

RESPONSIBLE FASHION CONSUMPTION:
MODULAR SENSORY INTERACTION

Sue Prescott



Figure 1. Sue Prescott, *Tui Jabot*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.

Reducing clothing consumption is a current challenge facing the global fashion industry, requiring urgent action and a response to consumer desire for a more sustainable fashion future. Emerging and experienced designers, small businesses and large companies are all exploring a range of fashion processes to effect such change, from traditional patterns of action through to more radical approaches. In her Fashion Ecologies Project, Kate Fletcher discusses how slowing down the fast fashion cycle is encouraging consumers to take more responsibility for their clothing, asserting that knowledge is the key to enabling such responsibility.¹

With a desire to revitalise consumer interactions and responsibility for clothing, my installation "Fashion Perennials" was created to expose the sheer beauty of garment-making processes to consumers and to 'slow down' fashion. Asked her opinion of slow fashion, Kate Fletcher answered: "It's an opportunity for us to have our cake and eat it: to be nourished by fashion and nature."²

In this fashion installation prepared for the LUX Light Festival 2017 held in Wellington, New Zealand, components of garments grow in a forest where Lycra trees are stretched taut, reaching for the sky and decked with epiphytes constructed of pockets, collars and cuffs, while the scent of wood emanates from the bark-covered floor.

Amid the widely recognisable details of clothing, less recognisable elements of garments are suspended between the 'trees': shirt fronts, back dresses, stray plackets, lone sleeves and bodice yokes. Pieces fit together and interchange to create multiple garment options. This modular approach aims to offer garment versatility and longevity through the potential to continually reinvent clothing, thus reducing the desire to consume.

The diaphanous qualities of unbleached woven silk organza and cotton lawn fabrics used in these garment pieces enable a transformation through lighting, drawing in the gaze of the viewer. Curious stares arise from an audience as they puzzle over the lit tree columns, visually linking shapes and details, relating a piece to the human form, or imagining a garment.

During everyday interactions with clothing, rituals such as making, wearing, ironing, folding, mending and washing become integral to consumer interaction, enabling close engagement and sensory experience with clothing as it is handled. However, in a society where fast fashion and high speed prevail, there is less opportunity for sensory engagement and appreciation of clothing; making and mending have become scarce, and washing is often carried out in a washing machine rather than done by hand. Ironing and folding may be reserved for the few garments intended for a particular occasion, with fabrics that cannot be hurried into a closet. As clothes age, their beauty becomes less realised; they are relegated to trash in many instances, sent away to become rags or shipped to developing countries in need of clothing, transferring the disposal problem to another nation. In *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook*, Sandy Black comments on a significant barrier to fashion being sustainable – we do not allow clothing to become "old or unfashionable without attracting prejudice."³

The role of function in clothing is changing to address new societal needs. The interchangeability of the garment elements in "Fashion Perennials" can be applied to circumstances where transient communities require flexibility of function in clothing and living conditions. In the Better Lives Lectures 2017, the themes of "society," "nature" and "power" were explored through a fashion and clothing lens. Professor Helen Storey presented her installation "Dress for our Time," and discussed the project that she carried out with the Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan and how displaced communities are new kinds of societies.⁴

In the context of climate change, "Fashion Perennials" celebrates the everydayness of clothing while considering 'nature' in the life of the garment beyond its wearing. As an antithesis to the over-production of fashion and the multiple seasonal drops to major high-street retailers, "Fashion Perennials" opens a dialogue aimed at dissuading the perpetuation of consumer culture and the fast fashion system, and replacing them with greater inclusivity and positive change. Through organisations such as Fashion Positive, "cradle to cradle" principles of fashion aim to "transform one material at a time" in the quest to create a community of designers and suppliers to "identify, optimize and certify the building blocks of the industry."⁵

Exposing an audience to the elements of garments, offering beauty in their partial state, in their potential to become complete or in their aesthetic possibility may anchor a memory of a past garment that was made or mended, where value was added, not removed, through its aging, and where relationships with our garments helped us understand ourselves better as consumers.

Sue Prescott is a senior lecturer and programme leader (Fashion) at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. Her research and design work sits somewhere between fashion and technology, and combines themes such as sensory engagement in fashion and costume with reflections on migration, identity, sustainable fashion and technological progress. Sue exhibits locally and internationally.

- 1 <http://fashionecologies.org/>.
- 2 <http://katefletcher.com/fashion-and-sustainability-faqs/>.
- 3 Sandy Black, *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook* (London:Thames & Hudson, 2012), 69.
- 4 <http://sustainable-fashion.com/blog/the-better-lives-lectures-2017/>.
- 5 <http://www.fashionpositive.org/>.



Figure 2. Sue Prescott, *How Many Collars*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting. Exhibition view, "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.



Figure 3. Sue Prescott, *Bondage Pocket*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.



Figure 4. Sue Prescott, *Polite Pocket*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.



Figure 5. Sue Prescott, *Exhibition view*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.



Figure 6. Sue Prescott, *How Many Collars*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting, shirt pocket. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.



Figure 7. Sue Prescott, *Jelly Cuff*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting, shirt pocket. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.



Figure 8. Sue Prescott, *Poplar Collar*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting, shirt pocket. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.



Figure 9. Sue Prescott, 2017: *Llama Collar*, 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting, shirt pocket. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.



Figure 10. Sue Prescott, *Llama Collar*, [correct?] 2017, silk organza, Lycra, LED lighting, shirt pocket. "Fashion Perennials," LUX Light Festival 2017, Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph: Sue Prescott.