

‘Fashion Matters’ by Anneke Smelik. A Lecture Series on Sustainability, Posthumanism and New Materialism, Università Iuav di Venezia, 2nd–30th March 2022

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‘Fashion Matters’ is a fascinating concept to think about the relevance of fashion and, at the same time, the vibrant substance which fashion is made of. This concept was the title of the lecture series delivered by Anneke Smelik, professor of Visual Culture at the Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands) whom I invited as visiting researcher and professor IR.IDE at Università Iuav di Venezia, Department of Architecture and Arts in Spring 2022.¹ The series explored the new paradigms of fashion cultures by connecting the interrelated issues of climate change, technology, and identity. Articulated in five encounters, it covered the topics of *Fashion and Sustainability: setting the stage* (2nd March); *Anthropocene: Posthumanism and New Materialism* (9th March); *Posthuman Bodies and Identities* (16th March); *Wearable Technology and Bio-couture* (23rd March); and *A Posthuman Ethics of Care for Fashion* (30th March).

The opening lecture critically addressed the concept of sustainability, providing a foundational historical context from the beginning of the 1970s, when the Club of Rome published its first report, *The Limits to Growth* (1972). During this lecture, Smelik addressed the audience with challenging questions such as ‘sustainability: what does it actually sustain?’, broadening the concept of sustainability to include culture, in addition to the three classical pillars of environment, society, and economy. Many authors have stressed the role of human sustainability (e.g. human rights and human capital), but this does not fit into Smelik’s posthuman perspective, which also includes the non-human. In her view, the role of culture is fundamental in sustainable discourses, particularly when dealing with fashion, as shown by the case of consumerism.

The first lecture created a common ground to interpret the concept of sustainability, the second one provided the audience with an interdisciplinary theoretical framework rooted in 1) new materialism; 2) Anthropocene, and 3) posthumanism. Smelik pioneered new materialism in the field of fashion studies

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1. ‘Fashion Matters’ is also the title of the research project that Smelik has been carrying out in the last years.

with the aim of illuminating matter — a rather underexplored issue —, and investigating the material agency, including ‘the intelligent matter of the human body’² beyond their discursive meanings. With regard to the Anthropocene, Smelik agreed on the fact that human activity has radically changed the planet, and questioned the meaning of living in the age of humankind. This lecture was timely and crucial for understanding how the definition of human is changing in the 21st Century; the complex relationships between humans, plants, and animals; and finally, the ontological questions of human responsibilities towards the planet. These questions have also been at the centre of Venice 59th International Art Biennale, which opened to the public in late April 2022, curated by Cecilia Alemani, under the title of *The Milk of Dreams*. Rosi Braidotti’s work on *The Posthuman*,³ informed Smelik’s lecture series as well as this year’s Biennale, providing a common thread between these different cultural formats.

Posthumanism was also at the core of the three following lectures, dealing respectively with bodies and identity; wearables technology and bio-based materials; and the ethics of care. With regards to identity, Smelik argued that ‘we are intersectional and transnational fashion subjects for whom body, dress and self are intertwined and entangled’. She reminded the audience of the complex meaning of this concept, that far from being individual and homogeneous, is rather plural and could be seen as a discontinuous process of ‘becoming’, following the Deleuzian key concept, and its further elaboration of ‘becoming with’⁴ by Donna Haraway, who stressed the idea of interdependence between human and non-human. Among the many visual examples that Smelik provided during her lectures, were the slime dress for Lady Gaga — designed by Bart Hess by pouring litres of slime over the singer’s body —; and the *Like living organisms* interactive skindress by Local Androids Studio, able to interpret the excitement that arises when two people first meet. These examples well illustrate the posthuman principle of de-centring the human to re-centre the matter.

Smelik’s lecture on *Wearable technology and bio-couture* offered the opportunity to discuss with the audience the intertwined links between human subjects and technologies. Instead of a robotic, human-machine imaginary, she proposed an embodied approach to technology, inviting us to keep technological innovation in textiles and fashion materials as close as possible to the living beings, as in the case of bio-fabrics based on seaweed, mushrooms or fruit skin. This lecture fruitfully contributed to the research on the relationship between fashion and bio-based materials that Paolo Franzo and Clizia Moradei are carrying out at Università Iuav within the Fashion Futuring research team, which I lead.

The lecture series came to an end with a promising new insight on the ‘ethics of care’ for fashion. Here Smelik argued that sustainability in fashion can only be achieved ‘by an emotional connection to materials, clothes, people, and a love for the world’. Drawn on *The Care Manifesto. The Politics of Interdependence*,⁵ this last lecture proposed a perspective on fashion based on an interwoven community, which promotes collective forms of joy and wellbeing, rather than on the satisfaction of hyper-individualistic desires.

This lecture series raised several fundamental questions, which helped to broaden the understanding of sustainability in the field of fashion studies, overcoming the common misconception of sustainability as lacking cultural interest and appeal. Instead of considering sustainability simply as the protection of nature, it proposes a ‘nature-culture continuum’⁶ that defies binary thinking. In addition, with regard to the Italian context, Smelik’s lectures helped to reframe ‘Made in Italy’ beyond cultural heritage and

2. Anneke Smelik, “New materialism: A theoretical framework for fashion in the age of technological innovation,” *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2018): 33–54.

3. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2013); Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2019); Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2021).

4. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244.

5. The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto. The Politics of Interdependence* (London and New York: Verso, 2020).

6. Anneke Smelik, “A Posthuman Turn in Fashion,” in *Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, eds. Eugenia Paulicelli, Veronica Manlow and Elizabeth Wissinger (New York: Routledge, 2021), 57–64.

craftsmanship. Zygmunt Bauman in his work *Retrotopia*⁷ argued that our societies increasingly look back at an idealised past, rather than imagining and projecting towards a better future (e.g. utopia). This is particularly helpful considering that 'Made in Italy' has been increasingly distorted and turned into a myth, instead of investigating the substance of which fashion is actually 'made' in Italy. In a broader perspective, 'Fashion Matters' contributed to re-discuss the canon of Western fashion historiography from the perspective of the Anthropocene, by assuming humans as 'a major geological force.'⁸ Finally, the lecture series opened the way for further investigations and discussion on the ontological redefinition of fashion. This is the aim of the international conference *Earth, Water, Air, And Fire: The Four Elements of Fashion*, which Anneke Smelik and I are organising, and which will take place in Venice on 16–17th March 2023. Considering that sun, air, water and soil make most of the substance of the clothes we wear, this conference intends to shed light on the new paradigms of fashion cultures through the four archetypal elements of matter. This approach fits in the current debate on the 'material turn' inspired by re-centring matter and the materiality of things, technologies, and bodies.⁹

Given that fashion is one of the planet's most polluting industries, this lecture series and the forthcoming conference, would like to problematise the current climate and ecological crisis by identifying new approaches towards sustainable fashion, and new ways of inhabiting the Earth.

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7. Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia*, (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2017).

8. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene'," *Global Change Newsletter*, no. 41 (2000): 18.

9. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (eds.), *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016); Ulrich Lehmann, *Fashion and Materialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).