

Title	Dilys Williams: A voice for radical change in the fashion industry
Type	Article
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/8550/
Date	2015
Citation	Williams, Dilys and Torres, Sara (2015) Dilys Williams: A voice for radical change in the fashion industry. 1 Granary.
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DILYS WILLIAMS: A VOICE FOR RADICAL CHANGE IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

16 July 15 under [Anything But Sustainable Fashion](#), Interviews by Sara Torres [Leave a Comment](#)

Founder of the Centre for Sustainable Fashion Dilys Williams speaks truth to power and provokes young designers' action.

The Centre for Sustainable Fashion established in 2008 by Dilys Williams, is an interdisciplinary research centre whose main focus is to use fashion as a catalyst for change. The diverse group of international leading designers, researchers, educators and communicators that conform the CSF, passionately work together in thinking fashion beyond fashion, that is; as a cultural production which has the potential to direct people's image of what is desirable. The construction of a more sustainable world needs to have fashion design as its ally. In the following lines, Dilys Williams, Director and Professor of Fashion Design for Sustainability, talks about the importance of understanding that everything is political as far as it affects our lives as social beings. Young designers, even if restricted by the market, should aspire to overcome culturally prescribed conventions by defying their inherited beliefs.

“It is very important to stand up for your own ethic, whilst being savvy about how best to balance the current world with the one that you dream of.”

The CSF is organized around five ambitious guiding themes:

1 “BE A VOICE FOR CHANGE”: SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

I want to relate this to young designers who are trying to find their place in the fashion industry: what can be the positive/negative consequences of positioning themselves politically?

Positioning yourself politically can be explicit or by stealth, it's about choosing what makes sense to your own way of working and how you voice your ideas. We are all positioned politically, whether we think directly about it or not.

It is very important to stand up for your own ethic, whilst being savvy about how best to balance the current world with the one that you dream of. As fashion is seen as a 'light' way of expressing ideas, some designers have been accused of being either too serious or not taken seriously when voicing through fashion – but a political voice that is also aesthetically amazing and is witty can be brilliant. Small designers can feel restricted by buyers demands, and it's a tough call to be both true to yourself and get your business off the ground and stay up! But those with a strong message are the ones that stand out, whether it's quiet and strong or loud and proud.

2 “CHALLENGE CONVENTIONAL AESTHETIC”: MOVE AWAY FROM PRESCRIBED NOTIONS OF BEAUTY

Why do you think that, in general, it is still so difficult to think outside the cultural conventions in terms of beauty?

There are cultural conventions and there are prescribed conventions...I think that the struggle is with prescribed conventions put in front of us to sell stuff. Plus our industry is now set up for industrialised production at speed and scale so it suits businesses to keep selling similar, slightly tweaked versions of the same thing over being more experimental. I have also found personally that with many sample rooms being scaled down, sending out sketches to factories overseas, you lose something in the sampling stage that makes it more difficult to experiment. I do feel that there are new notions coming through that are very exciting, from Craig Green to looking at the end of year shows, there are some amazing shapes and textures that defy conventions in brilliant ways.

“The rewards of ‘more’ diminish once we have a certain amount of stuff, we already have way more than makes us happy in the majority of cases in the western world, but we are in the habit of consuming, of shopping as a main social activity.”

3 “DREAM WITH EYES WIDE OPEN”: COMBINE FEASIBILITY, VIABILITY AND DESIRABILITY

I understand that we need a continuous exercise of deconstruction and construction: How can the desire of people be directed towards new representations and therefore, new ways of thinking, living and consuming?

We all love novelty, excitement comes in the new, the changing, and the stimulation of ‘consumerism’ has us caught in its gaze. But there is evidence, that Kate Fletcher, one of the professors in the CSF team, has been looking at, that shows that the rewards of ‘more’ diminish once we have a certain amount of stuff, we already have way more than makes us happy in the majority of cases in the western world, but we are in the habit of consuming, of shopping as a main social activity. One of our other projects has looked at why people buy different clothes – the results are pretty shocking. It’s mostly about having gone out to shop, and feeling like you’ve not achieved anything unless you have bought something. I do think that there are people turning the other way, opting for space, time, the huge rise in mindfulness, meditation etc – at a range of levels from ten day silence retreats to ten minutes on headspace – these are healthy signs!

4 “RADICALIZE PRACTISE”: DESIGN AND EDUCATE FOR ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE

Could you give me an example of radical practise in fashion? What is your pedagogical approach? Very often, the word “radical” is used to refer to visually strong representations that don’t challenge the terrain of the ideas and social belief in any way.

Yes, I could talk for a while here and the word radical is used across a very wide domain! For us, we find the things that are maybe most uncomfortable, hard to do and get little notice to be a definition of radical – working with empathy, thinking of the interdependence between cause and effect – **UBUNTU** means something on the lines of: *what matters to you affects me*. Desmond Tutu writes about it, it’s a South African word. That is actually quite a radical way of working in fashion. Our pedagogies include ways to link directly with nature and social connectivity. So whether it’s deep ecology, starting in nature to think about design, which we did with a group of students recently in Hay, or whether it’s asking students to go out around where they live and find ways to exchange skills without using cash, we have a range of ways of engaging in the world as well as techniques for thinking about how we imagine life to be, working back, rather than looking forward to ‘predict’ from what is around us now. The aesthetic then emerges from experiences of connection rather than the other way around...but there are many ways to practice that are open or guided.

“As humans we have the propensity to compete as well as care for each other – so we find ways to do things publicly that are about people being able to voice their own ideas, through participation.”

5 “INFLUENCE CITIZEN ACTION”: GATHER AND COMMUNICATE RESEARCH THAT THE WORLD NEEDS

Fashion can be an immensely valuable tool to influence citizen action, but these actions (mainly through consumption) can have as a result an increase in the quality of life of the total population or, on the contrary, they can promote and solidify inequality and dissatisfaction: What are your strategies for positive citizen influence?

Yes, fashion is a marker of the best and worst aspects of life, society and being human I think! I became interested in my work because fashion is such an amazing way to communicate; participate in, and create our identities with others. As humans we have the propensity to compete as well as care for each other – so we find ways to do things publicly that are about people being able to voice their own ideas, through participation. Like Our I Stood Up project, which is part of a bigger project looking at the cityisation of the world and how fashion is a means for a city’s metabolism to be healthy or not. Being able to stand up for what you care about through what you stand up in is, we think, very important. This project asks people to make statements through what they are wearing. Helen Storey, another professor in the team engages with public audiences a lot through social media. Her Dress4ourtimes is one of our ways of engaging with people on a digital and emotional level. I am super lucky, the CSF team are like magnets, they are and they find amazing people to connect with and amplifying those voices are our means to influence the others out there who are also pretty amazing – most people care!

“We are not running out of resources, we are running out of imagination, said John Wood. There are all sorts of things in abundance, yet we can’t seem to imagine how to engage with them over the fast diminishing resources that we currently use.”

To what extent is utopia important in your work? How can utopia relate to thinking the ideal future of fashion and design?

John Wood said something in the lines of, *we are not running out of resources, we are running out of imagination* – and that is the case – there are all sorts of things in abundance, yet we can’t seem to imagine how to engage with them over the fast diminishing resources that we currently use. I think that dreaming, imagining, from a place of understanding is vital. We need to imagine better, through having an ecological and social literacy – utopia is important, as long as it’s not disconnected from life’s essence in nature and in humans as social beings

What differences do you find when treating the question of sustainability with luxury and high street brands?

The first biggest difference is the ‘churn’ luxury is not made at the same speed and quantity, so the concerns about waste are different. Although there are still concerns about waste, it’s not about landfill in the same way as it is in high street companies.

We are working with Kering, who are the mothership of Stella McCartney, McQueen, Gucci, Bottega Veneta, YSL, Balenciaga, so we are working first hand with a range of luxury businesses – each with their own DNA in relation to sustainability, all benefitting from the work that Kering is doing to help them. In essence the issues are the same – water, biodiversity, emissions, fairness, waste, resource depletion – but with different symptoms. For many luxury brands biodiversity is a big issue as they are using fibres and skins from vulnerable sources – their business can support or destroy these sources. Luxury brands have models for business more in tune with notions of sustainability in many ways, whilst having a huge impact in themselves too. It's different in each case, but waste and labour issues (more luxury is made in places where traceability is somewhat more direct) these are the top two differences maybe.

“Who or what benefits from what I or you are doing?”

Can you talk to me about a specific project in which you are investing an important amount of energy nowadays?

I am very excited about the Habit(AT) Project, which is exploring fashion as a way of energising the metabolism of a city – it's early days – we have one strand of work that is about voicing concern through fashion – finding a channel for members of the public to voice their concerns in relation to climate and society. We are also in phase of ‘noticing’ the city through what people are wearing and what it tells us about how healthy a city's cultural life is – it's a huge project, probably too big at the moment. We will then link with people from other disciplines who are looking at other aspects of cities – housing, transport, food, to see how fashion links with these in a flow that gives back as well as takes from the city, nature and society....

“If designers start to ask different questions, maybe we can start to change the aesthetics, the culture,” you’ve once said. What questions should students or recent graduates be asking? They’re about to get into a very difficult and competitive industry where success is rated by growth that often is not sustainable.

It’s very tough – we have a business support programme working with many small businesses – so I know that it’s easier for me to say “go for what you believe in” than it is for businesses waiting for a store to pay them before they can buy cloth for next season. This is not new – it’s a business that has been tough and is now tougher...

But I do think that the first question is – who or what benefits from what I or you are doing? That has to be the first question. Then questions about what good a product serves, to the maker, wearer etc...these are starting points.

Words by Sara Torres

Portrait courtesy of Dilys Williams



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