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Clare Press's "Wardrobe Crisis" Highlights Issues of Sustainability in Fashion



By Timo Rissanen
On Wednesday February 28th, the third day of our climate injustice disruption throughout the university, the Tishman Environment and Design Center and the School of Fashion at Parsons hosted a conversation to mark the US publication of Clare Press's book Wardrobe Crisis. Press is the Sustainability Editor-at-Large of

[Vogue Australia](#), to our knowledge the first such appointment at a major fashion magazine. For the past year Press has hosted an excellent [podcast](#) also titled Wardrobe Crisis, discussing a broad range of issues connected to fashion, including [ocean plastic with Dr. Jennifer Lavers](#) and [climate change with Professor Tim Flannery](#). At our event Press was in conversation with [Kimberly Jenkins](#), part-time faculty at Parsons and an alumna of the MA Fashion Studies program. In Fall 2016, Kim debuted the undergraduate course Fashion and Race at Parsons, examining the implications of the social constructs of race in fashion history, business and image-making. She is a current recipient of The New School's Innovations in Education Fund for her project, 'Fashion and Race: Mapping a Decentralized Approach to Fashion History and Design Practice'. Jenkins will present the culmination of this work in fall 2018. Fashion is inseparable from climate change: [one estimate](#) has our annual global fashion production at 150 billion garments per year. Each of those garments has [a carbon footprint](#). Most of the machinery used to create these garments and their materials is still powered by fossil fuels. That points to the first urgent task: the fashion industry needs to transition to clean, renewable energy to power all of its

operations. While a complex task in itself, it will not be enough. We need to produce less and consume less. Evidence certainly suggests we need less. [One study in the Netherlands](#) published in 2016 estimated that a third of all clothing that is produced never gets worn. While the number may not be as high, even one percent of 150 billion is an enormous amount of clothing. Based on what I have seen over the years, 5-10% would not surprise me. For example, recently a number of brands including H&M were found to be [incinerating new, unworn clothes](#) at a plant in Denmark. This is not solely a fashion problem but a larger one connected to the dominant economic dogma, to create profit at any cost, to grow at any cost. We have not yet dealt with one of the greatest untruths of our time: we pretend that the global economy can grow indefinitely on a finite planet, and we operate according to this pretense. We make waste of precious resources and slowly (and sometimes quickly) [we replace other life with us](#). Based on our collective actions, it is easy to argue that we think of ourselves as more valuable, more important, than other life. I invite you to ask yourself, why do we consider us more valuable than other life? Why are humans more valuable than the Christmas Island Pipistrelle, a small bat, or the Baiji, the Yangtze

river dolphin? Both are mammals that have become extinct in my lifetime as a direct result of human activity. Unfortunately many more will follow. I say this to make the point that fashion as a global system is an inherent part of the capitalist system that makes waste of resources and life on the planet. That includes human life: we are nearing the fifth anniversary of [Rana Plaza](#). Rana Plaza was a building near Dhaka, Bangladesh that housed several garment factories. On April 24th, 2013, it collapsed killing 1,138 people. Many more were permanently injured and children were left orphaned. Since then smaller yet [fatal garment factory accidents](#) have occurred in various countries. This is important for us to acknowledge: our fashion consumption is currently based on a system that values our - consumers' - lives more than those who make our clothing. The humans behind the sewing machines are seen as disposable; whether we lose a few or 1,138, they are easily replaced, hidden behind abstract terminology such as 'externalized costs'. The loss of life makes little difference to the global system, it makes little difference to profits, it makes little difference to shareholder dividends. We haven't been paying the real cost of clothing for a few decades now: the 'we' is both us consumers

(although I prefer to think of myself as a citizen first; try it on) and the brands we buy from. This is on us, to pay for garment factories that are housed in structurally safe buildings with sound fire codes. It is on us to pay enough such that every garment worker can afford to feed themselves and their families and be able to provide an education for their children. We ought to pay a living wage to the people who make our clothes. Our fashion consumption must not be subsidized by the lives of others; that includes the living environments of others and non-human life. Bangladesh is currently a major supplier of our fashion, and due to its low-lying geography, [a country slated to suffer greatly](#) from rising sea levels. We must support the less privileged in the face of these challenges that mostly we have caused. We must rethink economics completely. In my teaching I have found Kate Raworth, a British economist, particularly helpful; [Raworth's doughnut economics](#) provides a framework for economics that accounts for planetary systems, and all of the planet's life, including people. Apparel and fashion brands such as Patagonia and Eileen Fisher are showing by example how business can be a force for positive change in the world: that it is possible to be profitable without exploiting people or constrained

resources. As for us, sustainability should never be approached solely through a narrow lens of shopping. We, as citizens, can lead by example: swap clothes with friends, repair and customize your clothing, and buy second-hand if you need to buy something. To find out more about the issues, The New School Library will have two signed copies of *Wardrobe Crisis*. Keep an eye out for them as well as for courses taught by Kim Jenkins. From the Tishman Environment and Design Center, thank you Clare and Kim for the engaging conversation! [Timo Rissanen](#) *is the Assistant Professor of Fashion Design and Sustainability at Parsons School of Design. He currently serves as the School Associate Dean of the School of Constructed Environments, and he is one of the Associate Directors of the Tishman Environment and Design Center. He was born in Finland and trained as a fashion designer at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) in Australia. Rissanen completed a practice-based PhD on zero waste fashion design at UTS in 2013.*

