act Now, alongside designers who challenge injustice through creative practice. Yet, persistent power imbalances remain deeply embedded within fashion systems. In particular, colonial dynamics endure when designers from the



Photograph: 'Freedom to Play' public action in Parliament Square, London. Credit: Michaela Ajani.

Global North “parachute” into communities in the Global South with the assumption to bring their expertise to “help” artisans and “modernise” their crafts, often guided by Western aesthetic and market logics. Instead, true empowerment requires artisans to be recognised as creative partners rather than service providers, supported through confidence-building and capacity-development.

To address these structural gaps, I adopt what I call a “middle-up-down” approach, positioning designers as intermediaries who connect grassroots initiatives with institutional support. This approach aligns with decolonial perspectives to decentre Western fashion narratives, valuing Indigenous knowledge systems, redistributing authorship, and demanding reflexivity about designers’ own positionalities. Participatory design must be grounded in an ethics of care. Meaningful collaborations require trust-building, long-term commitment, and emotional labour, which is rarely recognised in project timelines and funding structures. Sustaining social innovations also requires researcher self-care and institutional support.

Drawing on my participatory action research across community-led craft ecosystems in South Africa, youth-led fashion activism in the UK, refugee-centred textile practices, Indigenous-led brands in Australia, and hybrid NGO-enterprise models in Vietnam, I have observed democratic principles that can enable the transformation of fashion systems: plurality, inclusive participation, transparency, agency, power redistribution, regeneration, restorative justice, and narrative change.

Finally, education is crucial to build a legacy for the future. By nurturing the next generation of designers as change-makers – equipped with skills of listening, storytelling, co-creation, and cultural sensibility – we can enable more ethical collaboration, critical thinking, and deep care. I conclude with a call to care. Fashion is a political and relational practice, and local systems have a vital role to play in building a more democratic, compassionate future, where many worlds can co-exist.

Fashion For Democracy in Practice: Examples shared by Dr. Francesco Mazzarella



Inclusive Participation: Rego (UK)

“ReGo is impactful as the people involved have come together to tackle an issue that doesn't get nearly enough media coverage. It warms my heart to see the sense of community that working together created and how the message spread. Personally, the biggest take-away has been the sense of hope that I was left with. Horrible things happen in the world, but activism is alive and strong.”

– ReGo participant

*Photograph: Young people wearing garments and accessories created through the 'ReGo' project led by Dr Francesco Mazzarella.
Credit: Eugenie Flochel.*

Plurality: Crafting Situated Services (SA)

“You were alleviating the fact that you were external. [...] You have contributed by saying ‘I am not only having empathy, but I am having a deeper cultural sensitivity and pursued a process that made me more aware of what the community was like’. [...] This is the highest level of designers not being parachuted in a community, but really being there. [...] Instead of being binary opposites, we are talking about different grades of sensitivity”

– Prof. Carla Cipolla

*Photograph: Dr Francesco Mazzarella and the 'Weaving the Threads' artisans collective in Cape Town.
Credit: Francesco Mazzarella (2018).*



Francesco Mazzarella at Agora #1



Regeneration: Clothing the Gaps (AUS)

"What we do as a business has an impact on Country. First Nations people contribute the least to climate change but are affected the most by climate injustices. [...] What you choose to wear every day makes a difference. As an individual, you can support First Nations people and campaigns through purchasing from First Nations businesses and wear garments that tell a story and make a difference".

– Sarah Sheridan

*Photograph: First Nations models wearing Clothing the Gaps garments at Melbourne Fashion Week in October 2024.
Credit: Melissa Cowan.*

Restorative Justice: Fashion4Freedom (VN)

"We have developed and extensively tested a model of design and manufacture that not only provides scalability and price competitiveness, but also preserves Vietnamese heritage craft. [...] Social, cultural, environmental, and economic factors, driven by non-Western knowledge and understanding stimulate and lead business and design decisions".

– Victoria Ho



*Photograph: Hand-weaving textile.
Credit: Fashion4Freedom.*

Felix Kosok

World Design Capital 2026

Frankfurt, Germany

Felix Kosok is a design researcher, graphic designer, and professor at the German International University Berlin. His work explores the intersection of design, politics, and aesthetics. His current research focuses on democratic design cultures and critical creative agency. He earned his PhD from HfG Offenbach in 2020, and his dissertation *Form, Funktion und Freiheit* was published in 2021. Since 2024, he directs the design discourse for World Design Capital 2026 under the theme “Design for Democracy.”



Photograph Credit: Ben Kuhlmann

An Outrageous Spectacle

On the Politics of Style in Design

Style has long been treated with suspicion. Within the legacy of modernist design, it appears as something excessive, superficial, even morally questionable—a deviation from clarity, function, and truth. Yet this critique underestimates what is at stake. Style is not merely decoration added to an otherwise stable world; it is a force capable of transforming that world at its core. A genuine politics of style does not simply communicate values—it reshapes the very conditions under which values are defined.

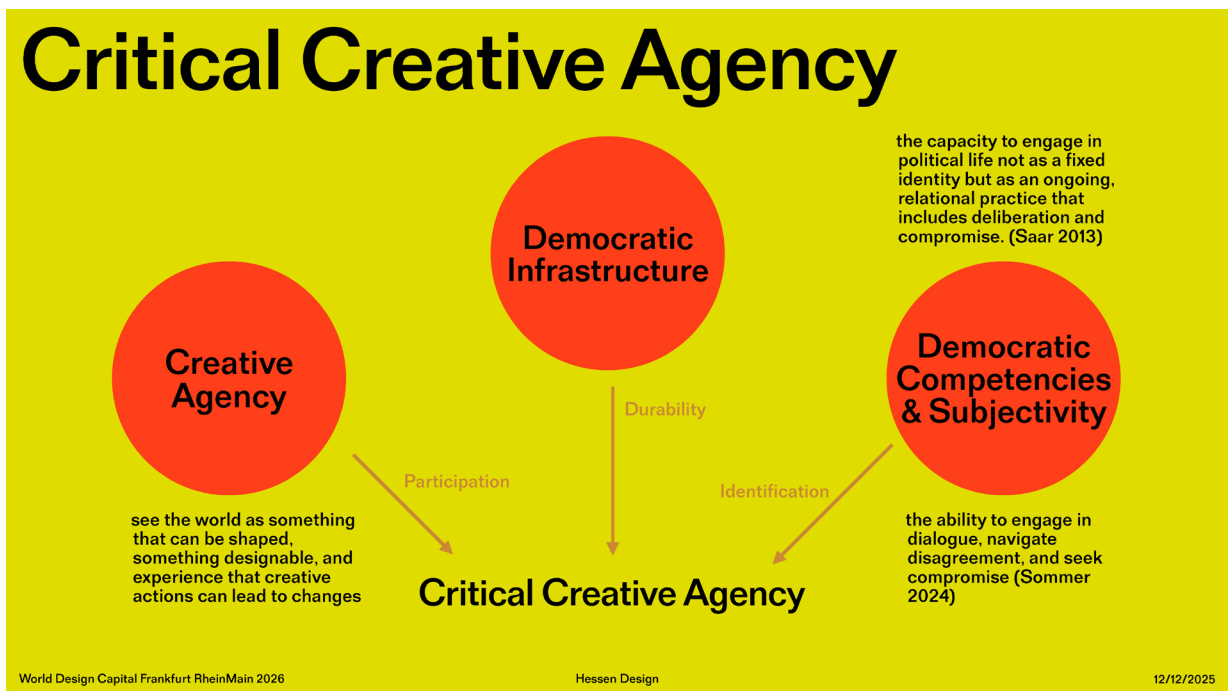
To understand this potential, it is necessary to revisit the modern accusation against style and to examine why it was perceived as dangerous in the first place.

Style as a Crime

In 1992, the American designer Paul Rand resigned from Yale University in protest against what he perceived as the decline of design standards. The appointment of Sheila Levrant de Bretteville—whose feminist, participatory approach stood in stark contrast to Rand’s modernist ethos—triggered his departure. In his polemic *Confusion and Chaos*, Rand denounced contemporary design for privileging style over content, linking its proliferation to cultural decay.

This critique echoes a longer tradition, most famously articulated by Adolf Loos in *Ornament and Crime*, in which aesthetic excess is framed as a moral failure. Across such arguments, style becomes synonymous with disorder, manipulation, and irresponsibility.

What emerges from these positions is not merely a rejection of certain visual forms, but a deeper hierarchy: ethics precedes politics, which in turn precedes aesthetics. Within this framework, the



Graphic 1: Presentation at Fashion For Democracy Agora #1, credit Felix Kosok

“good” in design is already defined, and aesthetic expression is expected to follow suit. Style, in this view, disrupts an assumed natural order—it becomes a transgression.

Yet this hierarchy is precisely where the problem lies. By treating ethical and political values as fixed, modernist design forecloses the possibility that these values themselves might be subject to transformation. The refusal of style is thus also a refusal of democratic openness.

Style as Transformation

Postmodern design challenges this order by dissolving the strict separation between ethics, politics, and aesthetics. It reveals that design does not merely represent the world but participates in shaping its norms and meanings.

This insight aligns with Juliane Rebentisch’s understanding of democracy as an aesthetic-political condition. Democratic freedom, she argues, is not limited to institutions but extends to forms of life—it includes the right to question and transform shared definitions of the good. A democracy that becomes immune to such aesthetic transformation ceases to be democratic.

From this perspective, style is not a superficial layer but a medium through which transformation occurs. It is a way of reconfiguring what is visible, sayable, and imaginable. In this sense,

style operates as a democratic practice: it opens up the possibility of being otherwise.

Style as Revolt

This transformative capacity becomes particularly visible in subcultural styles. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige describes how youth cultures use style as a form of symbolic resistance. Through the recombination of everyday objects—safety pins, torn fabrics, or later, rave aesthetics—subcultures disrupt what appears natural or given.

Style, here, functions as a “crime” against what Hebdige calls second nature: the social norms that present themselves as inevitable. By making these norms visible and strange, subcultural style reveals their contingency.

Importantly, this resistance is not primarily articulated through explicit political programs but through appearance. It is enacted on the surface—through fashion, gesture, and visual codes. These surfaces become sites of tension, where dominant meanings are contested and alternative identities emerge.

Yet this moment of rupture is always temporary. Subcultural styles are quickly absorbed into mainstream culture, losing their oppositional edge. Their politics lies not in permanence, but in their fleeting capacity to disrupt.

Style as Spectacle

This temporality—what Hebdige calls the “brief outrageous spectacle”—is central to the politics of style. It is precisely in its ephemerality that style gains its force.

Contemporary graphic and fashion design often operates within this threshold. Practices that embrace digital layering, hyper-stylization, or aesthetic excess—such as post-internet or vaporwave-influenced design—foreground their own transience. They resist stable meaning and instead stage a moment of suspension, where interpretation remains open.

In these moments, style is not emptied of meaning but holds meaning in flux. It delays closure. It keeps the question of significance unresolved.

This openness can be dismissed as superficial or nihilistic. But it can also be understood as a form of aesthetic freedom: a refusal to fix meaning prematurely, and thus a refusal to stabilize the social order too quickly.

Style as Politics

The political dimension of style becomes even more explicit in contexts of identity and emancipation. Philipp Dorestal’s work on “style politics” demonstrates how fashion and visual

culture have been central to the civil rights movement in the United States.

For marginalized groups, style is not an optional layer—it is often the primary means of political articulation. Through clothing, posture, and visual representation, identities are not merely expressed but constituted. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, Dorestal shows that identity emerges through repeated stylization. It is unstable, contested, and always in the process of becoming.

In this sense, style operates as a direct form of political negotiation. It is not secondary to “real” politics but one of its primary arenas.

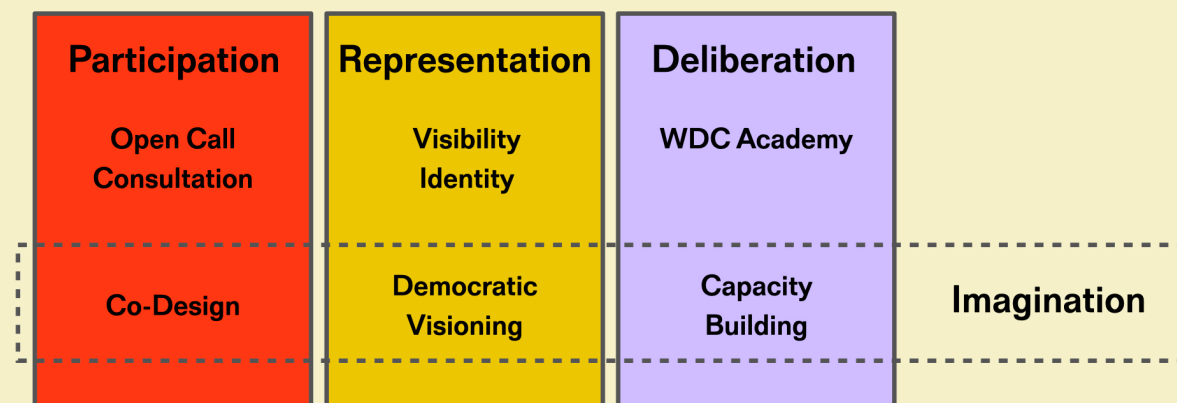
The SILENCE=DEATH poster exemplifies this dynamic. Its stark visual language did more than communicate a message—it reconfigured visibility itself. By asserting presence in a context of systemic neglect, it contributed to the emergence of a collective political identity. Style, here, was not representation but intervention.

Style as Artifice

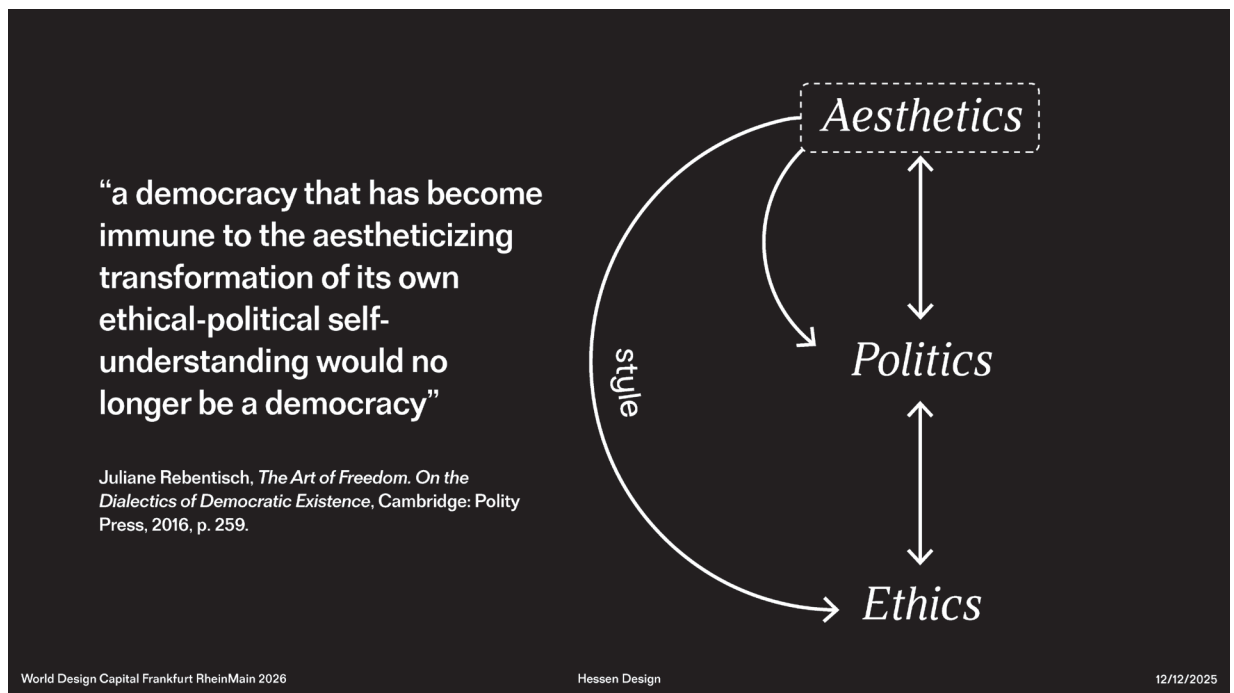
Across these examples, one aspect of style becomes evident: its artificiality. Style makes visible that things—objects, identities, norms—are constructed. It exposes the world as designed and therefore as redesignable.

This is the insight celebrated by Susan Sontag in

Diverse Democratic Participation



Graphic 2: Presentation at Fashion For Democracy Agora #1, credit Felix Kosok



Graphic 3: Presentation at Fashion For Democracy Agora #1, credit Felix Kosok

her Notes on Camp, where style is understood as a mode of seeing the world in terms of artifice and exaggeration. Camp reveals that nothing is natural in the sense of being fixed; everything can be stylized, transformed, and reinterpreted.

However, Sontag’s claim that camp is apolitical overlooks a crucial point. The disengagement she describes is not an end in itself but a moment of distance that enables transformation. By stepping outside established norms, style creates the conditions for their reconfiguration.

Style as Nature

Yet a politics of style cannot rest on artifice alone. If everything is endlessly transformable, the risk is that style collapses into mere trend—into the “anything goes” of consumer culture.

To grasp its full political potential, style must also be understood in relation to what Juliane Rebentisch, drawing on Adorno, describes as “natural history.” This concept refuses the separation between nature and history, showing how both are intertwined.

Style reveals that what appears natural is historically produced. But it also confronts us with the transience of all things. Every style, every norm, every identity is subject to decay.

This recognition introduces a second dimension to the politics of style: a sensitivity to fragility

and impermanence. It is not only about transformation but about acknowledging that no order—moral, social, or aesthetic—is final.

In this sense, style becomes a practice of both critique and care. It disrupts what appears fixed, while cultivating an awareness of the fleeting nature of all forms of life.

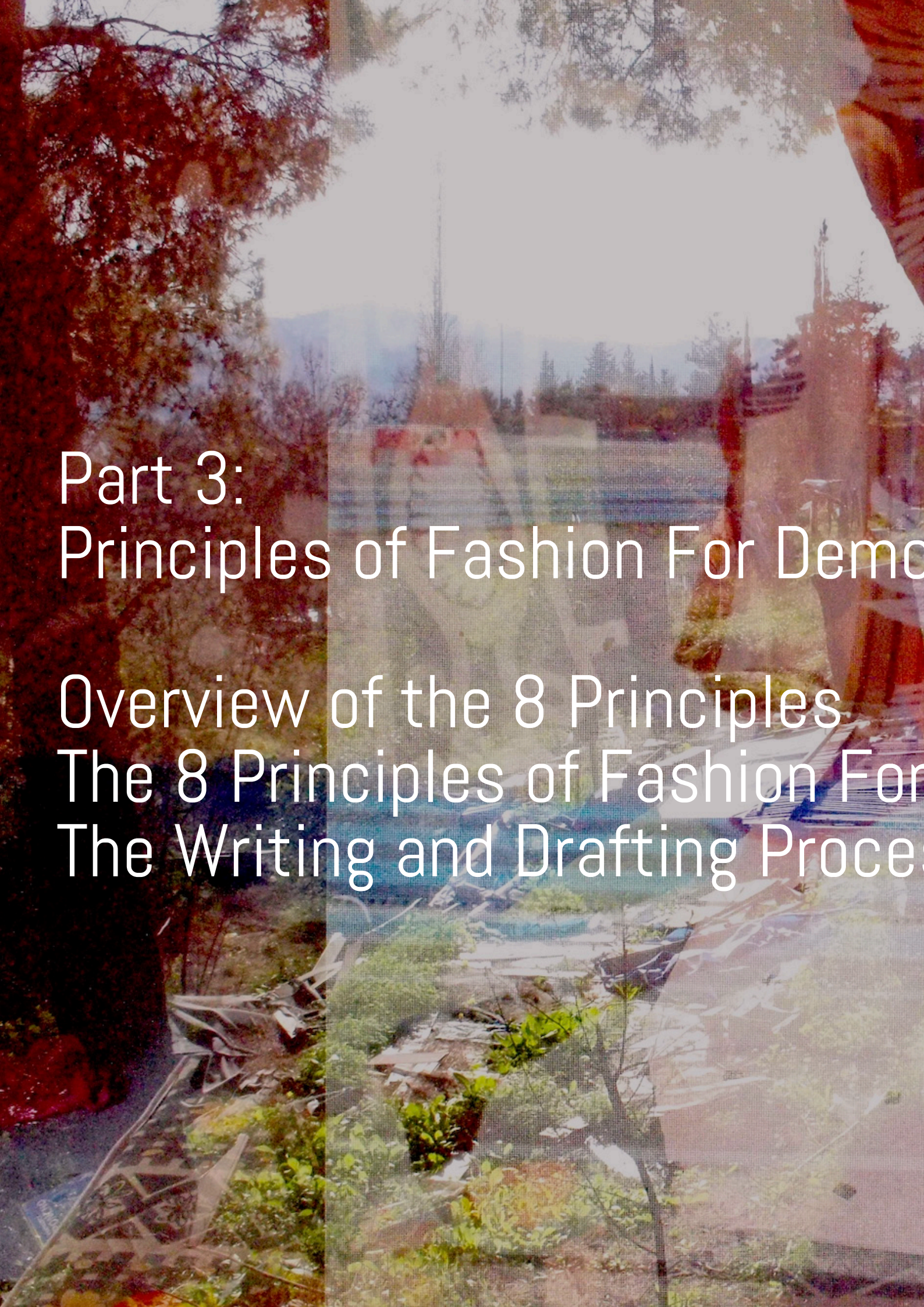
Stylish Conclusions

To dismiss style as superficial is to overlook its political force. Style is not opposed to content; it is a way of producing and transforming it. It operates on the level of appearance, but appearance is precisely where social orders are made visible—and where they can be contested.

A politics of style, then, is not about replacing function with decoration. It is about recognizing that the aesthetic dimension of design is inseparable from its ethical and political implications. Style is where the possibility of change becomes perceptible.

In fashion, this is particularly evident. Clothing, bodies, and images are not passive carriers of meaning—they actively shape how subjects appear, how they are recognized, and how they can act.

The outrageous spectacle of style is therefore not a distraction from politics. It is one of its most vital forms.

A scenic view of a river valley. In the foreground, there are green bushes and a path. A bridge crosses a river in the middle ground. The background features rolling hills and a tall tower. The image has a soft, painterly quality.

Part 3: Principles of Fashion For Demo

Overview of the 8 Principles The 8 Principles of Fashion For The Writing and Drafting Process



ocracy

Democracy (Draft #2)

SS

Artwork credit: Beatrice Steimer

1. Celebrate Plurality

Many types of people are represented, and our differences are celebrated.

2. Enable Equitable and Inclusive Participation

Every type of person can join, no matter their background.

3. Work Transparently

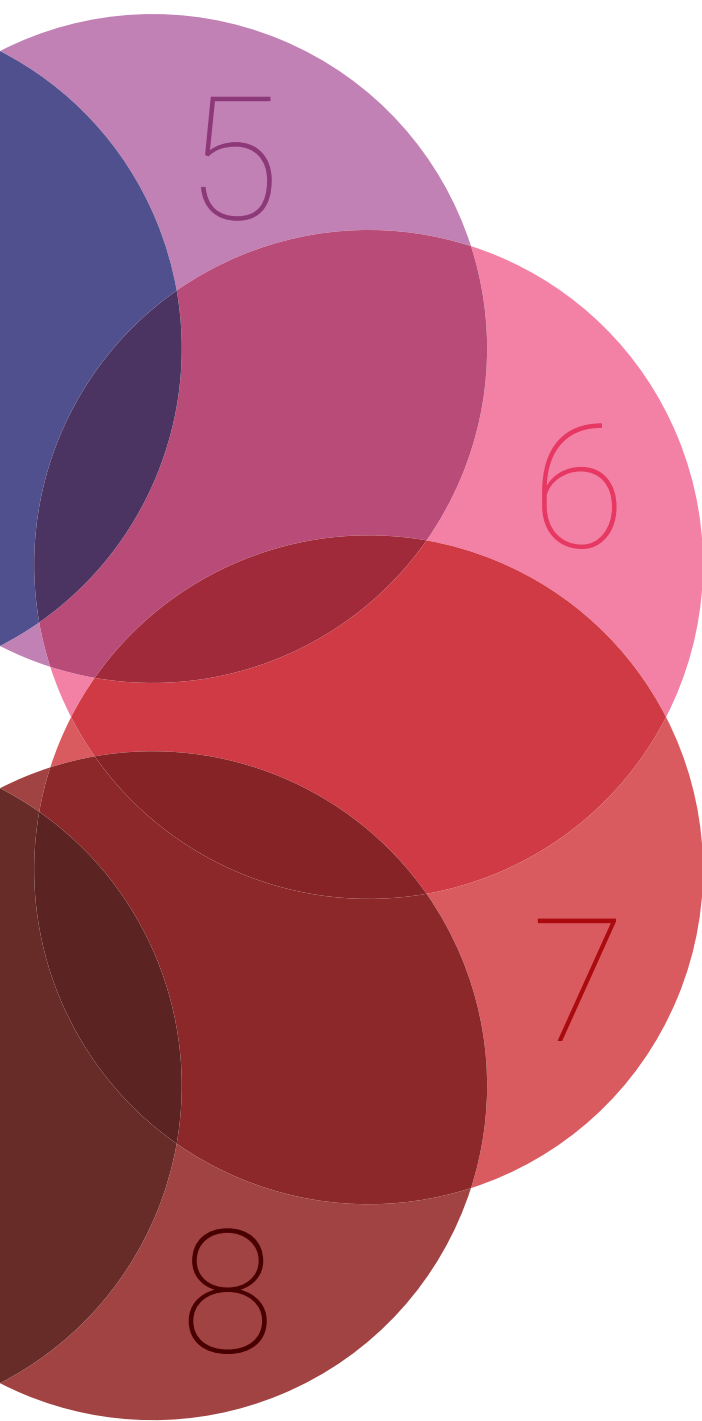
No organizational elements are hidden. Everyone can easily view and respond to decision-making processes, statistics, and budgets.

4. Redistribute Power

Give all people, especially those with less privilege, the power and resources to act in their individual and collective best interest. Those who have more than enough resources share with those who do not.



The 8 Principles of Fashion Democracy



Principles Fashion For Democracy

5. Build Structures of Accountability

There should be rules and consequences for how your actions impact other people. This is meant especially for people who already have a lot of power.

6. Regenerate Environments

Heal the harm that humans have done to our planet, and think of non-humans as citizens of the Earth.

7. Spread New Narratives of Democracy

Share the meaning of democracy with good storytelling, and invite newcomers into the movement.

8. Evolve & Adapt the Principles

Each person can edit the principles of Fashion For Democracy, and can add new principles.

Proposed Principles of Fashion For Democracy (Draft #2)

This draft incorporates feedback from the peer review work on 12.12.2025

Introduction

This document proposes 8 guiding principles for how to integrate democratic values within fashion systems and practices. It is meant as a compass for behavior, which both remains broad enough for general use, and flexible enough to be applied to a wide range of use scenarios.

We, the authors, acknowledge that there is no objective or universal set of tenets that humans should practice, in fashion and beyond. Instead, we offer specific angles on organization that center universalist ideals: universal respect, dignity, and empowerment. We acknowledge that the contemporary world order is driven by exploitation of the majority for the profit of the few, and that this system is a continuing legacy of colonization. By and large, the Global North still dominates the Global South, in economic exploitation, resource extraction, and environmental destruction. We also observe complex neocolonialisms, such as China's colonization of African countries through purchasing key lands and infrastructures, like railways and mines.

In this setting of global inequality, the authors acknowledge their own privileges and positioning. The Principles of Fashion For Democracy were first devised by white people of European descent, who work as researchers and educators in fashion and sustainability. The authors have invested their careers in the reform and reinvention of fashion for better lives for all, and environmental viability. However, despite our best intentions, we recognize that our own biases are naturally imbued into the Principles; no such document can ever be perfectly objective.

We therefore request peer review, from a diverse

and international community. We acknowledge the flexibility of the document is the key to its success. By remaining doughy (shapeable, bakeable, by different people and groups), it may serve as a compass that meets regional needs, rather than insisting on a single correct answer – rather than assuming that we, the authors, can know the needs of everyone everywhere.

The final principle of the document is the call to action to formulate your own principles of fashion for democracy. You, the reader, may bring them into your own fashion community or business, and let the group decide what values best serve them. If you are situated near the top of a hierarchy, you may ask those who work for you which principles of democracy would benefit them, and what needs are not being met.

We also intend the principles to be translatable into a survey, to evaluate an entity for its practice of democratic values.

Elements of the descriptions

Each principle is described through:

Simple language summary: A distillation of the principle's concept, for easy communication, especially among multiple language levels.

Why: A root need and reasoning for the principle.

Democratic value: The principle's relationship to democracy, either in its value or practice.

Calls to action: Clear and concrete actions that can be taken to implement and enhance the principle; ways to put it into play.

Key words: Vocabulary that may be specialized to those already familiar with the topic. This empowers newcomers to align on a shared language of Fashion For Democracy.



Fashion for Democracy begins with the body, where lived experience, culture and identity are expressed and negotiated. Alternative practices must centre embodied knowledge, enabling more inclusive, situated and plural ways of making and wearing.

*Daniel Caulfield-Sriklad, Critical Fashion Practitioner.
Position on Fashion For Democracy.*

1. Celebrate Plurality

Many types of people are represented, and our differences are

WHY

Humans are inherently diverse, and this is not accurately represented – or celebrated – in fashion. As a foundation for the principles, we center the human plurality of bodies, identities, cultures, and localities.

DEMOCRATIC VALUE

Societies recognize and represent their many different types of people.

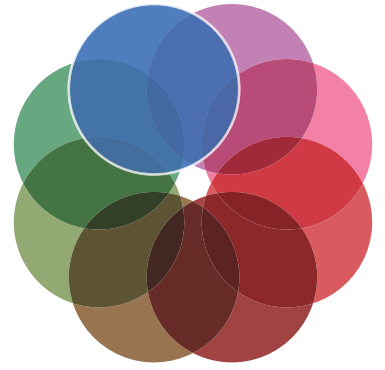
KEY WORDS

The Pluriverse (t.)

The understanding that our world is made up of many realities, each with its own unique set of values, beliefs, needs, and visions of a positive future. These many realities may be divided geographically, or they may coexist in the same location. Realities within the pluriverse overlap, often sharing as many similarities as they do differences. They impact one another, and co-evolve.

Intersectionality (n.)

The different ‘categories of diversity’ that all humans experience (i.e. gender, ethnicity, ability, religion, socioeconomic status, education, etc...) blend within each person, creating infinite, complex experiences of humanity. As Kimberlé Crenshaw notably pointed out, being a Black woman is an experience that contains more than that of simply being Black or being a woman. Our intersecting part of ourselves, and all of the privilege or marginalization tied to each part, combine to create unique identities.



celebrated.

CALLS TO ACTION

- ➔ We call for accurate, joyful representation of human diversity – in design processes, marketing and communication, education, employment, and any other participation in fashion.
- ➔ Support tools and structures that facilitate inter- and transcultural learning, such as training sessions, public dialogs and discussions, and peer-to-peer relationships.
- ➔ Build and nurture fashion systems and practices that are responsive to varied realities and needs, rather than serving narrow ideals or trends.
- ➔ Movements led by different identity-based groups should cooperate with others to support different sets of needs, while remaining aware of each other and open to collaboration. Intersectional nodes in the Pluriverse emerge where intersectional identities gain recognition and appreciation – in other words, the complexities of human plurality begin to show when we foster intersectional thinking.

2. Enable Equitable and Inclusive

Every type of person can join, no matter their background.

WHY

Fashion, as a system and global culture, is still dominated by privileged decision-makers who often gatekeep participation – whether intentionally or unconsciously. This gatekeeping is most visible at the corporate level, but also occurs at more micro, community-based levels.

DEMOCRATIC VALUE

All citizens get a voice and a vote in the operation of their society.

KEY WORDS

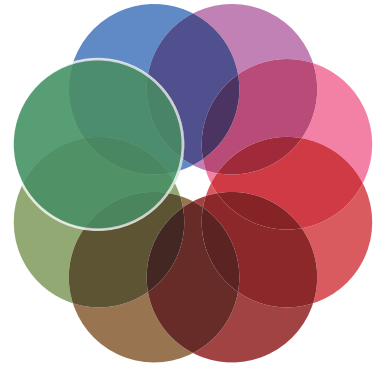
Equity (n.)

Considering needs-based solutions, in which those with less systemic privilege and resources receive an appropriate distribution of power needed to level the playing field. While “equality” means that everyone gets the same thing, equity means that each one gets what they need to join with an equal stance.

Inclusivity (n.)

Equitable opportunities to participate, no matter background or identity. While “diversity” refers to the neutral fact that there are many types of people, inclusivity promotes the engagement of all types of people. It is the so-called “seat at the table,” with an active role and a voice in decision-making.

ve Participation



CALLS TO ACTION

- ➔ Ensure fair, culturally rich, and sustainable access to fashion across the entire value chain, addressing barriers due to social, economic, and geographic inequalities.
- ➔ Center considerations on access for diverse groups of people. This may vary based on activity, but there will always be access barriers that arise when consulting varied target groups. They may be material barriers, such as mobility and geography, language, or affordability, or emotional barriers, such as social inclusion and a sense of belonging.
- ➔ Focus on these differing needs among individuals that impact access. Create participation opportunities that can be adapted for different needs. This is core to empowering a diverse range of voices in fashion—as designers, makers, community members, and consumers—to participate, as well as actively co-create and co-decide in processes and policies.
- ➔ For companies: consider how privilege impacts access to being hired for jobs in fashion-related businesses. Which jobs are inaccessible? What are the barriers? Develop strong DEIB policies that safeguard accessibility for a diverse group.
- ➔ For institutes and educators: focus on needs analyses for students from the application phase. Understand who may experience barriers to participation, and why. Develop services that enable those who experience barriers to participate with as good of a chance as those who do not.
- ➔ For individuals and communities: consider the barriers that may prevent social participation from groups who are a minority within your circles. Creating diverse participation in a social scene cannot be forced, but it can only start with more human connection. Be generous and gracious with invitations into community spaces, and be respectful of those that are not your own.

3. Work Transparently

No organizational elements are hidden. Everyone can easily view processes, statistics, and budgets.

WHY

We live in a fashion reality of opaque supply chains. Companies still do not disclose, and often do not know, all processes behind their products. While EU legislation is starting to address this, there is no global standard for transparency. On the small scale, non-transparent decision-making and management is still normal. From salaries at small companies, to budgets at organizations, to decision-making conversations in communities, there is a need for more transparency.

DEMOCRATIC VALUE

All information is provided for individuals to formulate their own responses to operations of a system – for informed voting, as well as direct feedback. Individuals can petition their points of view to leadership.

KEY WORDS

Traceability (n.)

The ability to see all information in the steps of creating a product, from where it is assembled, to where the components are made, to the raw ingredients.

Disclosure (n.)

Sharing information with a wider group. In this case, regarding operational information, decision-making pathways, budgets, and more.

Town hall (t.)

Organized meeting format where individuals may voice concerns openly to decision-makers and peers; peers may respond, and votes may be held.



Review and respond to decision-making

CALLS TO ACTION

- ➔ Make the processes within fashion systems clearly, publicly accessible.
- ➔ Promote open decision-making processes as a pillar of organization, no matter the scale or focus. Give individuals the full information, as well as the freedom of their own support or dissent.
- ➔ Create two-way communication channels that can both assist with accessing and interpreting information, as well as gathering feedback on the information shared. Create protocol for evolution and change based on feedback.
- ➔ For companies and makers: conduct rigorous traceability and impact of the company in all practices—especially regarding labor conditions, material choices, and environmental impact.
- ➔ For individuals and communities: When addressing practices rather than production, transparency is still necessary through disclosed decision-making procedures, budgeting and financing, and any other organizational factors within a group. Share meeting minutes, and make sure all agree on how information is shared, and where it is accessible.

4. Redistribute Power

Give all people, especially those with less privilege, the power and collective best interest. Those who have more than enough

WHY

Fashion is an ultrahierarchy, with a power range from CEO's who make seven-figure salaries to laborers working for slave-wages. The imbalance of shared resources must be redistributed if all are to participate in the system on their own terms. Those at the bottom of the power hierarchy are not currently determinant of their own lives. Resource- and power-hoarding is visible on smaller scales as well, with the wealthiest in a community obtaining resources that are not shared with those who cannot afford them.

KEY WORDS

Resource (n., v.)

When thinking in terms of redistributing resources, we expand beyond our definition of 'resource' to include the material and immaterial. Material resources include money, physical spaces, food and water, material goods and feed stocks for production, and other tangible assets. Immaterial resources include time, labor, knowledge, energy (relating to rest and workload), emotional energy and support, networks, and opportunities.

Agency (n.)

The ability to act with free will and self-determinism. This does not imply acting selfishly; if all have equitable agency within a group or system, it means each acts as a node in a social ecosystem, advocating for their own needs and responding to the needs of others.

Power distance (t.)

The imbalance of power between two individuals (i.e. a boss to an employee). Power distances exist on a spectrum from very large or can be horizontal and mutual.

and resources to act in their individual
high resources share with those who do not.



DEMOCRATIC VALUE

In order for all to have equal input, all must have the tools to meet their needs and operate with agency. Those with disproportionate amounts of resources should not wield more power.

CALLS TO ACTION

- ➔ Challenge concentrated industry control and foster community-driven, democratic alternatives where power is transferred from corporate centers to public and creative actors.
- ➔ Redistribute wealth and resources, as well as decision-making power. This ranges from all participants voting directly on decisions (group governance) to fairly electing representatives.
- ➔ Work more collaboratively, less independently. Collaborate between peers, and collaborate between departments, between sectors, across geographic divides. Collaboration is only possible when the collaborators meet and work together as equals.

5. Build Structures of Accountability

There should be rules and consequences for how your actions are received, especially for people who already have a lot of power.

WHY

Without structures and procedures of accountability, power can easily be abused. Accountability refers to concrete, enforceable consequences of abusing power. It also refers to the sharing and transition of power (for example, time-limited leadership terms), so that no group or individual may enact an agenda of domination. Accountability for domination is not enforced in a geopolitical context; reparations for historic colonization are globally lacking, and contemporary colonial practices persist. In fashion, there are often little to no consequences for perpetuating inequitable, unsafe conditions for the labor force or environmental harm.

KEY WORDS

Inter-reliance (n.)

Acknowledgment that all individuals depend on each other within a collective. We are each accountable to each other, and this human-to-human (or human-to-ecosystem) accountability exists regardless of power distances.

Reparations (pl. n.)

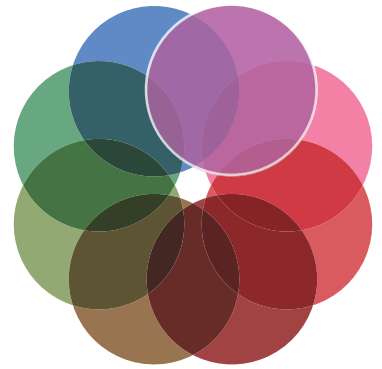
The resources delivered to an injured party by the wrongdoer. Reparations can be financial or a material resource (such as land), but they could also include commitment to better behaviors, such as educating oneself, participating in community service, and working with the injured party to meet their needs.

Call-in (v.)

Following a wave of cancel culture where communities would exile perpetrators, call-in culture brings perpetrators into dialogue for accountability, rather than expulsion. In severe cases, calling-in does not fulfill the needs of the injured party, and further steps need to be taken. However, it is a first step in conflict resolution that encourages growth.⁷

ability

impact other people. This is meant



DEMOCRATIC VALUE

All are treated with dignity, respect, and equal power, and there are concrete consequences for breaching this social contract.

CALLS TO ACTION

- ➔ Create cultures of accountability before wrongs are done. Facilitate trainings, team-building, and knowledge exchanges that engender accountability as a value of interreliance and empathy, not as punishment. All are accountable to one another.
- ➔ Design organizations with accountability measures for misconduct or conflict, both on the interpersonal level (i.e. harassment or discrimination) and on the operations level (i.e. inhumane material sourcing or polluting).
- ➔ Make accountability a fair process centered on education and conflict resolution, rather than shame and punishment. “Call-in culture” is a first string option, rather than “call-out culture” or “cancel culture” – not because it is nicer, but because it is more effective for creating behavior change. Injured parties’ needs and requests are held at the center, and the perpetrator is treated as capable of compassion, and as an agent of meeting the injured’s needs and requests.
- ➔ Enact systemic reparations for historic harms. This means that accountability is not only individual, but is a collectively held responsibility. Such reparations can be on a large scale, like delivering stolen lands back to colonized people. Systemic reparations can also be on a community level, creating equity for those involved who experience systemic oppression.

6. Regenerate Environments

Heal the harm that humans have done to our planet and each of the Earth.

WHY

Damage to the environment – pollution, global warming, destruction of ecosystems, and increased use of toxic materials – affects everyone. Humans who are the most at risk of climate-related disaster are those who have the least power on a global scale – living in parts of the world that are more exposed to extreme weather. Climate refugees will continue to increase, eventually creating housing crises and resource deficiencies. Non-humans are even more immediately affected by environmental harm, as we move toward mass-extinction.

DEMOCRATIC VALUE

All have a right to safe and fair lives, both present and future, with their interests and livelihood considered in decision making.

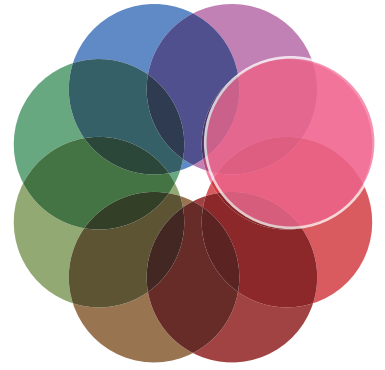
KEY WORDS

Regenerative sustainability (t.)

A model of sustainability that focuses on healing the planet and people rather than “doing less bad” or offsetting human impact (i.e. carbon offsets).

Indigenous knowledges (t.)

The cultures, methods, and technologies of a region that predate colonial, industrial, extractivist treatment of a place and people. These knowledges often contain information on how humans may live as harmonious members of the local ecosystem. Indigenous knowledges do not exist without those who inherit them; indigenous community members must therefore be considered leaders.



other, and treat non-humans as citizens

CALLS TO ACTION

- ➔ Prioritize not just sustainability, but regeneration of natural resources, guided by holistic development principles and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- ➔ Center indigenous knowledges. Look to communities with ancestry in a given region to hold older techniques for coexisting within the local ecosystem. This may range from agricultural practices to wildlife maintenance (i.e. controlled burning), to culture and religion.
- ➔ Treat the living world beyond humans as citizens (as per Robin Wall Kimmerer's *A Democracy of Species*⁸), and recognize that those most at risk of climate-related instability are not those steering decision-making.
- ➔ Rewild lands wherever possible, and halt the destruction of natural habitats. Switch to permaculture as the primary farming method. Utilize urban spaces as gardens, food forests, and wildlife habitats (i.e. bee highways).

7. Spread New Narratives of De

Share the meaning of democracy with good storytelling, and in

WHY

In fashion and in the world, narratives of individualism and xenophobia still dominate. Communication is our strongest tool for changing minds, and spreading new narratives about democracy in fashion is necessary for creating both individual and systemic positive change.

DEMOCRATIC VALUE

All are invited to participate in the conversation. All may advocate for their own stories and experiences. All may see themselves reflected and represented in the narratives that are told.

KEY WORDS

The Commons (t.)

Spaces and resources that are available to everyone for free. This can refer to governmentally organized resources (i.e. public parks and public libraries), as well as to independently organized resources. There are also many digital commons, online databases that house resources for public free viewing or download. The commons rely on the responsible engagement and maintenance of all who participate.

Re-story-ation (t.)

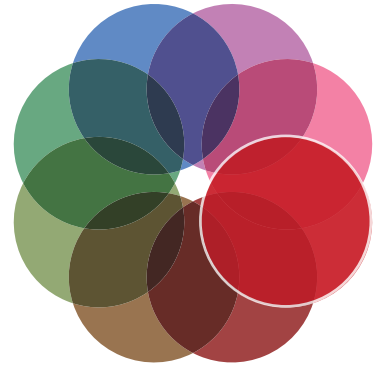
A term coined by Robin Wall Kimmerer that reworks the word “restoration.” Re-story-ation is the process of advocating for environmental repair (restoration), inciting action by changing people’s perceptions. New narratives on our relationship with the earth are foundational to creating behavior change.

Advocacy (n.)

Speaking up on behalf of an issue or cause. Advocacy can be specifically political, such as calling a political representative about an issue they will vote on, or can be social, such as speaking up on an issue within a community setting. Advocacy and storytelling can go hand-in-hand when it comes to spreading awareness on an issue – advocacy gains traction when it is formulated in a well-crafted narrative.

democracy

invite newcomers into the movement.



CALLS TO ACTION

- ➔ Wield storytelling and communication as a core tool of dissemination. Free access to knowledge and compelling, relatable stories bring everyone towards an aligned vision, centered on universal empowerment and dignity.
- ➔ Communicate to the public who is not yet involved about the power of democratic fashion alternatives, generating the shift away from mass-market, exploitative fashion systems.
- ➔ Spread awareness on democracy through meaningful, relatable storytelling, and invite newcomers into the conversations. Grow the change through grassroots channels and local exchange.
- ➔ Use accessible language to communicate to a wide range of people.
- ➔ Use storytelling methods that are current, efficient, and open-source. Share knowledge through the commons.

8. Evolve & Adapt the Principle

Each person can edit the principles of Fashion For Democracy

WHY

We acknowledge our existence in a pluriverse (a world made of many realities, differing from culture to culture). Every individual may bring their own vision to the principles of Fashion For Democracy, and therefore should alter this document and add their own principles that are currently missing.

DEMOCRATIC VALUE

Regional needs are met through regional practices and processes. The members of a community have the autonomy to decide their own governing principles.

KEY WORDS

Peer Review (t.)

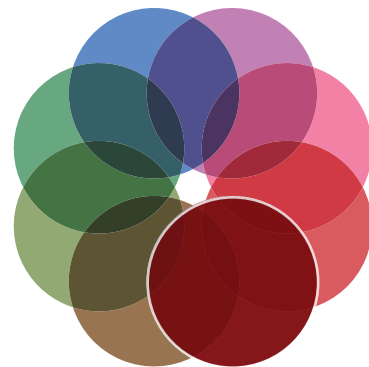
A process, often used in academic writing and research, in which other experts in the same field will read, feedback, or edit a work before it is published. Used more broadly, it is a process in which members of a community give feedback on a document.

Living document (t.)

A document that remains open to edits after it is published. It can either imply future published drafts, or a format (such as a web page) that will be edited and changed even after it has been made public.

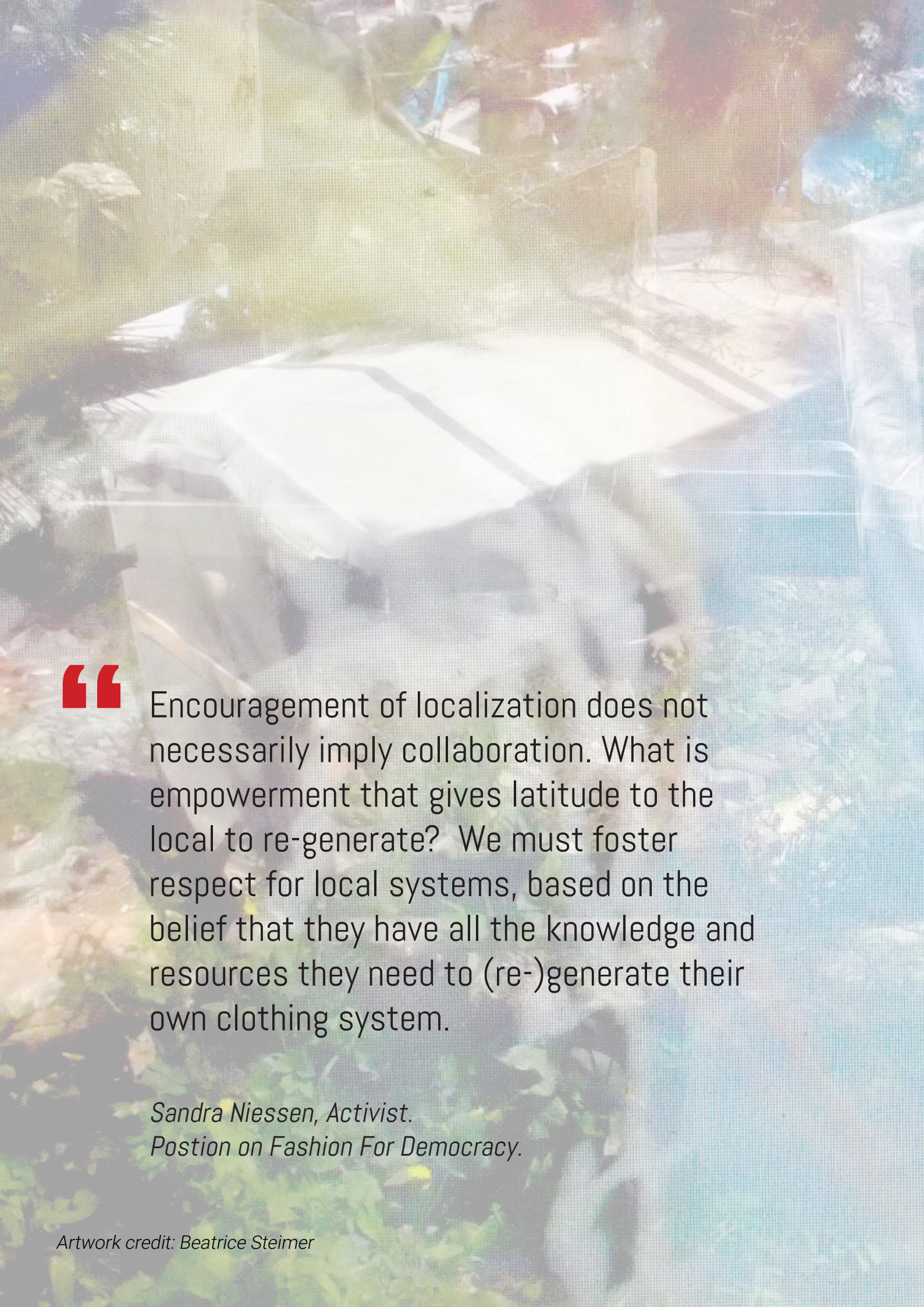
S

y, and can add new principles.



CALLS TO ACTION

- ➔ Work critically with all members of a community to shape the principles to the local needs.
- ➔ Communicate between communities where the differences lie, and why. Accept differing principles, and build upon aligning principles.
- ➔ Share the updated principles with others in different locations. Add vocabulary to the shared glossary of Fashion For Democracy.
- ➔ Keep the principles as a living, evolving document that may adapt to a quickly-changing world.



“

Encouragement of localization does not necessarily imply collaboration. What is empowerment that gives latitude to the local to re-generate? We must foster respect for local systems, based on the belief that they have all the knowledge and resources they need to (re-)generate their own clothing system.

*Sandra Niessen, Activist.
Position on Fashion For Democracy.*

Process: Drafting Principles of Fashion For Democracy

From Guidelines to Principles

Core to aligning on the meaning behind Fashion For Democracy, we started early on in the project to talk about collaboratively designing Guidelines of Fashion For Democracy. But instead of guidelines, which would have been more of an action-focused playbook, we chose to draft Principles of Fashion For Democracy. To us, a principle means a value that is a facet of a larger system of values.

We believe that ‘principles’ might be a more flexible tool for various projects and contexts.

Based on an approach to democracy rooted in humanitarian ethos, these principles were first drafted by Beneficial Design e.V. in partnership with Hessen Design e.V. in Fall 2025. They incorporated common principles of democracy, and position them in a fashion context. The 8 principles consider human and planetary wellbeing as ultimate goals. Rather than adhering to strict elements of a specific governmental democracy, we employ Dahl’s definition ‘rule by the people’⁹ at the heart, and define ‘people’ as all living entities, including our planet as its own organism. We delineate the values common to among democratic structures, and tie them to a fashion use case.

A Community Review Process

In our Agora on 12.12.2025, half of our workshop groups focused on reviewing the first draft of these principles. They were given the initial 8 Proposed Principles in a feedback matrix, and space to endorse and critique each principle. They were also given a final “wild card” section, in which they could propose a principle of their own.

The feedback of the two working groups was collated, similarities were highlighted, and the feedback To see the full peer review feedback on the first draft of the principles, visit the appendix at the end of this document.

Part 4:
Our Alternative Fashion Landscape

Collecting alternative fashion
Geographic mapping
Countermapping



cape cases

Artwork credit: Beatrice Steimer

How do we define alternative fashion?

The category of 'alternative fashion' is a blurry one; when we're looking at fashion that exists outside of the mainstream industry, there are infinite manifestations. There are the ultra-local sewing circles or clothing swaps, and, at the other end of the spectrum, there are businesses that either offer radical reforms for industrial fashion or rely on industrial fashion for their survival.

For example, we could look at chain second-hand stores (such as Goodwill in the United States, or Humana in Europe). While buying second hand is technically an alternative to supporting major fashion corporations, these stores only exist on the scale they do because of fashion's intensity of over-production. What the specialty 'vintage' rack may stock older pieces, the bulk of these stores is clothing produced, purchased, and purged within the past five years.¹⁰

On the other hand, a supply chain innovator may, while still working with industrial, large-scale production, so greatly change our current supply chain paradigm that the impact of that production is no longer comparable to that of other labels. We point to the work of Remei AG and Land to Market as leaders for major change within the system. They also fall in our gray area of 'alternative fashion.'

The true alternatives we aim to center are an absolute rainbow of activities, purposes, and people. We use the term alternative fashion 'initiatives' to encompass this broad range: there are a mix of communities, organizations, practices, activism(s), and more.

As a part of the Agora workshop on 12.12.2025, participants collectively accumulated, mapped, and counter-mapped initiatives that fall into different categories of alternative fashion. By the end of the workshop, we had a capsule database of alternative practices, derived from the shared knowledge base of the cohort.

Guiding research questions:

1. What alternative fashion practices exist globally and what democratic principles do they employ?
2. What defines an alternative fashion practice outside of a European fashion context, and how do groups in other cultural contexts practice democratic principles? How do we build awareness of all those within the alternative fashion pluriverse?
3. How do alternative practices redistribute economic power from corporations to communities? How do alternative practices meet the needs of the participants, offering something better than corporate fashion?

Cases of Alternative Fashion Initiatives

Collected during the Agora on 12.12.2025

- 1 **A-Gain Guide**
Index of textile services, Berlin & Hamburg, DE
- 2 **African Fashion Research Institute**
Design education & activism center, Cape Town, SA
- 3 **AKJP Studio**
Brand & platform, Cape Town, SA
- 4 **Altmat**
Material network, Ahmedabad, IN
- 5 **Anou Cooperative**
Artisan platform, Fez, MA
- 6 **Cultural IP Rights Initiative**
Activist initiative, Oradea, RO & global
- 7 **Clean Clothes Campaign**
Activist network, global
- 8 **Clothing the Gaps**
Aboriginal social enterprise, Melbourne, AU
- 9 **Cloudwool**
Local material sourcer, London, UK & Berlin, DE
- 10 **Decolonising Fashion and Textiles**
Research initiative, London, UK
- 11 **Fashion Act Now**
Activist network, London, UK & global
- 12 **Fashion Revolution**
Activist network, London, UK & global
- 13 **Fashion Roundtable**
Lobby & agency, London, UK
- 14 **Fibershed**
Material network, San Geronimo, USA
- 15 **Governance for Tomorrow**
Educational program, London, UK
- 16 **HoMie**
Aboriginal social enterprise, Melbourne, AU
- 17 **Katharine Hamnett**
Activist, London, UK
- 18 **KOSHA.ai**
Traceability tool, Bengaluru, IN
- 19 **Laila Tyabji**
Designer & activist, Delhi, IN
- 20 **Makeright**
Research initiative, London, UK
- 21 **Materials for the Arts**
Material reuse center, NYC, USA
- 22 **Modern Slavery Act**
Legislation, UK
- 23 **Oshadi Collective**
Collective & label, Erode, IN
- 24 **People Berlin**
Social project, Berlin, DE
- 25 **Pinkponilo**
Studio & hub, Budapest, HU
- 26 **PLATTE Berlin**
Store & hub, Berlin, DE
- 27 **RCDF**
Research & education collective, Amsterdam, NL
- 28 **Re-Root-Text**
Material innovation, Bayern, DE
- 29 **ReGo**
Research initiative, London, UK
- 30 **Sarah Corbett**
Artist & designer, UK
- 31 **Textilhafen**
Social enterprise, Berlin, DE
- 32 **The Craft Atlas**
Database, Berlin, DE & global
- 33 **The Social Studio**
Social project, Melbourne, AU
- 34 **Valupa**
Material innovator, Nuthetal DE
- 35 **Vers :: Clothing for People**
Collective & store, NYC, USA
- 36 **Vivienne Westwood Foundation**
Lobby & organization, London, UK
- 37 **VORN – The Berlin Fashion Hub**
Network & hub, Berlin, DE

Artwork credit: Beatrice Steimer

Mapping Alternative Fashion Initiatives

To better understand the reach of our awareness, we employed mapping as a strategy to spatialize our initial directory of alternative fashion initiatives.

First, geographic mapping shows a direct visual of representation who is acting where. We asked participants in the Agora to arrange their cases of alternative fashion using the Dymaxion Air-Ocean World map, first designed by Buckminster Fuller, and we specifically selected this map as a means of disrupting traditional orientations of Global North and Global South.



The online community included members from or based in countries in the global south, but we also had present several activists and scholars who, while benefiting from being situated in the global north, have had opportunities to travel and work with communities, companies, or individuals far outside of Europe and North America.

The map also contains examples of international networks. The most expansive case of a global initiative is Fashion Revolution, an NGO which is headquartered in the UK but has self-operating chapters in 92 different countries. Fashion Revolution acts as an interesting bridge between dominant and alternative fashion; while they initiate actions and advocacy for industry reforms, they also uplift local-scale design

economies and host regional events.

Smaller multi-locational initiatives also appear on the map. Alternative fashion networks, like Fibershed (USA), connect small businesses and independent actors across distances. Meanwhile, DIY collectives, such as the Queer Needlework Circle (NL, DE), may include members from many different countries and cultural backgrounds. With these types of projects, geographic mapping begins to fall short in its story telling. So much alternative fashion happens in the margins of societies, reminding us that, while a location may have a general identity, knowing the place does not tell us which people it is by or for. For example, an initiative could be led by an immigrant diaspora. If Fashion For Democracy is interested in a 'rule by the people' approach, the 'who' is just as important as the 'where.'



The geographic map, when used for a workshop exercise, provides an interesting lens on the distribution of a group's awareness. It is a starting point for visualizing a fashion pluriverse. But, living in the era of digital globalization, we seek modes of mapping that can depict other connection points between alternative fashion initiatives.

Graphic: Dymaxion projection of the world map, including country borders.

Credit: Justinkunimune via Wikimedia.org. This file is made available under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.



“

Vers :: Clothing for People is a collective in Brooklyn, NY that is a growing group of over 40 different local designers who all hand-make their own creations. We host designer meetings where we get to engage in collective decision-making, idea generation, and problem solving. We share tools in our studio and offer sewing education to our broader community. We host clothing and material swaps to redistribute free clothing, fabric and arts supplies. Designers set their own prices, and each contribute to the daily functions of the shop.

*Tilly J Lapidos, Vers :: Clothing for People.
Position on Fashion For Democracy.*

Countermapping Alternative Fashion Initiatives

When working on a small, independent scale, it is common for alternative fashion initiatives to not be aware of one another's existence. Some initiatives may be intertwined, of course; they may be inter-reliant, such as a material provider and a brand; they may be inspired or seeded from a preceding initiative; they may be collaborators, or even competitors; they may be part of a larger affiliation or collective. But, where the gaps in awareness lie is a missed opportunity for knowledge sharing.

As a second mapping strategy, we draw inspiration from countermapping practices, to better comprehend the relationships within our pluriverse of alternative fashion. Countermapping is an approach to cartography that has been pioneered by indigenous cartographers to visualize non-dominant, pre-colonial or decolonial relations to space.¹¹ The prefix 'counter' signifies a rebuttal to the practice of euro-centric mapping as a tool of colonization.

Especially in the early colonial period, colonizers would claim the rights to a place through mapping its features and contours (and always, of course, with Europe and the North pole positioned at the top). Cultures throughout history have had diverse methods of mapping geographies, stars, and spiritual or dream spaces. Countermapping reminds us that there are multitudes of "correct" representations of our world.

With respect for this legacy, we explore countermapping as a way of understanding closeness or distance not in terms of space, but in terms of practice. Who is performing what activities, and how do they connect to one another? Who is practicing which democratic principles? By clustering the same initiatives by practices or values, we develop a behavioral landscape. We can visualize the action areas in which we have awareness gaps, as well as where our community is the most connected.

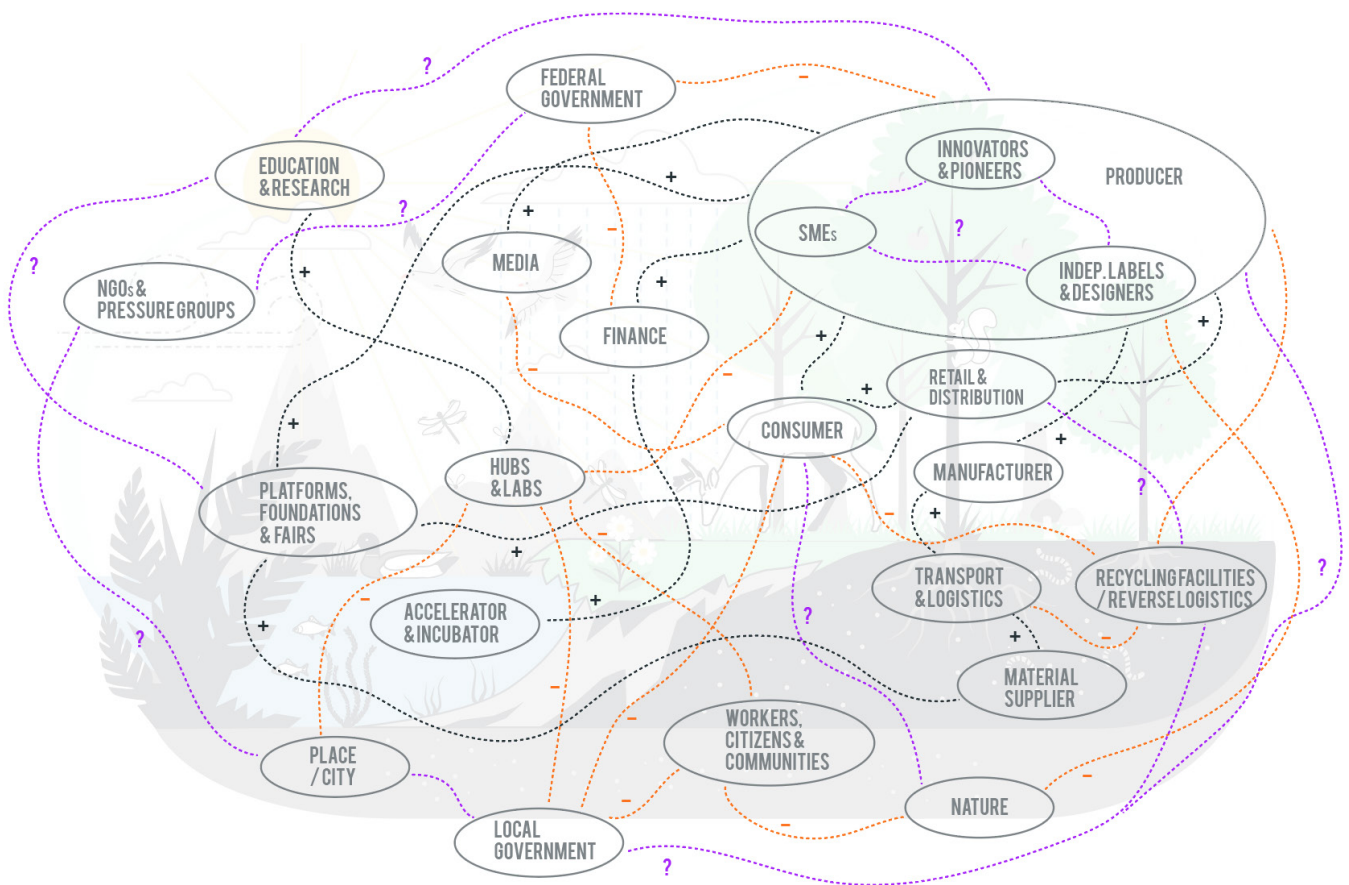


Image: concept for a fashion ecosystem map, based on exchanges and relationships.
Credit: Isabella Rhein for Beneficial Design Institute GmbH, 2022.

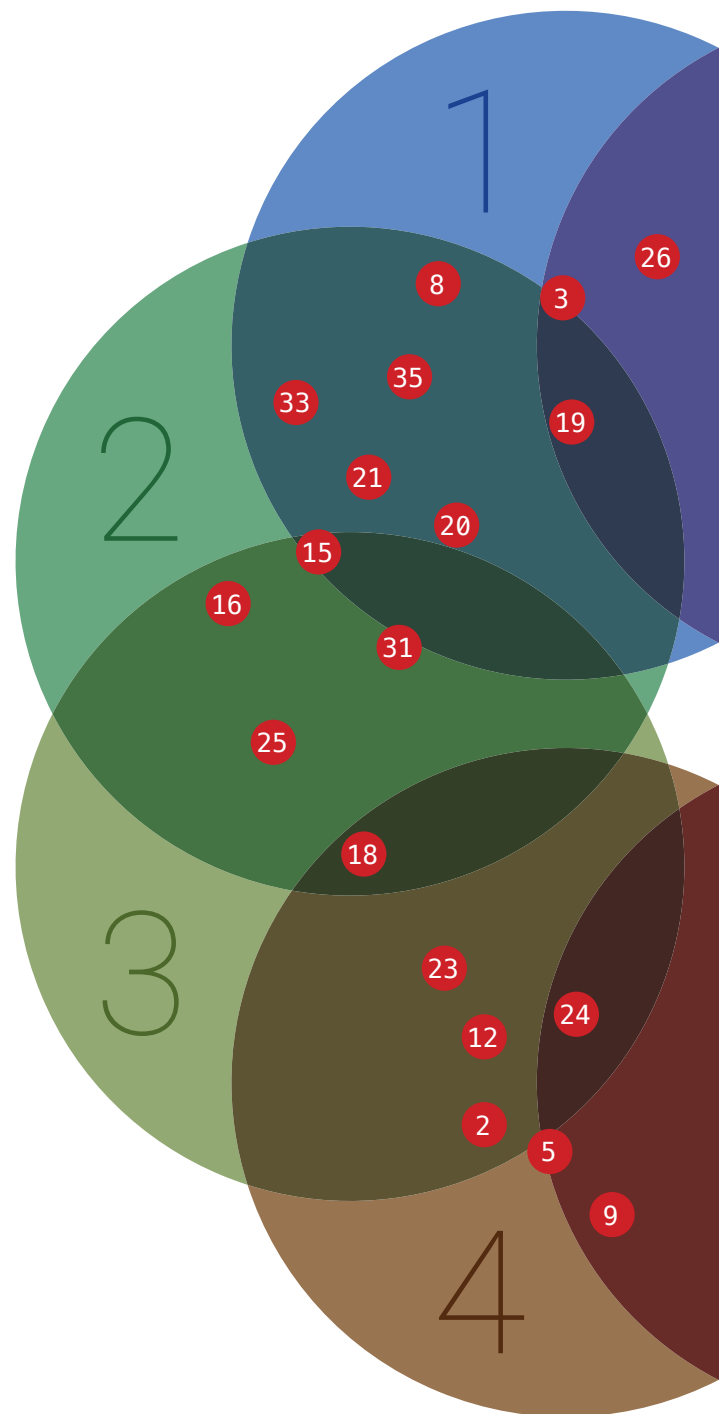
Countermap Concept 1: Alternative Fashion Ecosystem

One way to observe proximity in our alternative fashion landscape is by the role each initiative fulfills. This countermap envisions fashion as an ecosystem, in which 'nutrients' are exchanged between actors. The flow of services, skills, materials, and products is akin to nutrient exchanges in an organic environment: a 'healthy' fashion ecosystem requires homeostasis, a point of sustainable balance through equal exchange.

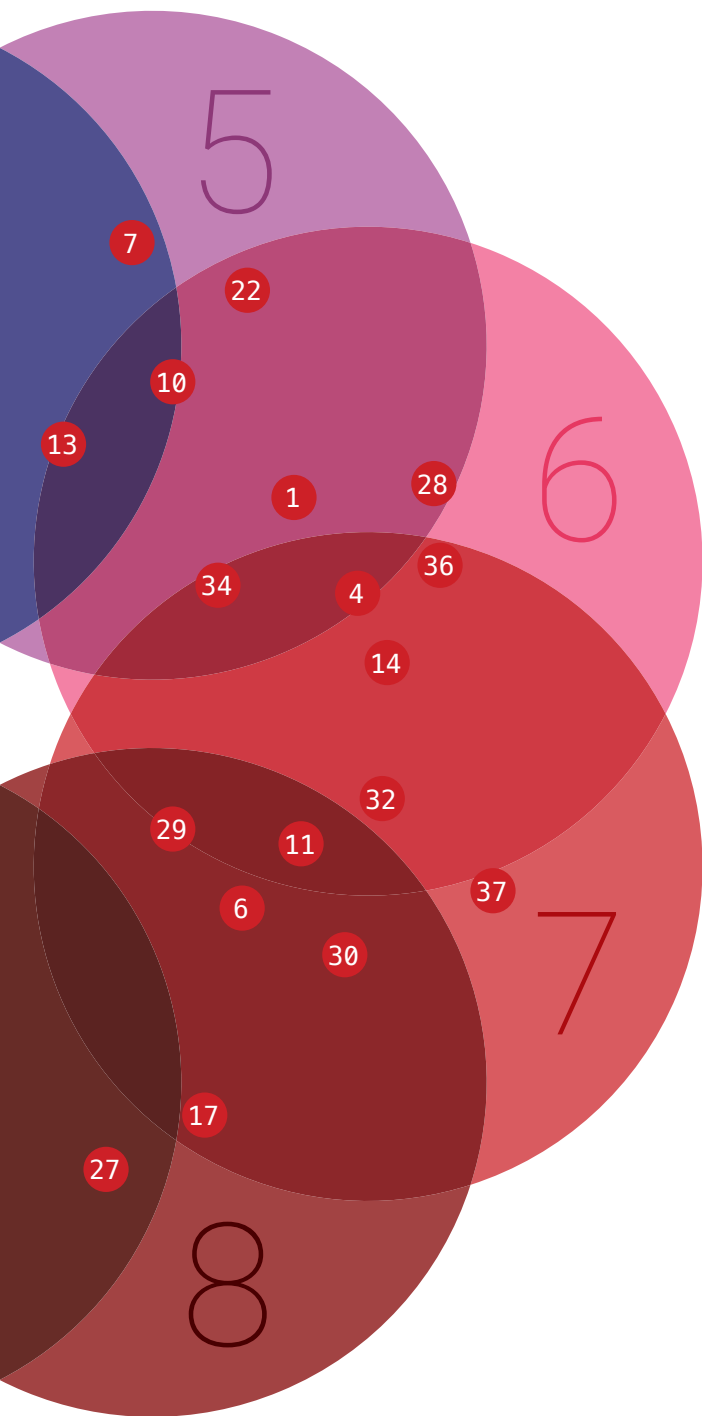
The map of the alternative fashion ecosystem can show which initiatives the mappers are aware of, and where the gaps in knowledge lie. If there are 'nutrients' or roles missing, it may be either because the initiatives are operating in a different sector or community than the mapper, or it may be that there is a lack of alternative fashion initiatives filling this role.

Alternative fashion initiatives in a community ecosystem may include:

- Craft groups and networks
- Activism platforms
- Small-scale labs and innovators
- Small brands or solo designers
- Individual thought-leaders
- Fiber farming or production collectives
- Artists working with fashion
- Education centers
- Any other categories of practice or business that work outside of dominant fashion.



Graphic: Countermap Concept 2. Alternative Fashion Ecosystem. Every initiative practices many of the Principles of Fashion, and does not suggest a lack of a strategy, rather than giving a perfect representation.



Initiatives are clustered by action area. Note: almost all initiatives practice multiple principles of Fashion For Democracy. Clustering is determined on each initiative's primary action area. This countermap exemplifies

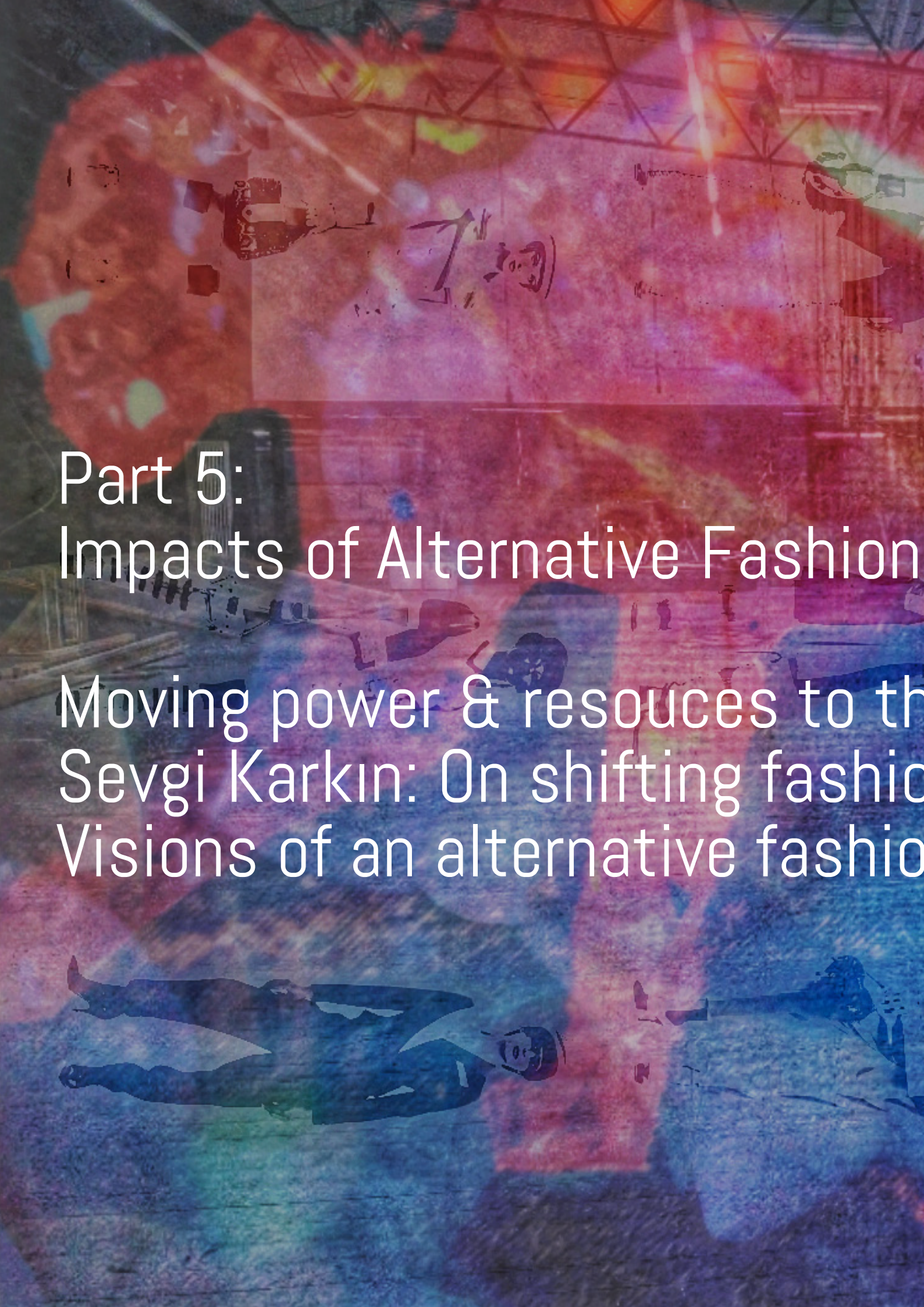
Countermap Concept 2: Principles of Fashion For Democracy

Another method we might use to countermap alternative fashion initiatives is by their impact area. Using the framework of the Proposed Principles of Fashion For Democracy, we can cluster the initiatives by their focus and behavior. Of course, one initiative might excel at practicing multiple principles in their organization and activities. How might we draw a map on which an entity might appear in multiple places at once?

A key consideration is the degree to which an initiative is practicing a democratic principle. For example, if a repair café is newly promoting a diversity and inclusion policy, they may be at the beginning of their journey for Principle #1: Celebrate Plurality. Is it possible to rank their action on the principle on a numeric scale? Perhaps this 'it's a first step' phase could be ranked at a two or a three. Creating a countermap with gradients of the action areas – the Principles of Fashion For Democracy – allows the mapper to show the nuance in activity, and reveal, once again, where the gaps might lie.

The 8 Principles of Fashion For Democracy:

1. Celebrate Plurality
2. Enable Equitable and Inclusive Participation
3. Work Transparently
4. Redistribute Power
5. Build Structures of Accountability
6. Regenerate Environments
7. Spread New Narratives of Democracy
8. Evolve & Adapt the Principles



Part 5: Impacts of Alternative Fashion

Moving power & resources to the
Sevgi Karkin: On shifting fashion
Visions of an alternative fashion



the margins
on realities
in future

Artwork credit: Beatrice Steimer

Power and Resources: from the Center to the Margins

Who holds power in a democracy?

The chant “power to the people” echoes through the city streets on May Day. The uproar from the masses deafens a quaking CEO at their desk. Demonstrations and revolts led to unionizing, and sometimes to shareholding; a global industrial workforce has asserted its rights over the past two centuries. This pressure from the many proletariat upon the few elite is, in many ways, mirrored in our modern democracies. But finding where power truly lies is a muddy quest, far more complex than national decision-making systems. If every vote were equal and in favor of a nation’s majority, we would not be trapped in our current billionaire’s fantasy that has dominated global politics, tech, and industry. Many decisions and deals are being made behind closed doors – which we call ‘elite pacts’ – to further the favorable conditions for the wealthy at the expense of everyone else. Our democratic principles and the average governmental democracy are not of the same cloth. Who holds the power? The resourced.

In fashion, where we do not have a voting system, the dominant power structures are corporate monarchies. King Inditex, Emperor Shein, and the rest of them rule their supply chains with an absolute top-down chain of command. The opacity of supply chains is, in a way, further control from the top to abdicate responsibility – by buying through middle men who hide the trail of material sourcing, large fashion companies avoid the repercussions of slave-wage conditions. We are living in fashion feudalism.

In our quest to democratize fashion, we bow deeply to the activists who, especially since the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in 2013, have been working to demand structures of accountability to the brands who perpetrate harm to their workers and our planet. This industry reform is necessary work, but it does not supply us with fashion alternatives that

are truly people focused – in which fashion is by and for the people. So, parallel to the work of fashion activists, we examine how power might operate on the margins, on the local scale, between peers, neighbors, and strangers alike. A horizontal approach to power in fashion means no kings, and therefore no peasants.

We wonder if the alternative fashion initiatives, especially if they formed alliances, might be a starting point for facing and dismantling larger power structures.

Guiding research questions:

4. What strategic alliances and infrastructure would enable alternatives to gain market share from industrial fashion? How do resilient democratic fashion networks help to dismantle large, extractive fashion?
5. What policies and infrastructure support transitions to democratic fashion economies?

What do we mean by power?

When we speak about power, we mean the ability to do something, the resources to do something, and the freedom to do something. In a fashion context, these three axes of power vary heavily by the region or nationality and by the privileges experienced by the practitioner. For example, as discussed at a 2023 Fashion Revolution event at Platte Berlin,¹² many women artisans in Iran are legally restricted from crafting certain designs; while they have the ability and the resources, laws around modest dress criminalize wearing revealing garments,¹³ preventing the distribution of artisans making wearables that might fall in this category. In a different political context, an alternative fashion initiative may have all of the freedom and ability to do their work, but may lack the resources due to financial or geographical barriers.

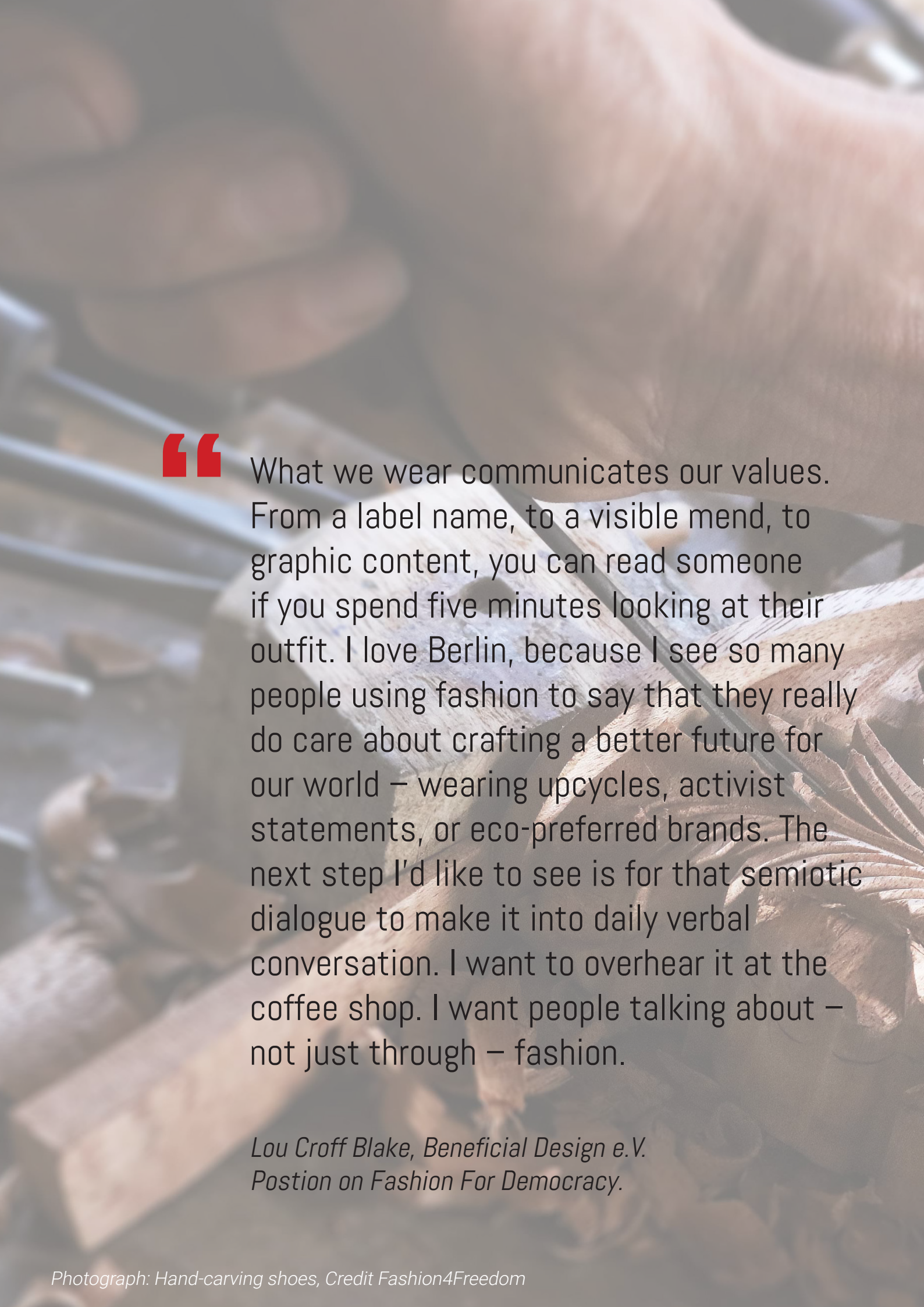
The global fight balancing power dynamics in fashion is enormous, regionally situated, and slow. Activist organizations and legislators battle fashion behemoths in an uphill battle against their soaring profit margins. We, as an initiative, want to hone in more specifically on how alternative fashion might make its own counterbalances to the power crisis.

Fashion scholar Otto von Busch, in his 2019 article “A Crisis of Power in Fashion: Is There Agency for Change?” breaks down fashion power structures into three key dynamics. First, “power over” refers to fashion in its capitalist status quo; a dynamic of absolute industry authority, where brands have “power over” workers and shoppers alike. Second, “power to” describes the trending shift towards consumer collaboration through customization, education, and a fabricated sense of ‘community’ – the individual feels they have the “power to” participate. The important point in “power to” fashion is that there is an illusion of redistributed power, rather than an actual dismantling of inequity. Finally, von Busch describes “power with” fashion as an avenue of actual collaboration. With grassroots initiatives that democratize the creation of fashion, finding “power with” each other creates a resilient model for people taking agency instead of giving agency to corporations. By tracing a path between these three types of power – which boil down to control, agency, and alliance – von

Busch delineates a shift from individualism to cooperation.¹⁴

“Power with” fashion builds on the anarchist concept of DIT, or Do It Together (an evolution of DIY, or Do It Yourself) that proposes a system of sharing resources, labor, and creative vision as the strongest means of achieving a shared goal.¹⁵ But “power with” is a slippery slope; von Busch circles back to the question of exclusivity and privilege. “Power with” who? And who is “Doing It Together”? While remaining critical of complex intra-community privileges and disadvantages, we are curious how alternative fashion might be the space in which alliance/power with/DIT can be the primary mode of power.

When we speak about power, we mean the ability to do something, the resources to do something, and the freedom to do something.



“

What we wear communicates our values. From a label name, to a visible mend, to graphic content, you can read someone if you spend five minutes looking at their outfit. I love Berlin, because I see so many people using fashion to say that they really do care about crafting a better future for our world – wearing upcycles, activist statements, or eco-preferred brands. The next step I'd like to see is for that semiotic dialogue to make it into daily verbal conversation. I want to overhear it at the coffee shop. I want people talking about – not just through – fashion.

*Lou Croff Blake, Beneficial Design e.V.
Position on Fashion For Democracy.*

Provocation: On shifting fashion realities



Sevgi Karkin

(she/her)
Yugen Company
Münchberg, Germany

"In today's world, what realities does fashion reveal, and what truths does it conceal? When a garment completes its production process, it reaches us finished and ready to wear. Yet, the things that give it shape, such as its materials and the processes it undergoes, are often difficult to see. The invisible labor and craftsmanship behind its production, as well as the meanings conveyed through color and design knowledge, often remain in the background.

Beyond this lack of information, it's part of how dominant fashion is formed.

As Arturo Escobar pointed out, dominant systems often present one way of organizing the world as the norm, leaving little room for other practices and perspectives.¹ Fashion works similarly. Materials appear as named fibers or surfaces, while their geography remains unclear:

the land they come from, the resources they are connected to, the processes they undergo, and the paths they take. Labor often appears only as an invisible stage of production, and the people who provide that labor are often obscured behind it.

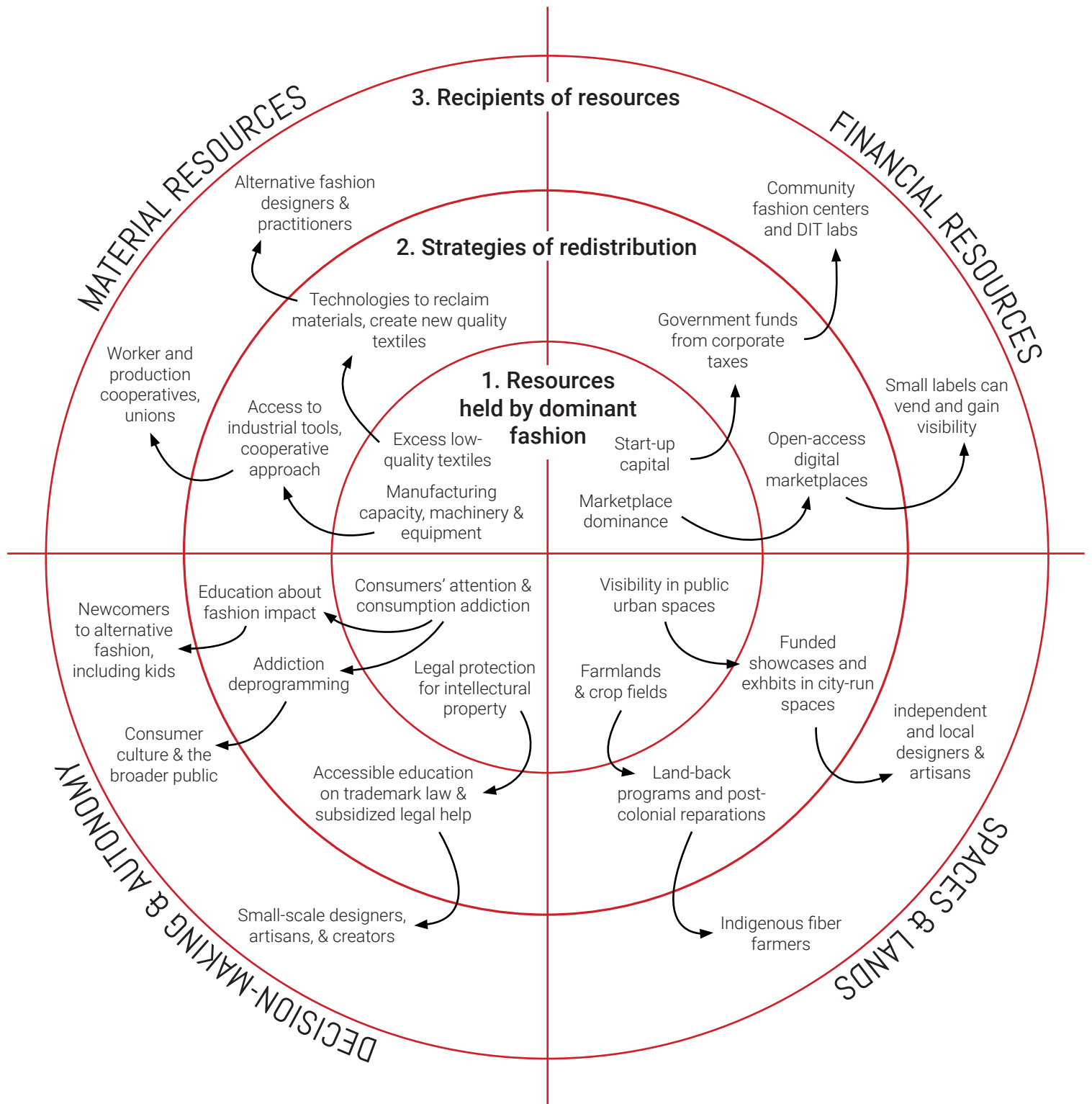
The most challenging thing at this point is how accustomed we all are to this reality. Everything on display in the Global North is still dependent on natural resources and human labor in distant places. What we accept as design and product at one end of the chain is dependent on environmental pressure, precarious labor, and unequal production relations at the other end. The difficult part is how challenging it is to read the clothes we wear every day as processes shaped by geography, work, and power.

Therefore, alternative practices have perhaps never been more important than they are today: they should become more widespread as a prime example of how fashion can be organized through shorter distances, more honest relationships, and more accountable forms of production. "



Spreading Resources into Alternative Fashion

Part of the DIT ethos is the redistribution of resources. With our cohort of the first Fashion For Democracy Agora, we facilitated a workshop exercise in the Power and Pathways discussion track to envision how resources might be diverted from dominant fashion into alternative fashion initiatives. Participants brainstormed which resources are currently held at the center of power – which could be the industry, but other institutes as well, such as academia – and who in alternative fashion needs those resources. Finally, connecting the two, a potential mode of redistribution. Resources were split into four categories: material goods, financial assets, spaces and lands, and decision-making and autonomy.



Graphic: Selected results from the Power & Resource Redistribution Exercise, 12.12.2025

Visions of an alternative fashion future

Regenerative Community Economonics

One attendee made the very good point that alternative fashion does not need to rely on dominant fashion for its resources, and that non-industrial fashion communities and systems might cultivate their own resource pools. A combinatory approach to this sentiment and drawing resources from dominant fashion is illustrated beautifully in Christian Sarkar, Enrico Foglia and Philip Kotler's model of regenerative community economics. In this framing, a community combines external investment with local, internal investment. External resources are circulated within the community as long as possible, with minimal investment in the external resource supplier (i.e. dominant fashion). The maximized internal circulation of resources is the fodder for community value – which may be, for instance, goods and services, creative development, spaces and gatherings, and shareable knowledge.¹⁶

The viability of an alternative fashion initiative is dependent on access to its needed resources, both material and immaterial. Integrating the concepts “power with” and DIT, sharing resources between initiatives is one way in which we might maximize the circulation of value, empowering their growth and survival. In order for this to happen, these initiatives must, once again, have a means of connecting with each other. Building an international, rhizomatic network of alternative fashion could provide streams of connection that lead to symbiotic activities.

Pathways to a Preferred Future

In the final stage of the Power and Pathways workshop, participants created a backwards roadmap for a future in which alternative fashion is the norm. This utopian visioning began with defining the qualities of this fashion paradigm one hundred years from now. Once the future was fleshed out, participants were prompted to focus on each quality and, working backward through the century, imagine the steps that would need to happen for the quality to be the norm. One example was “Local- and community-based fashion.” The group ideated that, in order to get to a future where this is the norm, by ~75 years in the future, communities will need locally accessible machinery; ~50 years in the future, fashion initiatives will need to be sufficient and integrated with their local communities; in the first half of the next century, research on different regions’ local materials will need to be greatly developed, which exclude oil-based and synthetic feedstocks and utilize waste streams. The group concluded that one contemporary development that could ensure a future localized feedstock would be to plant more food forests (which would also, naturally, feed the local community, addressing two resource needs at once).

While the workshop was not long enough for participants to work out more than a couple pathways, the most interesting result was the collectively developed vision of what an alternative fashion future might resemble.

Visions of an Alternative Fashion Future in the year 2100.

COMMUNITY

local, community-based

Local production is promoted and supported

community-based

dissolving the categories of producer and consumer

enablement to produce your own clothes sustainably

Fashion is no longer purchased

open-access knowledge

grow your own clothes

aesthetics is not dominated by one country/region/culture

incredibly diverse (pluriverse)

fashion is more mentality than material

no more textile waste

no wasteful, harmful materials

making fashion is integrated with making food

CULTURE

self expression through clothing is cherished throughout cultures, ethnicities etc.

MATERIALS

BUSINESS

alternative labels
around the world have
a platform with shop,
content, services

Sustainable labels receive
tax benefits

new technology
KI makes it possible
to present small labels
without big financial
support

design
fashion
designers become
operators and facilitators
of processes

The tailor's trade is the
standard

human rights
throughout the fashion
value chain are supported

democratizing fashion
design!

There is no maker
anonymity

PRODUCTION

no long supply
chains

fashion as a process, not
product

Fashion is made, or
passed down

tile

no fossil-fuel fibers

reused materials and
repaired fashion is the
norm

Textiles can be
optimally recycled and
repaired

Collected by participants of the Fashion For Democracy Agora
on 12.12.2025, Discussion Track 2: Power & Pathways

Artwork credit: Beatrice Steimer

Part 6: Conclusion

Next steps for Fashion For Democracy Endnotes

FASHION FOR
DEMOCRACY
DESIGN FOR BETTER





democracy

Next steps for Fashion For Democracy: Design For Better Lives

We wish for the world – especially those who are not directly involved with a fashion practice – to understand that clothing is a space for agency and connection for all.

As we share this first capsule of research, input, and visions into digital space, we feel the malleable texture of the project. Fashion For Democracy is a practice-first approach to how humans do clothes, and can therefore be sculpted by each person, collective, company, or university. It is equally creative and political at its core – a merger of qualities that dominant fashion has never managed to capture. It is a loud call to you (yes, you!) to be an active agent in your wardrobe and in your community.

We aim for a snowball of research to form around these themes. From refining and morphing the Principles of Fashion For Democracy, to expanding the map of alternative fashion initiatives, to practicing real-world resource redistribution, we incite students, designers, activists, and researchers to fertilize and grow the seeds that are here. We welcome constructive feedback, as well as adaptations of the ideas. We gladly say, “take it and run with it.” And we hope that, in the process, we can slowly spread our new definition of democratic fashion. We wish for the world – especially those who are not directly involved with a fashion practice – to understand that clothing is a space for agency and connection for all.

This new initiative is neither an organization, nor a dogma; it is an alliance, a network of many worlds, a diverse group of actors who may not always agree on everything. The diversity, and internal contradictions that may arise from our varied cast, is the exact point of a fashion democracy; we point once again to the need for regional solutions to regional issues. If we are all, as familiars of Fashion For Democracy, aware of these variations, it affirms that there is no one right way ‘to fashion.’ We learn from each others’ differences, and we learn more about our own privileges and disadvantages through hearing the stories of others.

Our vision is for the international conversations and workshops to continue. We also aim to facilitate more research with students, and seek university partners on other continents to conduct parallel projects. We aim to publish more research, and most importantly, to continue sharing stories and cases of alternative fashion in community contexts.



“

A future where finding what fits—style, values, body—is simply easy. Where fashion discovery feels personal, intuitive and conscious. Where we cherish quality pieces that can be mixed and matched across our wardrobes in many ways.

*Ksenya Dockhorn, mixNmatch.
Postion on Fashion For Democracy.*

Artwork credit: Beatrice Steimer

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Fashion For Democracy: Design For Better Lives
Positions & Provocations

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