Design, Dilemma, Degrowth — Degrowth will be painful, therefore it must be made sexy

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#fashion #sustainability #participation #perception #degrowth
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The impact of fashion industry on the environment is evident and manifest in its sheer numbers. The industry accounts for 17–20 percent of global industrial water pollution (Kant 2012). It also contributes between four and ten percent of global carbon emissions (Sadowski et al. 2021). The fashion industry can therefore be labeled as a 'climate killer' whose overproduction is consuming our resources on a global scale.

The destructive path of creating even more garments for a saturated mass market can be seen as an allegory for the pitfalls of the capitalist system: there cannot be infinite growth, especially when it comes to ecological resources. There are already more garments in existence than could possibly be consumed globally. The recent growth in sustainability awareness and the slowly emerging legal requirements in product and materials production offer hope for change. Nevertheless, textile mass-production, reframed as 'sustainable', is still flooding the planet with too much clothing instead of educating customers to change their consumer behavior.

In searching for solutions to the dilemma of a post-growth society, academic responses such as 'ecosocialism' (see: Kern 2019) are limited to economic aspects and control mechanisms. Most of these theories fail to consider the consumer (human) as an emotional being. Consumers are subject to fears regarding limitations of their lifestyle choices between self-expression and identity-building, as well as threats to their wealth.

As humans, we desire to stage ourselves (compare: 'staging value', Böhme 2014: 27) and 'enhance' our lives by acquiring new, updated or on-trend products, as described by Gernot Böhme in the book 'Aesthetic Capitalism' (Böhme 2014). Calling on this desire and the systematic logic of fashion as a system of paradoxes in between identification and individuality, distinction and imitation, and its binding nature of the temporary (Esposito, 2011), it can ask be asked: How can fashion as a symbol of fast consumption and superficiality be used to create ecological awareness? And how can it take part in a process of transformation towards a more sustainable future?

Aiming to explore ways of overcoming the fear of 'less', the Artistic Research PhD thesis 'Expanded Semantic Levels in Fashion—Opportunities for a Performative Interconnection between an Individual Immersive Experience and Fashion' is investigating ways of interlinking academic ideas with artistic and performative experiences. It will do this through situations of individual reflection (e. g., of one's own habits) and artistic encounters with physical (fashion) artefacts.

The underlying premise for the thesis is that a change in consumer habits and behavior must ultimately go hand in hand with a change in perceptual behavior, in which active participation replaces unconscious consumption. Earlier approaches indicate that fashion and artistic experience have the potential to make this transformation, a different kind of consciousness and – what Kate Soper (compare Soper 2019) calls an 'alternative hedonism' – more accessible and attractive through undogmatic (because open for individual interpretation), low-threshold (because it does not demand for academic reading skills) and intrinsic ways of showing alternatives, as well as opening up the discourse to a wide audience by including the academic and non-academic world.

Building on these assumptions, and based on exemplary case studies, this artistic PhD project uses fashion as a tool and interface to generate a sustainable consumption model. This is developed in the context of the fashion project 'Church Of The Hand' (COTH), which creates immersive rooms of experience that lie between fashion, installation, sound, taste, haptics and performance. Within these rooms, active audience participation and a staged concentration on certain processes focus on the appreciation of often overseen aspects of everyday life, and the empowering effect of making.

According to Dengel, "Fashion has not yet found its way into the canon of either political or cultural education. Under the conditions of progressive aestheticization and staging, knowledge of social sign systems such as fashion should become a component of democratic personality formation" (Dengel 2014: 1). Communicating ideas on degrowth through aesthetic means, such as fashion, can provide options for transformation, education and the mediation of knowledge. The case studies will be conducted in rural and urban cultural, educational or public venues, evaluated ethnographically and announced on site as well as on the website churchofthehand.com.

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