

Fashion, gear and clothing: toward an ecology of clothing

Over six billion humans – and pretty much every one wearing a garment or ten.

Kate Fletcher on where do sustainable designers, textile artists and clothesmakers begin with dressing for life

If you imagine how numerous we are and multiply that by the number of outfits we have, that makes many billion garments ... and yet how much do we know about our clothes? What can we say about the relationships we have with the contents of our wardrobe? What do we know about our garments' principles or integrity? Is there such a thing as a garment that encourages us to engage, to participate, to be resilient? Is there a garment that promotes an ecological awareness that transforms our relationships with materials and our experience of the world? In this piece, I introduce new ideas about clothing and fashion which question not only the status quo in mainstream industry but also that in the eco-clothing sector. Contained within is a new and significant challenge for us all: the drawing up of alternative visions and priorities for how we see, relate to and participate with our clothes.

The relationship between the textile and clothing industries, the fashion sector and ecological thinking is an uneasy one. Evidence suggests that these industries are among the most environmentally damaging, judged on a par with the chemical industry¹ and that their core features, which include fast-changing trends, fashion obsolescence and premature product replacement are anathema to ecological qualities of permanence, lightness and connectedness.

And yet there is another way of clothing ourselves. A way that is both instinct and knowledge-driven, that is based in harmonising interests and that centres around natural systems, people, technology and design.



People Tree's summer 2005 children's clothing

You can see this way beginning to emerge in the fully biodegradable Climatex furnishing fabric,² in Sigrid Smits' velvet upholstery designed to age with dignity, for the Eternally Yours project³ and in Fair Trade garments produced by People Tree.⁴ But this is just a start.