

REPORT ON A CLOTHING UPCYCLING SEMINAR, DUNEDIN: RESEARCHING CLOTHING UPCYCLING IN OTAGO

Kirsten Koch



Figure 1. Kerry Mackay showing her work at the Seminar. Kerry is holding her 'There's an Elephant buried in my Hometown' 2011. Found cross-stitch, cardboard suitcase, foam board, artificial turf. Behind on mannequin 'Purple Fox Coat' 2014. Retro woollen coat, vintage blanket, embroidery thread. (photo credit: Stitch Kitchen).

In this article I start by explaining the term 'clothing upcycling.' I then describe my research themes and I conclude with a summary of the eight presentations given at the Clothing Upcycling Seminar held in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's conference room on Wednesday 24 April 2019. This seminar was designed as an interactive and public engagement component of my sociology Masters research project, Clothing Upcycling in Ōtākou (Otago). My research design has received approval from Otago University's Human Ethics Committee [reference number: 18/176]. All participants mentioned below have given their written informed consent to be part of the seminar; to be identified and to have their words and photographs used for associated media coverage.

The Clothing Upcycling Seminar was held on 24 April, following iD Dunedin Fashion Week and the Dunedin Fringe Arts Festival – events that I felt 'clothing upcycling' sat somewhere between. The seminar was also intended to continue local action to commemorate Fashion Revolution Day. Fashion Revolution is a not-for-profit organisation that advocates for changes to the fashion industry to improve conditions for textile workers and help the environment. The organisation encourages thinking globally and acting locally in one's own community to celebrate local makers and to assess their working conditions and their connections to the global fashion industry. This ethos of both celebration and critique, and locating local practice within global industry and global practice, aligns with the way I had designed the research.

RESEARCH ON CLOTHING UPCYCLING

Upcycling is a fashion term used to describe the "technique of upgrading and adding value to a product or material that may otherwise be discarded."¹

For the broader research project, I interviewed around 13 local upcyclers. My research is designed to explore the under-researched area of local clothing upcycling practice. In addition to developing an overview of the field, I asked participants specific questions about how they situate their practice in relation to the global fashion industry and various fashion movements, and how they have set up their own practice and the conditions of their labour force.

The first interview focused on the participants' background in textiles and clothing upcycling and asked how they had organised their practice. The second interview was a studio visit where I asked participants about their processes and fashion alignment, taking photographs of their spaces, processes and completed designs.

Not all participants made solely wearable pieces; some used other 'slow fashion' techniques besides upcycling in their designs, and not all participants gave the name 'upcycling' to the techniques they used. I also intend to ask participants how they label their upcycling techniques, how they learnt and modified their techniques, and how they source and process upcycled materials. In this project, I do not anticipate surveying participants' entire practice, but rather seek to draw out relevant information about local upcycling, how upcycling fits within a participant's practice, seeking to represent each participant's voice in a personalised and narrative style.

As a clothing upcycler myself, the main aim of the research for me is to give participants the ability to respond academically and to directly engage with the public – a maker's perspective that honours the rich language of textiles, and the aesthetic, stylistic and pragmatic considerations that textile practitioners negotiate while creating their designs and structuring their practice or business.

For this research, I have concentrated on participants' wearable pieces with a view to discovering a clear correlation between these pieces and their making, on the one hand, and current fashion industry practice on the other: I will be asking participants to discuss their current practice, but will also focus on the upcycling processes within their practice and what they have to say about the dynamics of their practice including themes such as economics, health and well-being, precarious employment, passion work, career and life pathways, and female employment in the fashion and arts industries. These were all themes considered by Angela McRobbie in her book *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*,² which I had read while formulating the project.

Many of the participants' practices also echo social enterprise models for the creative arts industry discussed by McQuilten and White.³ The authors apply these models to the whole of the arts industry, arguing that no art piece or art-making can be unsullied or divorced from economics. So how does art happen in late-Fordism? They argue that a social enterprise model is becoming increasingly popular in terms of fitting the 'social good' that artists in particular claim, creative industry provides. In her 2017 article "Political Possibilities of Art and Fashion Based Social Enterprise,"⁴ McQuilten researched the organisational structure and guiding principles of several

Melbourne cultural textile groups. I created my interview themes in the light of the analysis provided in the three texts mentioned above.

INFLUENCE OF FASHION MOVEMENTS

In Dunedin, local upcycler designers are working in different ways that consciously or unconsciously employ eco fashion,⁵ anti-fashion,⁶ slow fashion⁷ and post-humanist approaches to fashion.⁸ Some of these themes were explored in the 2017 fashion number of the Otago Polytechnic journal *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics* (thescope.org). Terms such as the death of fashion, post-fashion and fashion entropy reflect questions about how long the fashion industry can sustain itself at its current accelerated pace.⁹

With culturally exploitative practices and appropriation, and often limited representations of cultural 'difference',¹⁰ these fashion issues and their associated theories prompt questions such as: Is the 'fashion' component about the article itself and how it was made? What of the maker and the craft? Where does the fashion design process sit and who benefits? Are textile materials simply materials? And how do you ethically source fabric and manufacture garments in an economically viable way? Are the structures of the fashion industry and late capitalism significantly shaping the way that fashion designers, artists and practitioners create and exist?

Fashion advertising has always utilised the idea of 'the look,' and the slow fashion movement,¹¹ and subsequently upcycling, could perhaps be viewed, in part, as refocusing on the authenticity of 'the look.' Here the wearer owns the ethics behind the manufacture of their garment and the aesthetic decisions they employ when creating their 'look.' The slow fashion movement has reinstated the ready-to-wear ethos whereby wearers seek out vintage articles and meld them together with imagination and an artistic eye. Yet the movement is also an acknowledgement of the time it takes to design garments critically and to make them in a way that is responsive to materials, aesthetics and form. It has similarities with the haute couture ethos of valuing clothes, the craftsmanship behind their design, and the material and environmental costs behind their manufacture. This sensitivity elevates the status of the wearer through their affiliation with the values embedded in their threads. This is a call made by Lidewij Edelkoort in her manifesto, *Anti-Fashion: A Manifesto for the Next Decade*¹² – yet Edelkoort also calls for more everyday wear and the breakdown of upper-class, high fashion ideals in favour of a younger and more inclusive, democratised fashion face.

Two major public events organised for Fashion Revolution Week, which took place in the Octagon, Dunedin, in 2016 and 2017, are described in Fiona Clements' article "Unstitched: Local Fashion Revolution Dunedin."¹³ Fiona Clements is the local Fashion Revolution representative in Dunedin. Stitch Kitchen is a trust set up under the name Just Atelier in 2015 by Fiona Clements and Fiona Jenkin. Desi Liversage has also played a key role in Stitch Kitchen and many other participants have been involved in its activities. Stitch Kitchen promotes public awareness of Fashion Revolution Day by promoting local designers, holding classes and engaging in community advocacy for the improvement of the social and environmental conditions found in the global fashion industry.

CONDITIONS OF LOCAL AND GLOBAL TEXTILE WORK

While textile workers around the world experience harsher labour conditions than are found in the New Zealand industry, the 2019 Tearfund report on ethical fashion¹⁴ and New Zealand designers' media responses to it indicate that the local industry is barely limping along. So what are the creative and employment possibilities in the local industry? And what is the structure of the global textile and fashion industry? Between maker and designer, and within the non-transparent manufacturing structures we support through our business practices as makers/designers, and also in our fashion consumption, in the manufacturing models we support, there is room to ask: What can we do to subvert the industry through mending and self-ornament and by supporting ethical craftsmanship and buying quality, buying arty.

WHY PARTICIPANTS MAKE

The participants in the study group are making for a variety of reasons. Many have their work for sale, some make for themselves, make for others, exchange pieces, make to show as wearable arts, as fine arts, or as sustainable fashion and a form of community political action. They are making, teaching others to make, working as part of a group, communicating and promoting work online, connecting with other global upcycling and slow fashion movements online, advocating for slow fashion and the arts, and capacity-building in the local community.

Some participants conceive of their practice in a spiritual or philosophical way, wanting to make and connect to nature, living a simple, more peaceful lifestyle, weaving from the llama's back, or simply being able to slip away into the meditative, calming and simultaneously exciting world of fabric, texture and form. Others conceive of their making as an overt political and economic activity, both at the macro level in their critique of the fashion industry, and also at the micro level in terms of the conditions of their employment, creating a sustainable ethos in their practice, and being aware of the supports and restraints they experience in sustaining their practice and their need to sustain themselves economically while practicing textile or clothing upcycling.

These two perspectives are not exclusive, however, and most participants identified spiritual, material and ideological drivers for their practice. The idea of sustaining one's business economically as a clothing designer in New Zealand, following a craft maker model,¹⁵ was discussed by Ariane Bray in the 2017 *Scope* fashion number.¹⁶

One aim of my research is to locate 'upcycler' designers in the history of New Zealand and Dunedin fashion and garment manufacturing. I also compare participants' thoughts on working conditions alongside other local slow fashion and craft-maker ideas. At this point in my research, I am bringing the literature reviews and the first interviews together, so my analysis is still some way from finding its final form.



Figure 2. Kirsten Koch's Seminar display table. Eco dyed and printed work on table and eco-dyed and nature printed tank top (2017-2019). Upcycled merino singlet previously owned by designer's mother, dyed silk panel stitched with vintage silk embroidery thread with poly-cotton machine thread mend. Photo credit: Stitch Kitchen.

CLOTHING UPCYCLING SEMINAR, DUNEDIN, 24 APRIL 2019

The seminar was a great success, with eight local Ōtākou textile practitioners, artists and designers discussing their practice and the garments they create using second-hand fabrics and clothing as a base material. Summaries of their contributions are given below.

Kirsten Koch

I showed PowerPoint images of my earlier textile artwork using upcycled materials and spoke about my connection to place, nature and family, all important features of my work. I mentioned my enjoyment of dress-ups, a practice I began early, making my own jewellery and adapting op-shop clothing as a young teen. My presentation moved on to showing images of my recent eco-dye, eco-print and nature prints on second-hand fabric and clothing. The eco-dye and eco-print works use a direct dye process using native and exotic flowers, leaves and plant material to create colours and outlines of the material forms. These are printed onto second-hand protein-based fabrics and clothes. My nature prints are created using raw plant and animal materials like kereru and seagull feathers, grass seeds and leaves, which are used as a resist under a silk screen ready to print onto fabric. I have been printing directly onto clothing, patching on prints and also nature-printing onto eco-dyed pieces. While I want to trial some more structural designs myself, I also like the idea of working with someone with more tailoring experience on joint projects. I have enjoyed taking eco-dye/eco-print workshops and have been working on a series of *Love Blankets* or *Love Rugs*, with the idea of working on commission for groups and families to make commemorative pieces for a birth, wedding/union or death, using the client's own flowers or foliage and fabric or blankets as materials.



Figure 3. Elena Poletti's seminar display table. Examples of Elena's work reusing and repurposing fabric and clothing.
Photo credit: Stitch Kitchen.



Figure 4. Close-up of Kerry Mackay's *'There's an Elephant buried in my Hometown'* 2011.
Found cross-stitch, cardboard suitcase, foam board, artificial turf.

Elena Poletti

Elena Poletti was second to speak. She shared the origins of her ideas and showed some of the eclectic vintage fabric finds which she has carefully brought together in order to preserve the glorious quality and previous life of the source pieces. Elena spoke about the 'play' and juxtaposition of materials and moods that inspire her making. With a career in European languages and a curiosity to try new techniques, Elena works with what she has at hand, re-injecting an edge of glamour to do her materials justice. She finds inspiration in being yet another person to hold the fabric and continue its story of care and human hands working with fine stitches.

Elena finished her talk by reading a poem about the power and the personally restorative qualities of working among her textiles late at night. I think I counted four changes in stole as Elena modelled her designs throughout her talk. Her studio, Atelier Jeux d'Esprit (second floor, Queens Building, 109 Princess Street), is like being inside the head of the owner. In a tightly packed room, small pathways emerge through the intriguing and ornate fabrics, clothing, homewares and vintage sewing equipment. Elena has collected vintage fabrics and items in her travels throughout the UK and Europe and her knowledge of their material history feeds into her artful pieces. This European quirkiness is continued through her interest in Klimt, Jugendstil, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, helping her find ways to reconceptualise and reutilise objects and materials, making them into artful and often obscure new forms.

Kerry Mackay

Following Elena, we had Kerry Mackay from Dublin Bay. Kerry used her classroom 'show and tell' skills to give a personal and visually engaging presentation. Kerry has spent many years teaching and overseeing children's arts education and was one of the art teachers at Portobello School when I was at school there. Kerry presented a

collection of her 'reskinned' bags, her coats with blanket fox-fur collars, her reskinned sheep skull trophy and her taxidermy lamb wearing a slinky skin and a little woollen bonnet. Kerry also showed one of her *So obviously Rex* reskinned handbags and some of her reskinned suitcases. Kerry talked about her work primarily as a teacher and an art teacher, but always as a maker; at this point in her life, she has the balance set towards more making and less teaching. She still enjoys the teaching, though, and has a business called *theartdept* which she runs with Pamela Brown. Kerry talked about her childhood memories growing up in Riversdale in rural Southland, showing her bag *There's an Elephant Buried in my Hometown*, referring to the time when a circus elephant had to be put down. Kerry talked about the influence of international female artists such as Yayoi Kusama and also about sourcing the cotton gloves she used for the yellow-and-black-spotted glove bag from her homage series *I Applaud Myself*. Kerry showed the audience items such as her purple fox coat and, with her *theartdept* suitcase titled *Keeping the Wolf from the Door*, she demonstrated how she reworks second-hand half-completed tapestries with the addition of a wolf motif and some colour and drama, and then reskins them onto vintage suitcases, handbags and trophies.



Figure 5. Simone Montgomery, Front view of *Waipunarangi*, 2018 Woolon Fashion Awards, wool, polyester and chicken wire. Photo credit: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 6. Kezka Bizarre's seminar display table, including *The melted stereo T-shirt*. (2014). T-shirt sleeves with reutilised t-shirt print.

Simone Montgomery

Simone Montgomery presented next. Simone acknowledged her Māori whakapapa of Kai Tahu, Kati Mamoe and Waitaha. Simone lives in Port Chalmers. She outlined her recent works and explored her love of clothing as 'costume' or 'role play'. She has distinct fashion interests including high fashion, as exemplified in her participating in race-day fashion, and steampunk. She draws on various aspects of her whakapapa and lived experience. Simone is excited about the ability of fabric and clothing to layer meaning and create juxtapositions. She uses upcycled fabrics extensively in her work.

One of the images Simone showed was her work *Waipunarangi*, which she entered in the 2018 Woolon competition and which was displayed at the seminar. Simone shared stories of her entry into the world of textiles through making dolls' clothes and then through her experience of working in the rag trade in Dunedin in the 1980s, at the height of New Zealand's clothing production. She shared details about Dunedin's involvement in devising the early textile industry's 'sweating laws' and helping change the regulations under which the national textile industry operated.

Simone supported my introductory comments about the historical significance of Dunedin in any discussion of the ethics of the textile and fashion industries. The site of poor conditions for textile workers in the late 1800s, Dunedin became a pioneer in improving the New Zealand industry. Dunedin saw the birth of the first women's trade union, the Tailoresses Union, in 1889 and this union, along with the efforts of Reverend Rutherford Waddell, were instrumental in improving conditions through the Factories Act of 1891.¹⁷ These laws and conditions are once more in question with respect to today's textile industry practice.

Kezka Zeitgeist Bizarre

Kezka spoke about her early art practice as a street performer and musician making album covers and posters, writing lyrics and singing and making upcycled outfits for her stage performances. Kez has a large body of painting and drawing which may filter into her textile work even more, thanks to a new printer:

Kez moved on to talk about her past work in her 'real job,' cleaning. The heavy repetitive work involved has hit her body hard, leading her to a change of focus in both the artforms she works in and monitoring her health, working within her capacities on different days and different times of Day. Kez has started an online business, Of Cats and Unicorns, where she sells her upcycled garments and her hand-spun and hand-dyed alpaca and booties knitted with her spinning. Kez lives in Kaitangata, where she has been part of local textile groups and has given spinning demonstrations at the local hall. Kez has worked with a local second-hand shop making fabric bags from second-hand curtains for a 'plastic-free' initiative run by the shop.

Kezka spoke without her work or notes, using her experience in theatre to personally connect with the audience about her path through life and her passion for fabric and creating with upcycled fabrics. Kez talked about the connection between capitalism and industrialism and the disenchantment of the world – no such things as fairies, elves or even unicorns. The name of her business, Of Cats and Unicorns, reflects Kezka's reinvisioning of her life, taking pride in her work and creativity, and encouraging others to believe in themselves and their personal creativity. She does not want to live a repressed life as part of society's 'machine' – rather she wants to imbue life with a sense of personal magic.

Desi Liversage

Desi Liversage, owner of the label Altered Eco, was our next speaker; first in the busy afternoon shift. Desi lived in South Africa, then Rotorua, but has called Dunedin home for the last 20 years, where she has worked on her MFA, entering competitions, exhibiting and organising and running her business.

Desi displayed and spoke to her work while discussing her business approach, which involves three different lines of garment catering to various budgets. Items with a small addition of pockets and a knitted toy on, say, a child's garment, she is happy to sell for a low price. The next line in the range has a greater level of time invested in individual pieces and the prices are fair, but reflect the extra time and attention. Then with her top-of-the-line work, where Desi has designed the whole piece, or has spent considerable time embroidering the garment, the price reflects this increased attention to detail.

Desi talked about her move to designing clothes as a way of trying to make some income from her work as a textile artist. She talked about her ability to spot nice fabrics at a distance, on the basis that sourcing superior fabrics is the main advantage of second-hand purchasing – although the shelves are largely full of disposed fast fashion.



Figure 7. Desi Liversage *Denim unicorn jacket*. (2017).
Second-hand denim jacket, embroidery threads,
metallic fabrics and lei petals.
Photo credit: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 8. Fiona Clements' seminar display. Dress at the front
from *Waste What* collection. Local manufacturer's
Adventure Outfitter's merino and cotton off-cuts.
Photo credit: Pam McKinlay.

Desi's rationale is that if she is going to put time and effort into working with these materials, she wants to start with quality base materials.

Desi showed her *Divest Dress* and told the story of its creation. She had had a slow day sitting on a clothing stall next to an Oil-free Otago stall at a local market and began embroidering the logo on their pamphlet – a tairoa (albatross) – on a black 1970s retro woollen dress from her stall. She then devised her own stitched representation of an oil slick in black and grey thread.

Fiona Clements

Next we had Fiona Clements, Pākehā, Kai Tahu, Clan Gordon, craftivist, zero-waste textile practitioner: Fiona, who grew up in Waitati, gave a PowerPoint presentation focusing on about her recent collections. She discussed her favourite jersey (which she was wearing), explaining how her grandmother dyed the wool and her mother knitted it for her and keeps patching both arms – and is even remaking one entirely reinforced arm for the coveted upcycled item. Fiona trained through Fashion Design at Otago Polytechnic and she has also recently completed the Graduate Diploma in Sustainable Practice. Her aim has always been to advocate for less waste in the fashion industry and to make zero-waste, ecologically sourced and upcycled designs under her label *Senorita AweSUMO*. Fiona Clements co-runs *Stitch Kitchen* with Fiona Jenkin where they run sewing classes, weekly community events and one-off or yearly events.



Figure 9. Fiona Jenkin. *Red cotton vintage velvet dress*. Upcycled damaged vintage dress.
Photo credit: Pam McKinlay.

Fiona's "Te Warehouse Whakapau – War on Want" collection, shown as a capsule at iD Dunedin Fashion Week 2014, is made from manufacturers' off-cuts and items upcycled from local landfill. This collection spoke to clothing consumption habits and presented an alternative image of what fashion could be. The piece she showed was made from flag bags from The Warehouse and incorporates a long dress train and a cake made from plastic Warehouse toys. Another work, illustrated here (Figure 8) is Fiona's *Waste What*, designed for a show called Fashioning the Future, organised by the Centre for Sustainable Fashion at the London College of Fashion in 2010.

Fiona Jenkin

To conclude the day, Fiona Jenkin spoke to her PowerPoint presentation. Fiona is the second core member of Stitch Kitchen. Fiona told the story of when she and Fiona Clements met, many years ago, discussed what they wanted to do and their ethical approach and decided to set up the Just Atelier Trust, now renamed Stitch Kitchen. Fiona showed photographs illustrating her upbringing in an alternative family marked by embracing sustainability, living thriftily, making things for themselves and encouraging the children to make, too. This background engrained her present outlook which sees 'living from the scraps' as the glass being half-full: "You can have anything, if you make it yourself." Fiona's mother often helps Stitch Kitchen sort their fabric room, which is full of folded and colour-sorted pieces of donated fabric. Like her mother, Fiona trained in textile science and then moved into image consultancy, where she taught others how to make the most of the items in their wardrobe, possibly re-tailoring them or simply mixing and matching to create the look they wanted. Although she also worked for many years in retail, Fiona is very happy investing her energy in this textile-based social enterprise. She loves the sense of community and the vast potential for upcycling and salvaging fabrics. Fiona showed the audience a red velvet dress (figure 9) which had been hacked at the front fastening; she had designed a sash from the same fabric that covered the front elegantly. Fiona has an interest in tailoring and enjoys taking sewing classes for the Bags for Good project which she initiated and continues to run.

Kirsten Koch is a Dutch Pākehā who was born in Dunedin spending her childhood on a native tree farm in Portobello, Dunedin. Kirsten holds an MFA in Textiles, an MA in sociology and anthropology, a graduate diploma in indigenous development and a post-graduate diploma in anthropology. Kirsten's interests include the intersection between clothing/culture and identity politics. She is particularly interested in the potential clothing and adornment offer to reflect on and express the multiple aspects of our overlapping identities. She is also interested in the material reality of art and culture construction and examining the creative yet underfunded and often under-exposed realities of local creative practitioners.

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