

Shanna Spiering
Closet Connect
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Artist Statement

Shanna Spiering is a multidisciplinary artist working in the Portland metropolitan area of Oregon, which, respectively, lay on the unceded land of the Multnomah, Wasco, Cowlitz, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Bands of Chinook, Tualatin, Kalapuya, Molalla, and several other Indigneous peoples. She received her Bachelor's Degree in General Fine Arts from the Pacific Northwest College of Art of Willamette University.

Shanna's work takes on a personal, intimate approach. She is interested in exploring how we perceive the world and ourselves. Shanna's work is concerned with the radical interconnectedness of life and working in an ecologically conscious manner. She not only wants to recognize and foster our inherent connections, but honor and celebrate them. Joy and love is a foundational component of how her work operates.

Thesis Proposal

Intro:

Wearing clothing is a part of our everyday lives. It is something that can easily go unnoticed, but these choices we make, no matter how consciously, affect the way we feel and live. Within our capitalist driven society, companies jump on the opportunity to sell us clothing, in hopes of feeding into an ideal way of being. This reality is ugly and harmful, and severs us from connection, instead feeding into an alienating system. The project I am proposing involves repurposing unused clothing from other people, and transforming them through various methods in order to give back to a particular person, in hopes of creating an intentional connection to our way of wearing and consuming clothing.

Line of Inquiry:

I wish to investigate connections that can be made through an act. I also want to challenge the current ideals in fashion culture and the fashion industry. This project will look at clothing as objects, and as a canvas in which to create. What psychological disposition do we have while wearing clothing? How do our choices in clothing influence our experience? How does the way our clothing was created and distributed affect this? How does capitalism contribute to feelings of alienation? How does consumerism function? Specifically, in the fashion industry, what effect does consumerism and fast fashion have on us? What does this mindset consist of? How can we combat the harsh reality of fast fashion? How can we instead foster connection, love, and self expression?

Project Description:

In order to investigate these questions, I will be collecting articles of clothing, transforming them, and giving to a specific person. I do not wish to construct clothing, rather use existing material. This is an important aspect of the ecological side of my inquiry, as I do not want to create waste, rather recycle what is already present. I plan to modify 5 pieces of clothing, for 5 different people, purely for feasibility reasons. The collaborative component is essential. The pieces are meant to be a personalized and intentional result of close interaction with another person, whom the clothing will be given to.

Extensive documentation of the interactions will be recorded, as well as the final set of attire, which will stand both individually and as a collective. I will photograph the piece of clothing by itself, as well as being worn by the individual, with their consent. It is important as to how I arrived at the final pieces, so documents will be shown to the audience depicting the whole process.

Materials/Processes/Techniques:

I will gather clothing case by case. For example, someone could offer a pair of pants they no longer want, that could be given to a different participant. I also plan to use some articles of clothing from my own closet to rehome. Within this project, clothing becomes an object, perhaps almost found objects.

I will be utilizing embroidery, patchworking, beading, and painting onto fabric. I want to be as sustainable and conscientious as possible in my material sourcing and process. I will be mostly using materials I already have, such as beads, fabric swatches, clothing, and embroidery string. I have a number of my own pieces of clothing that I intend to practice and test with.

The process will begin with close communication with the selected person. We will

meet either virtually or in person. With their permission, I will record the meeting, in order to be more engaged in the conversation than with recording notes. I will have questions ready to refer to, but I also want there to be an open conversational tone. I will allow the conversation to develop and diverge, according to what grows out of it. I want to understand their own relationship with clothing and their personal choices and preferences. How do they make their choices? Where do they buy their clothes? What is important to them?

I will use the information gained from this meeting in order to understand how I will transform the piece for them. I want the pieces to have a very illustrative quality; each piece will be involved, with great attention to detail. The imagery will be a reflection of what I came to understand from the conversation. Perhaps, they wear a lot of a particular color, or there is a certain symbol that resonates with them. The way in which I am adorning and altering the pieces will be deliberate. I want to emphasize the creativity and self expression of an individual.

Context:

Connection and acting with love are integral in how I situate myself in the world and within my artistic practice. The connections being made through the transfer of material and ideas are central to the project. I find great gratification in making things for other people. I wish to communicate with each participant to create an individualized gift that speaks to their own personality.

Sustainability and having an ecological perspective in every action is very important to me, as well. As it stands, the fashion industry is a huge contributor to waste, unethical working situations, and global warming. Fast fashion, being termed for the false need to quickly and cheaply mass produce “trendy” items at the expense of workers and the environment, is a

dominant business model within the industry. These ideals are something I want to bring attention to and challenge. I wish this project to bring about a different mindset surrounding clothing and fashion. I believe clothing can be very personal and have an altering effect on the wearer, while not having to cause harm. This approach goes against consumerism fueling fast fashion.

There are many contemporary creators partaking in similar upcycling practices online through various media platforms, such as Etsy and Depop. There is also a rise of people reselling their clothing through these apps. This is an important shift from throwing unwanted clothing away or selling to second hand stores, such as Goodwill, as these places often do not resell a large percentage of the clothing, and thus they end up in landfills or are otherwise “disposed” of. These platforms are an interesting subject when considering connection. There is a direct exchange happening between the buyer and the seller, despite the use of technology. Specifically with Depop, you are often conversing with the seller before buying items. In my own experience with the app, the sellers will often include hand written notes thanking you, and sometimes extra gifts.

With this direct contact, it is an opportunity for artists to extend their creations through their own control. Many artists will invite people to message them for custom designs. A few people who have gained a following on Etsy are Natalia Ridnaya and Vered Koren Hirshnzon, both of whom largely paint and patchwork denim jeans and jackets. Although they are largely seeking profit, there are similar lines of thought and material consideration present as the ones in this project.

Another artist of interest is Nicole McLaughlin. McLaughlin is a designer who

creates garments out of used material like old clothing, packaging, and handheld electric fans. She also runs a program that reaches out to companies in order to relocate their unused material to young design students. There is emphasis on using what is already here, and what would otherwise become a further problem.

Summary:

Within this project, I will transform existing articles of clothing, through a variety of methods, in order to challenge mindsets of consumerism within fashion and instead focus on connection, creativity, and self expression. The project will function on an individual basis, with a specific piece of clothing given to a selected person. These interactions fuel the project, as the connection and awareness being fostered is an essential basis of the process and the finished piece. This intentional approach to consuming and wearing clothing fights the harmful and alienating practices of our current reigning system.

Abstract

This work, titled *Closet Connect*, is an exploration of redesigning garments to foster our inherent connections. *Closet Connect* honors the radical interconnectedness of life and works within this framework through a system of collaboration with 4 people, in which a strong foundational relationship has been built. Within this project, 4 garments are upcycled in relation to the individual collaborator, showcasing their personality and individuality. This work is positioned against the mindless consumerism that fast fashion feeds off of. Instead, the practices are focused on a slower, more intentional approach that is ecologically conscious and grounded in gratitude. Longterm, the goals of this project are to shift the focus and ways we consume and interact with fashion, creating a playful, intentional experience that is aware of the reverberations our decisions bring and the possibilities they hold.

Oral Thesis Defense

Thank you all so much for being here and for sharing this experience with me. I am going to share with you my thesis project, which is titled *Closet Connect*. First, I want to start with a land acknowledgment.

The Portland Metro area lay on the unceded land of the Multnomah, Wasco, Cowlitz, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Bands of Chinook, Tualatin, Kalapuya, Molalla, and many other Indigenous peoples. These Indigenous communities have long cared for and honored the land. Due to forced removal, they are currently a part of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Chinook Nation.

I also recognize that this recognition is simply a starting point in decolonizing and giving reparation to the damage and hardship that Indigenous people have faced and still do today. It is important to be mindful of where you stand today and how you came to be here.

I now ask you to take this mindfulness and consider the objects in front of you. You see four garments, alongside four collages. My work over the years has bounced around a lot over in terms of material and medium, as my General Fine Arts curriculum so lovingly allows me to do. I have found that this experimentation in material is beneficial in who I am as an artist. I enjoy being able to try new processes and grow and challenge myself, in this regard. I implement my ideas into different modes of creating, in this case into clothing.

One growing constant that my work has taken on, is the concern for the radical interconnectedness of life. As humans, we are inherently creative beings connected to one another and all in this universe. This is a beautiful thing - something that I want to explore and dwell in and create within, something that I feel compelled to do.

It is integral in how I situate myself within the world, and within my artistic practice, that I act from this place of connection, from a place of love and gratitude, that every action and thought I breathe be guided by these values.

I would like to share some of the goals I wrote down at the beginning of this project. They were (and are) as follows: fostering connection to each person and the earth; creating, connecting, and communicating from a place of love; to be mindful of my own role and how I am operating with love; to work against the mindlessness and harm that consumerism causes; to repair the harm that was done to the people and the earth.

Clothing has the wondrous potential of being creative and illicit play and imagination. It holds the opportunity to create a richer connection with the natural world and the beings that inhabit it.

Clothing is also important to these inquiries, for the ways in which it currently *does not* do this. Many aspects of our lives may take us out of this place of connection, and separate us from these relationships and values. In the modern, western world, capitalism is one of these sources of disconnect. Many might argue that it is *just* an economic system, but it has seeped into our lives in a multitude of ways. It is a harmful system- one that wreaks havoc to the natural world and groups of people. Much of the time, we may be divided by physical space, but we are never away from the heart of it.

As part of this project, I chose to conduct a paper alongside creating these garments. Part of this process was digging in and researching how the clothing industry functions, and understanding the greater whole in which we are participating in, and myself within this project.

I am going to share some of this research with you, but if you would like to indulge yourself in more information, there are also copies of this paper. It is important to understand the origins, histories, and inner workings of systems we participate in.

One of the ways that helps capitalism to function is this very disconnect. As consumers, we are left out of the production process, and often kept in the dark. We enter buildings and everything is already there.

Contrary to popular belief, Macy's does not have a hidden printer in the back of the store. Although, when you step into a store and see racks, and racks of clothing, it can be hard to even imagine that they have ever seen somewhere other than those walls, and that they have in fact had a long journey before being in front of you. While we are sifting through these racks, detached from their journey to us, behind the scenes a myriad of ecological and social devastations are occurring.

This is not to say that your clothing is evil, either. There are tons of businesses that have multitudes of ways of producing and making. This critic, however, focuses on the corporate level- on the fast fashion industry, because this has become the *dominant* business model and the disaster that it reaps overshadows the concern of others. Fast fashion is the product, the extension of capitalism within the garment making industry. It is a neoliberal model that fuels itself on profit over all.

The United States outsources 97% of their garments. While this doesn't have to be bad, it disconnects us from the origins of the objects closest to our bodies. To maximize profits, we want "cheap labor"; we pinch the funds here. These factories do not receive much compensation, and in the competitive nature of capitalism this is a trend that keeps going. Certain factories will do it for less- the prices keep dropping- these western companies start asking for more. This also

means that the garment workers are receiving less and less, and due to the demanding cycle other concerns are also ignored. These workers are often women, and they are not making livable wages.

These garments make it to the stores, - at an alarming rate at that- companies want something new nearly every week, they want more and more and more, faster and faster. This fuels the mindset of consumerism- In with the new, out with the old! Which is where we meet the last step in the cycle- waste.

Fast fashion is not supposed to last- it's fast! These trends don't attain their held value, and These garments were not made for durability- they were made for profit! So quite literally, the garment does not last- the fabric pills, it wears out, people do not want to keep it. So What then? Popular options would be to throw it away, or perhaps you drive to your local secondhand store and drop them off as donations. At first, this seems like a great option to divert waste. In actuality, a large percentage of the clothing you take to secondhand stores, will still end up as waste. In the mass increase of fast fashion garments being made, consumed, and used, there is an excess of waste. At the end of this cycle is again, outsourcing, or more accurately pushing problems for other people. The United States ships an estimated 85% of clothing consumed annually, which is 3.8 billion pounds to landfills as solid waste. Once again, these issues that we started- make them someone else's problems.

I could go on, but I think you get the point. Through every step of this cycle, we are disconnected. These are huge problems that are causing *so* much devastation for other people and the natural world. It is important to note the ways in which we directly and indirectly play a role within this system- and recognize these mindless processes that sever us from our inherent connections, our relationships, and values.

The situations and outcomes of these choices should not be options or something to be considered, waived, ignored or pushed onto other people. Would we do this to ourselves? What would come if we started viewing others- your neighbor, the tree outside your house, the family living hundreds of miles away from you, the oceans, the person you walked by on the sidewalk today, the person sitting next to you- not as others, But belonging to an intricate web of which you yourself are a part of?

This is not about one garment, one person, or one company- but rather- overarching systems, systems of oppression and devastation.. Systems of transformation, a collective consciousness, a line that runs through, a connected experience. How can we foster these connections- nurture them to a place of healing?

In this intersection of thought and value, is where my project began to take shape. How can clothing be an opportunity to foster these inherent connections, explore one's own means of self expression and individuality? How can it be an opportunity to work towards mending the damage we have done to the world, or at the very least not add to it? Clothing holds the opportunity to create richer connections and reflect the complex networks that connect all life.

Like many others, I chose to implement these concepts through the practice of upcycling. When I say upcycling, it refers to the taking of old, or used garments and textiles, or any material really, to create something new and give it added value. This is a very physical means of diverting waste and redistributing it into the stream. Upcycling is also significant in the fact that it creates a refocus, a mental shift. It opposes the mindless cycles of consumerism, and fuels itself on a slower, more intentional practice. Moreso, the apparent fact of the object's past is a reminder of how we're all connected. Rather than a new object that "came from nowhere and no one" it shows a history. Each and every material choice within this project was deliberate. I only

used things I already had in my own closet, as well as invited collaborators to give me anything they were no longer using, or were worn out. There are also a couple of items from Scrap.

I wanted to focus on an even more intentional, personalized approach to upcycling. One that returns to the idea of honoring and celebrating the ways in which our lives intertwine into a greater whole. So, in contrast to the anonymity of the garment workers in the current fashion system, I chose to be a garment maker for some close friends of mine. How might a garment be made when it is done by a close friend through a deep relationship? To begin, I chose to start a dialogue between 4 collaborators, 4 people who are very dear to me.

Why did I choose the people that I did? This is an important question and I found that there are a number of reasons. For one, this was a safe choice. These people acted as anchors, as a constant. I knew that I could rely on these people going forward, and take up some of their time. I knew that this was something they were excited about and genuinely wanted to do. These people were open to the idea of collaboration and sharing themselves with me, as they already have. Also, following the inquiries of this project- these are some of my favorite people. I have made genuine meaningful relationships with them, that I not only want to recognize, but honor and celebrate. I want to come from and work within a place of love and gratitude. And I am forever thankful for these people in my life. Having this safe place, strong foundation, and understanding of the ways we are connected to one another was essential.

So, I began by creating a dialogue with each of my collaborators. I called them interviews, but I also consider them to be conversations. From these conversations, I aimed to come to an understanding of what kind of garment I would be making for the individual and what choices would be meaningful to them. One interesting thing I had them do was choose 1-3 of their favorite items in their closet, things they would never ever part with and tell me why.

This conversational part of the process was very intriguing and showed me insight on how I would move forward. It was also very interesting to see how the interviews compared to one another.

From the interviews, three ideas emerged and solidified. The first being the connection we have to one another. What does this look like? How does each relationship have its own unique character? What things can be sentimental, or a tribute to these relationships? Secondly, a connection to the natural world was a theme throughout. How does this relationship show itself in daily life? How do the ways we exist influence or interact with our environment? Thirdly, I noticed a dialogue happening with the connection to ourselves. How does clothing become a means of self expression? What do our choices show of our individuality? Each of these three themes took on different shapes and meanings in each conversation, but were present throughout and manifested into my later choices, guiding my approach.

After these initial interviews, I began to take these ideas and thoughts and translate them into visuals, through design research. I made 4 collages for each individual, piecing together visual cues as well as conceptual backing that related to our conversations and themes that came out of it. I gathered sentimental items, which is an important component regarding the relationship we have to one another. People put meaning into things. We collect information. I collected material, pictorial inspiration, some of my favorite quotes from the interviews, material tests, and an assortment of other objects that represent the memories and emotions attached to each relationship and what is meaningful to each individual. These and more were translated into textiles, color palettes, paintings and prints. All reminders of joy, and friendship, to be carried, through the garments, onto the body. I considered the collages to be living objects, and I added to

them as time went on. They served as anchors for me to refer back to, holding the essence of each piece.

I included these in the exhibition to shed light on this process and the bridging that happened from the initial conversation to the finished pieces in front of you. The process I went through and the meaningful interactions were just as important, if not more, than the physical, finished pieces. This whole project has a life that was not exactly intended for the gallery space, so when viewing in this context, it was very important to me that the audience can see more than just the garments.

The experiential quality of clothing was also a large focus in how I approached designing the garments and understanding my decisions. What is the experience of clothing like? How does it feel to be in that garment? How does it alter our daily lived experience? How can this approach guide my decisions for each individual? How can this enrich the focus on connection?

Linked to the experiential aspect of clothing and to the idea of the relationship one has with themselves, there is a sense of play that fashion can embody. Clothing is a space for one to play with their self expression, and evoke fun and humor. Play is also a part of the relationships we have with other people. In each garment, I wanted to evoke joy and lightness. Each garment has its own visual aesthetics and approach linked to this idea of play, related to each individual collaborator.

I would also like to note the role that music had within this project. In my own personal life, music has become a part of my daily life, beyond the confines of just liking music; I will feel a burning urge to listen to it, to sing, and dance. It has become a fuel, an act of play and of energy. I became compelled to create a playlist for each individual that I would play while working on their collages and garments. This started as more so a tool for myself, for fun, for

idea generating, for making mental shifts- like once I heard "Islands in the Streams" by Dolly Parton I knew I was working on amber's pants- but this idea embodied itself into the project much further. The words you see that appear on the garments are from specific songs that I associate with each person. I found this to be a very delicate way into sharing past memories and experiences, as well as adding to the experiential qualities of the garment. When the individuals see these words, they not only have a personal moment of connection, but they also hear these words in their heads... maybe they do a little dance.

These garments act as many things- art pieces, garments, objects, wearable art objects, sculpture, an experience, a gift, an intervention, a mental shift, an embodiment of thought and value.

When making and designing these pieces, I largely considered the relationship they had to one another. They are in some ways, a collection, a series of pieces that speak to a larger conversation and exploration of concerns and ideas, but they are also very individual; they have through lines of themes and ideas, but the physical manner in which these ideas are displayed are unique to their own, in relation to each individual collaborator. It was important to me that these choices felt right and honest, and that I did not force anything in the name of being cohesive or to fit a qualified project description.

I will speak to each piece individually now.

Anika's piece is the dress. We have been friends for a long time. Anika is a very exuberant, lively, and kooky person. She is not afraid of being herself and I wanted her garment to reflect that. Therefore, I decided to make a dress that was a fun, vibrant statement piece. I made something a little more extravagant that is not meant to be worn everyday.

Anika and I listen to music and dance a lot. She dances in grocery stores. I wanted the dress to be conducive to movement. I wanted it to glitter and sparkle in the light, when she is spinning and dancing and laughing. Out of anyone, music has the biggest role in our relationship. In fact, Anika's playlist was the quickest and easiest to create because I just pulled from existing playlists we already shared together. I decided to include the lyrics "I swear by the moon and the stars in the skies, ill be there" from the infamous song "I Swear" by All 4 one. That is our song. Our interview actually ended with us singing this song together, not by design- it just kind of happened.

This sculptural piece was designed using 3 dimensional draping. I lay out a composition in brightly colored fabric, creating a piece that would let Anika shine the way she does. I experimented with an assortment of materials and let them flow into one another. This mesh of material and form is also related to Anika's own paintings. In our interview, we discussed the relationship between her paintings and her clothing styles, both some of her main modes of expression. We agreed that they had an "organized chaos" quality to them. I wanted to honor her own modes of expression and utilization of many sources.

To sum this piece up, I would say "a little wacky but cool".

Now, focusing on Natalie's piece, which is the t-shirt. Natalie and I met at work. We still work together- Fred Meyer Starbucks kiosk. She is someone who I would describe as deeply caring, dedicated, intelligent, and funny.. in a very sparky way.

I decided to focus my energy on one central image, I thought of it like carrying a painting around with you, the tshirt acting as a frame. I found this approach to be reflective of the presence and energy Natalie brings, which is very centered and present in the moment. She also

gives her all into everything she does. So I wanted to focus on one main area, and give it a lot of love.

In Natalie's interview, there were several moments where the theme of connectedness and innerworkings peaked through. She expressed a keen sensibility to these aspects that were outside of herself.

I also found myself thinking of work. When you work in a fast paced environment with a lot of multitasking dependent on the cooperation of one another, you come up with an effective system that works for each individual. Natalie and I have worked enough weekends together, where we have a methodical way of working with one another, that is natural and unspoken. We understand the greater whole and all of the little aspects that get us there. We move around one another picking up and leaving off of each other effortlessly.

Another mode of communication we have that inspired this work, is the cups that she draws on. The silly little characters and scenes she depicts have a way of cheering up my day.

I was thinking of these ideas when drawing this image. I wanted to depict a scene of life that evoked wonder, but that was grounded to one similar to our own. I was thinking of the intricate web of life- animals, mushrooms and the sun, the swirling energy that feeds in and interacts with itself. Even the playlist I had for Natalie, which had a lot of Tame Impala and Glass Animals on it, had a habit of flowing and waving, a complex assortment of sounds that verbarted into one another.

This one had a funny way of working out. I decided to screenprint the image onto the shirt; the image worked well within that process and screenprinting is a valuable mode of upcycling clothing. There was also a dialogue between these ideas of working in the coffee kiosk, and the way the print studio works, with the many steps of printing and the social aspects

of the studio. I gave Natalie some options of shirts to try on, and she happened to choose a shirt that I had two of. Fun fact- Natalie and I have matching socks, they have bananas on them and they say “go bananas”. We wear them every saturday. We also sometimes find humor in matching the rest of our outfit. It is a way for us to have fun and initiate a sense of play in an environment that can be a little stressful. So in a wonderful turn of events, I was able to create two of these shirts, one for Natalie and myself.

Moving onto Leah’s piece, which is the jacket. Leah and I met in 2018 when I started working at Fred Meyer. She has since moved on and is currently working towards a degree in Environmental Science at Oregon University.

Following Leah’s science driven mind, I was thinking a lot about systems and processes and this idea of parts of a whole. I knew that the *way* in which I worked would be especially important in how Leah received this, and provided me with an opportunity for entry.

One thing I started with doing to this jacket, was I gave it a coffee bath. I dyed it using grounds from work, which was fun, sentimental, and process oriented all at once. I was really intrigued especially by being able to use waste. Leah is actually working on her thesis right now, demonstrating using wasted material to make art.

I was also guided by this idea of the fringe, which had become an anchor to this piece. I began thinking about the experiential qualities that fringe gives, the sense of movement. I thought about the shape of the swoops and began drawing the shape and was reminded of bird wings. I thought about the flapping of wings and the movement of flight. I knew too that I wanted there to be a lot of black added to the jacket, for added contrast. Fun fact, one time Leah invited me to her birthday party. The theme was to come dressed as your favorite bird; Leah was

of course a crow. I came to this mental image of a bird, somewhat abstracted, but persisting through the curtain of fringe.

The way I painted the image was linked directly to music. During our interview, the topic of psychedelic rock was brought up, and Leah's love of Jimi Hendrix. She described the music as being "transformative". This also made me think of a print Leah had given me. It was called "Millionaire's Waltz" by Prince as she had made the image in correlation to that song.

I decided to approach the painting on the jacket in a similar way. I chose to listen to the "On Patrol" album by Sun Araw, since this is my artist of choice, when it comes to psychedelic rock and music that I find to be quite transformative. I had an overall idea of imagery, but I allowed my movements to be informed by the music. It started to feel like I was drumming with a palette knife and paint.

Lastly, we have Amber and her lovely pants. Before even inviting her to collaborate with me, she had given me an old pair of her jeans upon hearing my plan for this project. Amber was telling me that these were some of her favorite pants but they had become very worn out from work, (she's actually why I work at Fred Meyer). She said she liked them because they were comfortable and stretchy. This was a huge part of why Amber wears her clothing. They must be comfortable, otherwise they are not even a consideration. I ultimately decided that it would be a meaningful interaction for me to mend these pants and return them to her.

I decided in order to work within amber's visual parameters, I would work with a pattern of sorts, taking meaningful imagery and motifs and repeating them on the pants. I could get away with a lot, if it was methodical and consistent.

As I was designing and messing around with compositions and imagery, I found that this was very reflective of Amber's own disposition and mannerisms. Some of her most "Amber

qualities” are her reliability, consistency, and groundedness. Even the nature of mending reminded me of Amber. She has been someone I confided in over the years and is a great emotional support.

I chose to use plant imagery- this was almost a given. Amber’s house is full of plants, I go over there and am instantly calmed by the sight of her and her plants.

I chose to also depict skeletons doing a variety of different activities, the black rectangular pieces becoming another repeated image. Another fun fact, for decoration, Amber has posters of all the human systems on her bedroom walls- from the immune system, endocrine system, reproductive systems, to the skeletal system- all of them. She is a biomed major and is deeply intrigued by the human body. So I was also poking a little fun and working in this sense of play, but also recognizing the things that Amber values. I had the skeletons doing a variety of activities. I found it humorous to have them doing things like grocery shopping and splashing in puddles. I thought about the activities that Amber and I enjoy doing together, but also the ones she values individually. I also made sure to throw a pumpkin in there. Amber giggles at the sight of pumpkins.

For the final step of this project, I conducted a photoshoot with each collaborator. This might have been one of my favorite parts of this whole experience. Partly, because I was able to have some social interaction after shutting myself in the basement forever, but more so when I finally saw each person wearing their piece, I came to appreciate the garments and work I had put in so much more. It gave me a sense of completion. When I saw Leah flapping around and Anika spinning, I knew that I had done what I intended to do.

Through this transformation of clothing - I provided an alternative mode of interacting with our clothing and fashion. One that is invested in the overall health and wellness of the

world, one that we are connected to and a part of. One that allows us to celebrate being a human and being a part of this large intricate system.

This is not about one garment or one person, but to get where we want to be, we must believe in each garment and each person. These are large systems, but each step along the way is *integral*. We must believe in all the parts of the whole, be grateful for each individual aspect, and move towards a place of connection and love.

Before I stop talking, I know I am not accepting a Grammy award but I would like to take a moment to be thankful. This work would quite literally not be here the way it is without the support of other people. Firstly, thank you to Anika, Natalie, Leah, and Amber. You are some of my favorite people and it means the world to me that you partook in this experience and spent this time with me. Thank you to my mentor Ophir. It has been absolutely wonderful getting to know you and work with you. I am so grateful for all the guidance and wise advice you've given me that resonated with me, so well. Thank you to Sara, for your support and guidance. It has been an honor to share my ideas with you and listen to what you have had to say and share. Thank you to all the others that have supported me through this process, and to everyone who just listened to me talk, thank you for sharing this experience.

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A Reality Transformed in Love: A Redesign of the Ways we Interact with Fashion

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What is your favorite item of clothing- something you would never, *ever*, part with? An item that transcends the traditional notion of “clothing” and takes on a much more intimate role? This is something I asked my collaborators. They each chose three items from their closet, items they deemed “most important”. Anika termed the garments “holy grail” items. Her selections consisted of three coats, and as she excitedly described the stories behind each one, I could tell they were very individual in the experiences and memories she held within each one.

Leah, another collaborator, had chosen three items, each one linked to a story about three important people in her life. One of these garments was a brown and purple checkered sweater that she had taken from her dad’s closet. She said “I wear it a lot, *but* I wear it when I’m really sad...cause it just feels like dad’s hugging me and I like that.”

My last year at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, as per the thesis project requirements, led me on a journey of redesigning garments in hopes of refocusing our attention on connection and the ways our lives are touched and intermingled with those around us. This project involved a lot of practices that I had never done before, like working with clothing and within a system of collaboration that I was in charge of leading. Despite all these aspects that might cause hesitation, I was eager to press forward. I knew that this was the right place for me to insert all of the ideas that I was passionate about. I was not alone either; I had the support and wisdom of my mentors, distinguished artists, educators, and scholars, Ophir El-Boher and Sara Bernstein. I also had the support of my collaborators- Anika Schaedler, Leah Venkatesan, Natalie Clayton, and Amber Stone.

As humans, we are inherently creative beings connected to one another and all in this universe. We may not be in tune with it at all times, but that is our nature. This is the radical interconnectedness of life.

In my own life and within my artistic practice, this is a doctrine I let guide my thoughts and decisions. It is a beautiful thing- something I want to dwell in and create within.

In this intersection of thought and value, is where my project began to take shape. How can clothing be an opportunity to foster our inherent connections, explore one's own means of self expression and individuality? How can it be an opportunity to work towards mending the damage we have done to the world, or at the very least not add to it? Clothing has the wondrous potential of being creative and illicit play and imagination, of what could be and already is. It holds the opportunity to create a richer connection with the natural world and the beings it holds.

This curious potential of clothing is what drew me into working with it. We all interact with clothing every day (for the most part), whether or not we make our decisions consciously. Clothing and styling ourselves leaves room for so much potential creativity and sense of play. Within these ideas, there's a relationship between ourselves that we are speaking to, and portraying. What do I want to say? How do I want to feel? This is a physical means of self expression. Clothing is often influenced by the where and what- work uniforms, business attire, weather, and so forth. Mixed in with these external factors, are a plethora of internal forces that guide our decisions. This is the space that I explored. How do these internal thoughts manifest into the way we dress ourselves? How can this be connected to a wider context?

Anika says that clothing is her “main source of self expression”. If she is excited for something, she will think about what she is going to wear and piece it together in her head. It is exciting and fun for her; she makes her attire *part* of the experience.

What is interesting about clothing, in particular, when considering them as objects we own, is that we get to wear them and carry them around with us all day. They take on a very active, experiential role in our lives- a transformative experience.

Artist and designer Jennifer Anyan's work intersects with this notion of experience. She wrote an exposition, titled "Interrogating the notion of 'Frock Consciousness' through the practice of dressing and responding to dressed bodies" that retrospectively assessed three of her works through the lense of "frock consciousness". The term "frock consciousness" first arose in Virginia Woolf's diary in 1925. Essentially, this idea asserts that our choice in dressing oneself affects our daily lived experience. In Anyan's piece "Embodied Memories", she conducted a series of interviews, asking participants about some of their favorite pieces of attire that no longer exist or they no longer have. While analyzing their answers in her exposition, Anyan found that people were more often focused on describing their memories and feelings associated with wearing that piece of clothing, rather than the actual object itself.¹ This approach and thinking was something I carried on with me, guiding my decisions.

Let's return to the idea of humans being "inherently creative beings". A lot of us do not tap into this aspect of ourselves; you might think you are not "creative", but you *so* are. Each individual has their own way and manner in doing so, and that is part of the beauty of it. I want to bring this up again, really make this point, because creativity is a part of your makeup, of your thinking. We have the power to reimagine and reinvent. The world is allowed to change and grow with us. We have permission to change things. We can adapt and recreate, individually and collectively.

Clothing is important to these inquiries, as well, for the ways in which it currently does *not* allow us to grow. When seeking connection, it is vital to understand the aspects of our lives

¹ Anyan, "Intergottating the Notion"

that sever us from this very connection. In the modern, western world, capitalism is one of these sources of disconnect. Many might argue that it is *just* an economic system, but it has seeped into our lives in a multitude of ways. It is a harmful system- one that wreaks havoc to the natural world and groups of people. Much of the time, we may be divided by physical space, but we are never away from the heart of it. It is important to recognize these systems that exist around us, and how they operate. It is important to deconstruct them and recognize our own role within them, and how they might be affecting other people and parts of the world, no matter how far away they may be from us. This was a vital step in moving forward in this project.

One of the ways that helps capitalism to function is this very disconnect. As consumers, we are left out of the production process, and often kept in the dark. We enter buildings and everything is already there. Does it even matter how it got there?

This critic focuses on the fashion industry, specifically *fast fashion*. What is this? How does it function? How often do you question where your food came from, or your pencils, or your shampoo? What about your clothing? Contrary to popular belief, Macy's does not have a hidden printer in the back of the store. Although, when you step into a store and see racks, and racks of clothing, it can be hard to even imagine that they have ever seen somewhere other than those walls, and that they have in fact had a long journey before being in front of you. While we are sifting through these racks, detached from their journey to us, behind the scenes multitudes of ecological and social devastations are occurring.

This is not to say that your clothing is evil, either. There are tons of businesses that have multitudes of ways of producing and making. This work, however, focuses on the corporate level- on the fast fashion industry, because this has become the *dominant* business model and the disaster that it reaps overshadows the concern of other businesses. Fast fashion is the product, the

extension of capitalism within the garment making industry. It is a neoliberal model that fuels itself on profit over all.

The United States outsources 97% of their garments.² While this doesn't have to be bad, it disconnects us from the origins of the objects closest to our bodies. To maximize profits, we want "cheap labor"; we pinch the funds here. These factories do not receive much compensation, and in the competitive nature of capitalism this is a trend that keeps going. Certain factories will do it for less- the prices keep dropping- these western companies start asking for more. This also means that the garment workers are receiving less and less, and due to the demanding cycle other concerns are also ignored. These workers are often women, and they are not making livable wages. The damage does not stop there. The pollution and waste havoc from these buildings affects everyone else living in close proximity, as well, in horrendous ways.³ Eyes are turned on people and the planet.

These garments make it to the stores - at an alarming rate at that- companies want something new nearly every week, they want more and more and more, faster and faster. Forget fall, winter, spring, summer- we want more clothing than that. Companies are constantly pulling and pushing new clothing and lines and styles- give us the newest trends, let us feast. This fuels the mindset of consumerism- I want the new shirt before it is gone! It is a fast paced world out here, 'gotta be fast.

In with the new, out with the old! Here we meet the final victim- waste. Fast fashion is not supposed to last- it's fast! These trends don't stay- this shirt does not matter anymore, it doesn't fit. These garments were not made for durability- they were made for profit! So quite literally, the garment does not last- the fabric pills, it wears out, people do not want to keep it.

² Hvass, "Business Model Innovation"

³ Préau, "Sustainability and Globalization in Fashion"

What then? Popular options would be to throw it away, or perhaps you drive to your local secondhand store and drop them off as donations. At this point, they are once again ignored- by some.

At first, donating them seems like a great option to divert waste. In actuality, a large percentage of the clothing you take to secondhand stores, will still end up as waste. In the mass increase of fast fashion garments being made, consumed, and used, there is an excess of waste. More clothing items are being brought in than what is bought. At the end of this cycle is again, outsourcing, or more accurately pushing problems onto other people. The United States ships an estimated 85% of clothing consumed annually, which is 3.8 billion pounds to landfills as solid waste.⁴ Once again, these issues that we started- make them someone else's problems.

Through every step of this cycle, we are disconnected. We are ignoring huge problems that are causing *so* much devastation for other people and the natural world. We are also ignoring the ways in which we directly and indirectly play a role within this system- as consumers, participators, bystanders. As we consume, we dispose. These mindless processes severs us from our inherent connections, our relationships, and values. All steps in this cycle-the production, consumption, and disposing- all disconnects us and takes us further from a place of unity.

The situations and outcomes of these choices should not be options or something to be considered, waived, ignored- these should not be options. Would we do this to ourselves? What would come if we started viewing others- your neighbor, the tree outside your house, the family living hundreds of miles away from you, the oceans, the person you walked by on the sidewalk today- not as others, but belonging to an intricate web in which you yourself are a part of?

This is not about one garment, one person, or one company- but rather- overarching systems, systems of oppression and devastation, systems of transformation, a collective

⁴ Bick, "The Global Environmental Injustice"

consciousness, a line that runs through, a connected experience. How can we foster these connections- nurture them from a place of loss and into a space of healing?

Like many others, I chose to implement these concepts through the practice of upcycling. When I say upcycling, it refers to the taking of old, or used garments and textiles, or any material really, to create something new and give it added value. It is important to note that upcycling is not an end-all- fix-all solution. Ultimately, every part of the industry - from production to waste must be changed, for long term sustainability, but upcycling is a very positive step, on the consumer-waste end, and something that we have direct control over.

The displacement of waste is integral to the values of upcycling. This is a very physical means of diverting waste and distributing it elsewhere. This can be done via your own clothing, your friends, second hand stores such as Goodwill, or even with scrap fabric. There are also designers who are opting for more unconventional waste. For example, designer Nicole McLaughlin is well known for using used sports equipment, camera bag straps, and hairbrush handles to create attire.⁵ The essential component is that you are taking used items and transforming them, giving the pieces added value.

The idea of making new out of old, is ancient. How can this add new meaning and value? How can we make it a more meaningful process? How can it be intentional towards fostering connection?

Upcycling is also significant in the fact that it creates a refocus, a mental shift. It opposes the mindless cycles of consumerism, and fuels itself on a slower, more intentional practice. Moreso, the apparent fact of the object's past is a reminder of how we're all connected. Rather than a new object that "came from nowhere and no one", it shows a history. Writer and researcher Madison Hames encompasses the ideals of upcycling well in their article, "How

⁵ McLaughlin, "About"

Upcycling & ‘Creative Reimagining’ Can Help Us Do More Than Refashion Clothes”. They wrote “when I learned to reconfigure materials in front of me, I practiced reconfiguring the way I engage with the world. The macro mimics the micro”.⁶ It is in the act of “recreation” that new realities can be formed.

I wanted to focus on an even more intentional, personalized approach to upcycling. One that returns to the idea of honoring and celebrating the ways in which our lives intertwine into a greater whole. So, in contrast to the anonymity of the garment workers in the current fashion system, I chose to be a garment maker for some close friends of mine. How might a garment be made when it is done by a close friend through a deep relationship? To begin, I chose to start a dialogue between 4 collaborators, 4 people who are very dear to me. Within these relationships, there was a strong foundation of gratitude and an understanding of what connects us to one another. From this foundation, I was able to build from and intersect the interweaving values and concerns.

In the garment industry and in the name of mass production and profit, there is little room left for personalization. Fast fashion is probably the antithesis of individuality. Garments are mass produced according to circulating trends and often this process is mindless. The work of others and even whole cultures, are riffed off to create these garments in order to sell. Essentially, it is an algorithm for profit.

This idea of *what is it for*- hold onto that a little longer. Question the intention. These garments and these systems are made *for profit*- the profit of those in power, those that are also disconnected themselves from these systems. Profit itself becomes, almost, like an entity. Consumerism is a mindset- a mindset that does not honor individuation or a sense of responsibility. It is not made for us, although we have become a part of the equation, another

⁶ Hames, “How Upcycling and ‘Creative Reimagining’”

hub in the cycle. We have the power to take ourselves out of the vicious cycle, or intervene in our own ways, create a space, reimagined, by us, *for us*. Why don't we slow down a little.

We don't need to be fast too, right?

Practical notions of upcycling are hinged on this idea of distribution back into the market stream. Some people even make their living this way, hunting at Goodwill bins and reselling online for a price close to the original. I am all for conniving the system, but something about this seems a little off, wouldn't you say? At least, this is not the direction I am heading towards. This model still interacts with the system, still a part of the system. Is there any way we could remove ourselves further from the system, perhaps, working towards a different one?

It was an intuitive decision to upcycle *for* my friends, one that felt right and I wanted to do. I was able to implement my thoughts further, explore more of what it is that I am gravitating towards. I was able to envelop myself in love and gratitude. The decision became upcycling meets, "updistribution", a word Sara threw out during one of our early meetings. When working within this framework, I knew where this garment would end up; I had a *why, how, where, who*. I was centralized in intention and direction.

I see now that this decision is also important for the ways in which it removed the practice from the system, even further. These garments were not made for profit or for being consumed or mass produced or for any other capital reaching purpose. They were made for love, from love, and with love. These garments were made so my friends could have fun in something that resonated with them, spoke to their individuality, and let them shine in their own way. These garments were made as intervention to the very system that created them.

When creating and designing these garments, I was looking to things that we share, things that our experience have in common, and ways in which they branch out- differentiate,

aspects we share uniquely. Relationships are an important part of how humans operate; we are social creatures. When the things that we collect around us reflect that, we are more attuned and in a place of appreciation.

All four of my collaborators, and myself, expressed notions that shopping was a sentimental activity that they partake in with their mothers. When I asked my collaborators about their “holy grail” items, 3 out of the 4 had chosen at least one item that was given to them, either handed down or bought as a gift. The fourth that had not chosen an item with these qualifications, did, however, choose their first pair of scrubs they ever bought, thus still possessing a sentimental quality. So could you say, it is less about the clothing itself, and more so sharing an experience with your loved ones? *Interesting.*

The idea of “gifting” was prevalent within this thesis work. Afterall, instead of seeking money and capital gain, I wanted to make these garments for my friends, a service to them. I could still have asked for money in return, but that did not feel right. In the earliest forms of the project, I was considering taking donations that would then be turned around and given to somewhere else, put back into something I deemed worthy. These thoughts had more to do with perceived *expectations* and notions of our “normal” ways of consuming and wearing clothing. I gave myself permission to completely rid myself of these biases, and step into something different.

Ophir and I had a conversation about the history of a gift. When thinking of gifts now, there are heavy connotations of buying new items from stores. You go to the mall and you go shopping. Events like “Black Friday” exist. Certain online stores will allow you to create wish lists online. Historically speaking, gifts took on a much different meaning. Gifts varied widely over cultures, but there was a much more intimate approach. Oftentimes, this would be

something that was handed down. It was a tradition, generationally. These meaningful objects would be passed down along the lines as gifts, an object that takes on a personal meaning.

My collaborators received garments that I put a lot of time, effort, and love into. This act alone amplifies the inherent value of these objects and the ways in which collaborators received them. Each piece was unique in relation to the individual collaborator. This system focuses, honors, and celebrates the individual. Instead of widespread, mass production that is a force for capital, it focuses on a transfer of energy from one individual to another. There is no waste involved because each act is intentional and filled with purpose.

I was working at a very small, intimate scale, but how can this practice be amplified and spread? I looked to other models and designers working in a variety of ways.

Nicole McLauhlin, as mentioned earlier, not only works with tossed out sports and camera equipment, but works to help others do the same. She holds workshops for young creators to understand the techniques and mechanisms of working within this manner. She also works to connect large corporations to universities and designers, so that their waste can be further utilized.⁷

I took much inspiration from my own mentor, a talented designer, scholar, educator, and creator, Ophir El-Boher. In her solo exhibition in 2020, “Patterning”, she took commonly found used clothing items, such as men’s dress shirts and trousers, and recreated them into newly imagined garments. As part of this process, she created a book, *Patterning*, that explained how to complete these processes for yourself. She is helping to aid other creators and giving them the tools they need to create in this sustainable manner.⁸

⁷ McLaughlin, “About”

⁸ El-Boher, *Patterning*

These creators are invested in collective change- in the spreading of knowledge and resources, *for all*, not interested in limiting it to themselves or for any personal, self-serving agenda.

Upcycling can be more than an individual practice. Upcycling can create its own large web of cycles- one that emphasizes the creator and the community. A web that honors the interconnectedness of life. One that recognizes the reverberations we inflict onto the world. One that is invested in the overall health and wellness of the world, one that we are connected to and a part of. One that allows us to celebrate being a human and being a part of this large intricate system.

As I said earlier, this is not about one garment or one person, but to get where we want to be, we must believe in each garment and each person. These are large systems, but each step and each act along the way, is *integral*. We must believe in all the parts of the whole, be grateful for all and move towards a place of connection and love.

If we are more aware of how things came to be in front of us, of the journey that these objects have embarked on and the implications of the lives they have touched, what will that change? If we become invested in this system, a part of it, aligned with it, what then comes out of that? How can aligning our values and desires with the processes in our lives, transform the world?

Annotated Bibliography

Anyan, Jennifer. "Interrogating the Notion of 'Frock Consciousness' through the Practice of Dressing and Responding to Dressed Bodies." *Journal for Artistic Research*, no. 21. 27 October 2020.

Artist and designer Jennifer Anyan writes an exposition retrospectively exploring three of her past works, under the lens of "frock consciousness". She explores the notion of this word and how it manifests itself into the way we wear our clothing. She explores how her own works have implemented this idea into the approach and design of the projects.

Bernstein, Sara. "An Ode to Poorly Lit Dressing Rooms." *Catapult*. 1 Oct 2020.

In this work, distinguished writer Sara Bernstein explores the intimate spaces of the dressing room. She relates this to the oppositional spaces of department stores and the intersections of expected consumer roles. The work uses Sara's own experiences as means of exploring the delicate experience of dressing rooms and the ways in which this experience can build connection and solidarity between women.

Bick, Rachel; Ekenga, Christine; Halsey, Erika. "The Global Environmental Injustice of Fast Fashion." *Environmental Health: A Global Access Science Source*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2018, p. NA. *Gale Academic OneFile*.

Within this work, information is presented surrounding the harm inflicted to people and the environment as a result of fast fashion. The information is split into sections based on the stages of the garments, from material production to textile waste. This work is of particular interest due to the specific statistics surrounding textile waste and production.

El-Boher, Ophir. *Patterning*. Fuller Rosen Gallery, 2020.

Artist Ophir El-Boher had an exhibition in 2020, titled "Patterning". Within this body of work she deconstructed commonly found used clothing garments, such as men's dress shirts and trousers, and redesigned new garments out of them. As part of work, she released a book, *Patterning*, to show other people how to deconstruct and reconstruct garments using the patterns that she did. The work focuses on sustainable models of fashion.

Hames, Madison. "How Upcycling & 'Creative Reimagining' Can Help Us Do More Than Refashion Clothes." *Dismantle Magazine*, 10 Aug. 2020.

Inspired by their own experiences and by the upcycling clothing culture around them, artist Madison Hames explores the implication and practices of upcycling. Upcycling becomes a physical practice of creativity and healing. Hames focuses on showcasing upcycling's capacity for reimagining and what that means during a capitalistic world, and looking forward. This work is of particular interest due to the wider reaching view of upcycling and its intersections.

Hvass, Kerli Kant. "Business Model Innovation through Second Hand Retailing: A Fashion Industry Case." *The Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, no. 57 (2015): 11–32.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/jcorpciti.57.11>.

This paper looks into the implications of corporate brands reselling their own clothes, as means of sustainability. Examples and current business ventures of this business model are stated. Relevant to this work, the author provides information regarding the current situations of the industry and business' role within the model.

McLaughlin, Nicole. NICOLE MCLAUGHLIN. "About." Accessed December 8, 2021.
<https://nicolemclaughlin.com/about>.

The website of designer Nicole McLaughlin shares her work and the center of her focus. Viewers can see her past work and collections. This is of particular interest to this work for the information provided about her use of wasted material and dedication to sustainability.

Préau, Galaad. "Sustainability and Globalization in Fashion: Can the fashion industry become sustainable, while remaining globalized?" *Research Gate*. 2020.

This work consists of four chapters that explore the question and implications of the fashion industry becoming sustainable while remaining globalized. The first two chapters are about the historical precedents that have led to the fast fashion business model and the consequences of the system- economically, socially, and ecologically. The third chapter contains information on more local systems that are not globalized. In the fourth chapter, the possibilities of a more sustainable model while remaining globalized are explored through data and examples.

