Goldsmiths Research Online

Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London

Citation

Persistent URL

Versions

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Feminism and the Politics of Creative Labour : Fashion Micro-enterprises in London, Berlin and Milan

Angela McRobbie, Dan Strutt and Carolina Bandinelli

ABSTRACT

This article makes a case for fashion, as part of the creative industries and as a major employer of women, as well as a significant space for self-organised work, to attract more sustained attention on the part of feminist scholars with a view to developing a stronger policy lobby for the sector with priority being given to issues which focus on the quality of livelihoods in the sector. Drawing on interviews and observations carried out within the course of a three year study which investigated working lives of fashion designers (predominantly female) in London, Berlin and Milan, the argument presented emerges from an analysis which focused on two key factors: the impact of adverse economic circumstances following the euro-crisis of 2008 and the role of urban cultural policies in the ability of designers to establish a creative practice. With the help of three provisional, indeed tentative, concepts, each of which relies on questions of space/place, we suggest that this expansive sector contains potential to become a more equitable and socially engaged field, particularly with reference to women's working lives and through the development of regionalised centres with an emphasis on doing fashion differently.

Introduction

We nowadays enter the debates about creative economy and working lives in the cultural industries at a point when any remaining traces of Richard Florida's celebratory account have

been well and truly vanquished, not just in the academy but also in the field of cultural policy (Florida 2002). With attention more recently paid to how creative economy protagonists who are located in poor inner city locations, and thereby exacerbate the already economically adverse conditions for existing populations now living with reduced access to welfare benefits and with sclerotic, cut-back public services, not to say rising rents, few voices continue to champion without qualification the quick fix regeneration model proffered by creative economy (Banks and O'Connor 2019). Fashion as a space of creative labour has not been a gathering point for the critical voices of the anti-gentrification movement in the way that art workers have mobilised energies in these directions in various cities in recent years. But this is not to say that fashion has remained immune to the new activism or silent on a range of related issues. Where we cannot promise to reflect on how small-scale or independent fashion enterprises find themselves placed in regard to current waves of urban activism, we will flag up some pointers and we will discuss the question of female livelihoods in this sector.

One aim of this essay is therefore to present an account of our recent research which brings to the fore issues that relate to the urban conditions of working lives of independent fashion micro-producers, and the other aim is to cast a feminist light on these everyday economic activities. Ideally such a discussion might lead to more sustained attention being paid to fashion's potential as a more egalitarian workplace. But prior to this a case is made for a feminist critical fashion studies to pay more attention to questions of 'immaterial labour', and of precarious livelihoods in fashion, in the context of the increasingly temporary and casualised jobs that are a defining feature of neoliberal society (Lazzarato 1999, McRobbie 2015, Arvidsson et al 2011, Mentisieri 2017). This entails proposing a materialist account of key selected themes which emerge from recent interview- and observation-based research on fashion micro-enterprises in London, Berlin and Milan carried out over a three year period (2013-2016[1]). The alarm bells need to ring in fashion, not just at those points in time when exploitative internships hit the headlines, but on a more permanent basis. This call also becomes part of an argument about putting fashion, as a key site of female employment, at the heart of cultural policy. We would like to make the case for the need for explicitly

---

[1] Phase One Report CREATe/Goldsmiths Fashion Micro-enterprises London, Berlin and Milan is available at http://research.gold.ac.uk/26280/

feminist fashion policy-makers to emerge, working at the interface of the fashion schools, local and national governments, the industry, especially at start-up level, and with the fashion media. Fashion has the potential to become a much more egalitarian and diverse sector, and this is a timely moment, given the wider social awareness which has emerged in the last few years, often spearheaded by young people and by students, to request that words such as anti-racism, job creation, under-employment, welfare-to-work, and regional development find a place in fashion's everyday professional vocabularies.

At the same time it is instructive to understand why there has been resistance to this kind of emphasis in both fashion pedagogy and in fashion studies scholarship. So reliant has the teaching of fashion been, in order to garner academic credibility and a place within the university system, and indeed a place alongside the teaching of the fine arts, on establishing strong and enduring ties with leading companies, that labour issues have been largely circumvented (McRobbie 1998). It has been incumbent upon mostly female heads of fashion departments to maintain strong links with industry, from the setting of projects, to job placements, to donations of fabric and textiles, and mentor schemes. Sponsorship is, and has been, an embedded feature of fashion pedagogy long before more recent debates swept through the universities as a whole in regard to employability and work experience. Training students on labour rights, entitlements and working hours could be construed as a disincentive to the high-profile companies who provide these valuable connections. This is even more the case in times when students, as in the UK, pay such high fees on the expectation that there is, as Wendy Brown puts it in the context of the neoliberalised university system, a 'return on investment' or ROI (Brown 2016). In the fashion departments there has been a high degree of industry-orientation and compliancy with the long hours and self-exploitation culture (even a degree of romanticism, see Bill 2011), and at the same time there has come into being in the last few years a student body with a much higher degree of political awareness.

The second reason why fashion studies has been disinclined to interrogate questions of labour and the modern work society is that this sociological register does not chime with the majority of fashion theory academics, whose background training remains overwhelmingly from within art and design history and only rarely from the social sciences (as exceptions see Entwistle 2009, Entwistle and Wissinger eds 2012). The economic and cultural geographers who undertake research on the growth of the creative economy tend not to teach in fashion design departments (Rantisi 2006, Gilbert 2011, Larner and Molloy 2009). Likewise

academic research on global supply chains, compliancy issues and labour exploitation in manufacture, particularly in the huge EPZ factories producing on an outsourced capacity for the well- known brands, from sportwear to high fashion, is often undertaken by anthropologists and can fail to find an audience inside fashion (Tarlo 2016). There is therefore a tendency not to subject the fashion system to the kind of critical analysis which in the longer term may prove beneficial to all parties: the workforce, the students soon to enter the sector, academic managers and administrators and indeed to the wider public as consumers of fashion. This is all the more pertinent when fashion has also suffered marginalisation and lack of critical attention within creative economy debate. It is hard not to attribute this to its assumed feminine status. For the reasons mentioned earlier there are fewer feminist scholars of fashion working in creative economy. Geography, even cultural geography remains substantially a male dominated discipline and the key debates in creative economy tend to be driven by television and broadcasting, film, popular music, gaming, and social media studies, again with a preponderance of men in the lead.

It is now nearly twenty years since the first mapping document published by the UK Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) appeared. Since then there have been dozens more, and these have given rise to heated debate among scholars, something that can be tracked through journals such as the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, among many others. Hesmondhalgh's analysis of the role played by the New Labour government is the most substantial to date (Hesmondhalgh et al 2015). Fashion's limited presence across these many pages surely warrants further investigation. Young prize-winning fashion designers themselves have figured markedly in the mentorship programmes undertaken by UK government supported organisations such as NESTA[2] so it is not that the sector is ignored. It is listened to and has a presence in, for example, the more recently established London-based Creative Industries Federation[3]. But because this presence is inevitably fronted by a line-up of well-known industry figures, the issues we are concerned with here rarely get an airing, and inevitably in the context of wider debates, when fashion is discussed, there is typically a 'walk on part' and a heritage-driven celebratory voice, reminding audiences of the great successes of figures like Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen. In the UK overall, fashion finds itself more or less in its own space, overseen by the British Fashion Council, which acts as a flagship for the sector, and is able to call upon

[2] National Endowment for Science Technology and Art.
[3] Set up in 2014.

CEOs and celebrities to show their support for the sector as required[4]. As a consequence there is a top-down agenda with little or no concern for small-scale incomers, for those whose star status is now eclipsed, or for those working on a shoestring. The overarching ideology of glamour remains intact and pushes more intractable issues into the shadows. This corporate stance becomes a kind of hallmark of what fashion means as a creative industry, an image bolstered by the success of the online magazine htttp//www.*businessoffashion.com,* which, while valuable to those interested in understanding the new political economy of fashion, nevertheless embodies this top-down approach, with an editorial which tracks an endless stream of typically male CEO appointments and shifts in the brand values of the top-rated companies worldwide.

In sharp contrast, the material presented in the pages that follow avoids the world of the boardroom, and instead investigates the everyday, often mundane, professional activities of the mostly female designers who took part in the UK-based CREATe Arts and Humanities Research Council study[5]. Over the course of three years and with various interruptions for reasons of small budget and all the other usual academic obligations, a small team comprising myself, post-doctoral students, freelance research assistants and occasional consultants met regularly in the three cities, reporting on the findings while also developing strategies to involve the designers themselves in ways which may be useful to them[6]. Among the questions uppermost throughout the research were: What role do the polices adopted by cities and local authorities play in shaping the outcome of fashion start-ups? How has the impact of the euro-zone crisis of 2008 impacted on graduate fashion self-employment initiatives? This being more relevant in Berlin and Milan but also in London with the financial crisis of 2008, and the exorbitant cost of rental space: How possible is it for an independent small-scale fashion design scene to flourish? Throughout the course of the research we were also inevitably attempting to develop a conceptual vocabulary, from existing scholarship and from the work on the ground as it developed. Our terms are: 'fashion spaces-of-labour', 'fashion as female-led 'post-Fordist place-making''' (Colomb 2012) and 'fashion human capital. The first

---

[4] Though it is worth noting that the new wave of very recent feminist fashion activism has seen a number of these leading light figures fall from the pedestal, for sustainability issues, or exploitation of the workforce or for alleged harassment of employees.

[5] https://www.create.ac.uk/research-programme/theme-4/wp4f-fashion-ip-from-start-up-to-catwalk-a-three-city-investigation/.

[6] Angela McRobbie, Dan Strutt, Carolina Bandinelli, Bettina Springer, Giannino Malossi, Oliver MacConnell, Ares Kalandides, Marte Hentschel.

and third term refer to the disciplinary features of immaterial labour while the second permits a sense of women's capacity to create a neighbourhood fashion production milieu.

Berlin: a new social fashion imaginary?

'That you are working 18 hours a day, without making much money, my family are proud… It's just me. I do everything with two interns and sometimes one freelance… In Berlin it is still possible to pay for both a home and a studio.'

– Hien Le, Berlin

'I'm basically really happy right now because I still have a good renting contract.'

– Stefan Dietzelt, The Director's Cut, Berlin

The new cultural economy has been of keen interest to scholars since the Millennium, and Berlin has attracted a good deal of attention, especially from cultural and economic geographers (see, among many others, Jakob 2009, Colomb 2012, Lange 2012). But only a handful of studies consider fashion as part of these often intersecting urban 'scenes' comprising predominantly music and club culture, graphic design, artists and curators, and the emerging tech sector, many of which converged not only in the city's famous nightclubs (Berghain, Tresor) but also in the growing spread of co-working spaces (see Kalandides 2014, Manske 2015). Of course, Berlin is a smaller city than London and not part of the global high-fashion city map. Some might categorise it as an emergent fashion city alongside Hong Kong, Sydney, Los Angeles, Moscow, Montreal, Shanghai and Tokyo, mostly on the basis of its Senate-led initiatives, including well-publicised Fashion Weeks with attention drawn to the existence of vibrant networks of independent designers, often graduates of highly considered art and design schools. Berlin, under any circumstances, is viewed as exceptional given its history, even just in the post-war years when the existence of the Wall meant that it received higher levels of subsidy from the west German government in order to retrieve a population and to retain a largely post-industrial economy. As is well documented, Berlin always attracted a young population with an interest in the arts, and in culture in the broadest sense. For this workforce salaries have never been high and project work, mostly in the not-for-profit sector, dates back to well before the development of the full-blown creative economy. The history also of a strongly left-wing, feminist and green presence in the city before and after the demise of the Berlin Wall in 1989, along with certain long-standing

features of urban governance such as rent control, can encourage a slightly rose-tinted lens on the part of commentators, especially when compared with the conditions of creative economy in London or New York. In the abbreviated discussion that follows there is only room to extrapolate and focus on the politics of 'fashion spaces-of-labour' in the city, which also provide some possible models for a more egalitarian neighbourhood-based fashion design sector to develop, ie a 'female-led "post-Fordist place-making"' (Colomb 2012).

The *CREATe* research team (as described in footnote 4) found a relatively easy to access fashion design network in Berlin, with some of the city's leading designers showing willingness not just to take part but to become involved in a whole range of activities scheduled for the programme of work over the period of three years and spanning our chosen cities, including a two-day visit to and event hosted in May 2016 at the well-known Glasgow School of Art in Scotland. In this current context and bearing in mind the overall argument about fashion's potential to open itself up to a wider and more egalitarian range of practices than those which currently dominate the sector, we focus on just two inter-related factors. The *first* is that although the designers could be stratified as belonging to one of three groupings – the avant-gardes, the socially engaged, and the low-income home-based knitters and sewers often working in an informal capacity – in fact there was a lot more interaction across these groups than would be imaginable elsewhere. This made Berlin fashion immediately less hierarchical than is normally the case. The socially engaged designers often doubled as managers of producer services and social entrepreneurs working in a not-for-profit capacity, who in turn linked the more avant-gardists with the relatively low-qualified women who were designing and making one-off items with some rudimentary equipment and on the expectation of extremely modest returns[7].

The best example of a fashion social entrepreneur is someone who also became a core member of our team as well as advisor and respondent. Marte Hentschel started off as a designer herself but, seeing a need for fashion producer services in the city set up the not-for-profit company Common-Works. For several years Hentschel ran the company, organising production services for most of the Berlin designers through working with suppliers and small under-used factory facilities in Brandenburg on the outskirts of Berlin and also in nearby Poland. More recently she became the founder and director of an online supplier services agency, having secured funding from, among other sources, the European Union (

www.fashion-sourcebook.eu). This is a fast-changing landscape as Berlin emerges as the European capital for textile technology and environmentalism at every level of the supply chain, and Marte Hentschel has played a leading role here, having found more investment and a partner in Amsterdam so that *sourcebook-eu* does not just act as a sustainability-led matchmaking agency for more than 20,000 small scale producers and suppliers but provides a host of training and knowledge support services, inevitably attracting the interest of some of the fashion-tech companies like *Zalando* also based in Berlin. With more of a focus on local women's labour markets, Anne-Kathrin Carstensen, the founder and owner of *Rita in Palma,* works in a social enterprise mode, drawing in women from the Turkish-German community in Neukoelln and Kreuzberg, for whom her workshops provide a valuable opportunity to up their already prodigious skills in crochet and embroidery and hand sewing, while also finding more formal ways of earning a living (figs 1 and 2). Here too Carstensen is able to reach EU Social Funds to support a project like this, one that has grown over the years with various concessions spaces in leading department stores as well as pop up spaces. In a similar vein, academic and social entrepreneur Prof. Ares Kalandides set up *NEMONA* as a fashion networking agency, again in Neukoelln, designed to bring together and create sociality and neighbourliness for more isolated women home-workers, with the aim of supporting local female job creation.

Cases like these demonstrate how a fashion culture which is less status and glamour-driven and decidedly un-star-struck can come into being. This is enabled through the availability (under competition) of European Union Social Funds, which in turn rely on teams of economists, geographers working with designers and other industry partners to secure these various grants. It would be instructional to analyse the actual workings of the grants while they are in operation, the jobs created and the long-term outcomes. We have come across no equivalent fashion enterprises with similar support from the EU in the UK. It could be surmised that the reasons for this lie in the top-down identity which UK fashion design bestows upon itself (referred to earlier) and its tendency to disregard social dimensions. Similarly the more egalitarian agenda inside the Berlin fashion social enterprises reflects EU emphasis on supporting disadvantaged populations and ethnic minorities especially in the labour market. The more feminist agenda and commitment to improving female participation, especially at the low-income end of the social spectrum, can be seen as part of the more longstanding processes of 'gender mainstreaming' which are a key element across European Union work, employment and social policies. These factors, along with the availability,

despite recent rent rises, of affordable atelier space, contributed directly to the idea of 'female-led "post-Fordist place-making"' (Colomb 2012). This kind of scene of women's employment undergirded by notions of self-entrepreneurship which in this case betrays its origins both in neoliberal pro- active programmes and also in the field of 'femocratic' urban management often led by a more social democratic or green agenda, is of key interest to feminist scholars who like Kern and McLean label these as 'undecidable' and make a strong case for attention being paid to precisely the kind of local practices which interrupt the 'juggernaut' narratives of neoliberalisation processes associated with male leftist figures such as David Harvey and Jamie Peck (Kern and McLean 2017). This would be to suggest paradoxically, forms of female-led social entrepreneurship as radical urban intervention. Alternately, and as we argue in the conclusion, if we replace the word entrepreneurship with the idea of the making of livelihoods reconcilable with social care obligations including parenting duties then working life in fashion can be seen as part of a spectrum of neighbourhood and community economic activities which might also dovetail into other forms of local commitments and activism.

The city, its neighbourhoods and even the interiors of the studio spaces were scripted into the distinctive styles and the kind of aesthetic which the designers foregrounded in their practice. The addresses of our respondents themselves tell a story about good locations for studio-cum-shop spaces. With windows looking out onto the street these ateliers dotted about Neukoelln, on for example Weserstrasse, Friedelstrasse, Pfluegerstrasse, and Lenausstrasse, provide many opportunities for passers-by, tourists and local people to look, drop in and possibly spend some money. There is movement as some of the social enterprises grow and need to move to bigger premises; likewise some of our respondents were based in the more upmarket Mitte area, but even here they all had managed a few years back to secure cheap affordable space on a secure contract[8].

The *second* and related feature of the Berlin work was the non-stigmatised relation to welfare-to-work programmes. Across all categories respondents referred, often unprompted, to various forms of support which they had relied upon to get their design studio off-the-ground. In a city with high levels of graduate unemployment and intermittent working patterns, reliance on welfare for in-between periods was an everyday fact of life, and this

---

[8] Esther Perbandt at Almadtstrasse and Dietzeldt on Kastianallee.

meant that multi-disciplinary teams often worked alongside each other to submit grant applications to a wide range of funding bodies. It was not simply that the kinds of start-ups reflected the broadly social democratic contours of governance in the city, as well as a German-wide emphasis on the value of European Union social funds for training and welfare. The micro-businesses we observed produced a new fashion social imaginary, new ways of doing fashion. They made visible the ways in which independent fashion could have an impact on the local environment. One such place-making example might be the way in which fashion social enterprises have set up events such as the '24Hour-Fashion-Weekend Neukoelln', a local festival designed to be participative and socially inclusive while at the same time avoiding the otherwise inexorable waves of gentrification. As one of the *NEMONA* team said: 'these events bring fashion onto the streets, and into the windows of unused or empty shops and offices, the colour and the fabrics also make a feminine kind of statement in what has been a poor neighbourhood'. This example actualises the gendered interruptive element referred to above, where male left urban geographers are largely inattentive to such ephemera other than to cast their eyes over what they perceive as yet more waves of culture-led gentrification.

It also becomes apparent how important the forms of urban governance are in providing pathways and avenues to enable this socially valuable activity with a strongly gendered dimension to take place. Of course these modes of governmentality are also *dispositifs* exercising their own requirements of their subjects, indeed producing certain types of busy professional socially engaged, mostly female, subjects. Following Foucault, the positive incitements to 'be creative' carry a whole range of constraints. Those populations to whom this invitation is extended are almost exclusively German passport-holders. Despite the cosmopolitan mix of young people living in the city, few coming from elsewhere, even EU citizens, had navigated their way through the bureaucracy and paperwork needed for *Zwischennutzen* (temporary use spaces) applications or for the complicated schemes for moving from unemployment to self-employment[9]. The question as to whether such persons could be technically unemployed is also unclear. Mostly non-German creative young people in the city live cheaply but with help from parents, or from grants from their home countries, or else they work shifts in bars and cafés for cash. Inside the designer ateliers we also noted

---

[9] Zwischennutzen refers to a programme introduced after the Wall came down to encourage use of empty spaces. Nearly 20 years later, although changed in some respects it is still possible for local entrepreneurs to make an application for reduced sometimes minimal rent, now managed through Quartier Management, Berlin.

that despite the non-hierarchical styles of working, there were few ethnic minority designers throughout the period of our study, and most of the Turkish-German women were concentrated at the low-skill end of the spectrum. There is a still intact a generous system of welfare provision, but the endless grant applications processes and the chance of losing grants or of them not being renewed must weigh heavily in the longer term. For this reason the reality of 'project working' also has to be seen as part of the logic of the modern work society, with the downsides including anxieties about pensions and about earning enough money to keep afloat.[10] Yet none of this detracts from the high levels of enthusiasm for inventing and making sustainable a different kind of female-led cultural economy, one shorn of the signs of crude commercialism and wholly committed to – indeed defined by – environmental issues, including recycling, upcycling as well as developing new textile production processes which could prove less harmful at every point in the supply chain.

London and the winner-takes-all ethos

If there is something of a disparity between the depth of analysis given over to Berlin and the remaining sections of this chapter looking at London and Milan, this imbalance is intentional in the context of the ongoing debate about fashion design's place and the development of a more feminist egalitarian work society. Berlin offers a useful microcosm of so many threads of discussion. It is also not insignificant that the high turnover of small fashion boutiques and the high level of self-employment there is offset by some underpinning of welfare. No one on we interviewed feared losing their home, not being able to cover their rent or getting sick; no one professed to having had to escape the city to live in a cheaper small town. The main source of anxiety was simply finding enough people to buy the clothes and the search for wider visibility and recognition. How long could they envisage carrying on psychologically if their collections did not find a market?

Nothing could be further from the ambiance and atmosphere of these Berlin fashion social enterprises than the London initiatives, which also borrow the label 'social enterprise', something we came increasingly to query. Instead the small number of relatively high-profile London-based fashion social enterprises such as the (now defunct) *Trampery, Fashion East, Fashion Fringe* and the *Centre for Fashion Enterprise* are closer to the 'big society' model,

---

[10] See https://www.arbeitenviernull.de/

which was launched at the time of the David Cameron-led Coalition Government. The fashion sector, it seems, interpreted this concept loosely, as a mechanism for sponsorship, including high level mentoring for a select number of candidates. (Though the *CFE* is also an offshoot of the London College of Fashion and part of the University of the Arts London, hence not purely or primarily a social enterprise.) In this scenario it is the creative entrepreneur him or herself who, if he or she is lucky, will find support, not, as in Berlin where the designer must demonstrate a willingness to involve disadvantaged people in the community or neighbourhood in his or her enterprise. A strongly competitive element determines access to a London social enterprise such as *Fashion East,* and even the CFE expects applicants to have already achieved success. The UK model favours the individual and his or her business plan and the accolades already garnered, whereas in Berlin the case rests instead on the wider social value which the designer would bring to the area. Thus we see, in crude terms, the stark difference between a social democratic programme underpinned by a less individualised business-driven agenda, and the way in which neoliberal values are applied to the creative economy in London.[11] In the latter the social element does not exist beyond the possible offer of subsidised space and even that is not guaranteed to the prize-winners.

It is at this point, however, that we confront the real absence of sociological fashion-labour research on this kind of topic. Little is known of the career pathways in, through and out of these London fashion enterprises. We can note former inhabitants of the Trampery (there at the time of our research visit) Sophie Hulme and James Long, both then transferred to CFE. But when in operation the cost of space in the Trampery was beyond the reach of most recent graduates[12]. More research on career biographies of this type is urgently needed: what are the outcomes of these fairly minimal levels of support for all those who win places? The London research found a highly stratified model, with a handful of designers propelled into the spotlight on the basis of prize-winning collections and strong support from the fashion press and media, and a second category who, slightly older than we originally envisaged, had found ways of sustaining a practice in London. In neither case were there strong ties to neighbourhood. Instead, in common with trends in the London creative sector, they clustered

---

[11] Berlin creative economy reports acknowledge that many micro-businesses will not generate substantial incomes in the early years, and they also stress the importance of the sector for generating higher levels of female employment (Wowereit 2008).

[12] We tried without luck to interview both of these designers. Countless others were on our list including Louise Grey and Holly Fulton.

mostly in North and East London, where they also lived. This means that the more pro-active of our concepts here, that of 'female led "post-Fordist place-making"' practices, were nowhere to be seen, and instead the London fashion design scene was dominated by the two more overtly disciplinary models, 'fashion-human-capital' and 'fashion spaces-of-labour', the latter being highly constrained and geographically dispersed, even non-spaces of labour at that point where there is no option but to move out of London.

We followed the careers of four prize-winning designers, but drawing attention, ironically, to the 'precarity of success', from the moments of elation when someone like Michelle Obama is photographed wearing a dress or shirt designed by one of our 'winners'[13], to the high levels of anxiety when a collaboration with a much bigger company (an Italian producer or a luxury jewellery company) comes to an end. There is no space here to map out with precision these complicated career biographies, though it has to be noted that three of the four come from outside the UK: Teija Eilola (fig.) came from Finland to the Royal College of Art, Bruno Basso from Brazil to Central St Martins, and Carlo Volpi from Italy to Goldsmiths and then the RCA (figs). This is a sign both of London's cosmopolitan openness, which is not found in either Berlin or Milan, and the success of the UK art school tradition, which is what attracted these designers to the UK in the first place. But now in London the very idea of setting up as a designer oneself or as part of a small team is predicated on the slim chances of being a prize-winner. This, with the accompanying media attention, gives the designer the kind of boost which also stirs the attention of larger companies on the look-out for collaborations with talented newcomers. At the very top end this means one or two people being pronounced new talent at the end of their degree shows and being taken up by the biggest conglomerates in Paris or Milan (*J W Anderson* being the best recent example). For those, like our respondents, one tier down, collaborations provide a stream of income which in turn allows the own-label work to be developed, but on the assumption that the designers are working round the clock seven days a week. Living and working in London has become much more difficult in the last two decades because of the absolute unaffordability of space (suggesting we amend *fashion spaces-of-labour* to *fashion non-spaces-of-labour*). The human capital model discussed by Foucault in his biopolitics lectures refers to the economisation of the self as a mechanism of audit, or 'self-appreciation' (Foucault 2008, Feher 2018). The kind of calculations which our prize-winning respondents constantly had to

---

[13] Michele Obama chose to wear a dress by Basso and Brooke in 2010 and on holiday in Italy in 2017 she was photographed wearing a blouse by Teija.

make also corresponded with what Ulrich Beck referred to as 'biographical solution to structural problems' (Beck 2000[14]). The creative individual is constantly having to scrutinise how he or she maximises their personal assets in order to assess how to keep going. This is the logic of the 'talent-led economy'. This may involve leaving London for a period of time to save on mortgage or rent, or it can mean drafting in a partner to attend to the business side of things, while also holding down a day job, or it can mean a shift of direction towards teaching as a way of at least being able to rely on an income stream which will be paid on time and hence cover the rent. It can even mean commuting weekly on a budget airline to maintain a valuable teaching contract in London. These are highly personal and indeed private decisions indicative of the need for a stronger research strategy which is able to peel back these layers and reveal the precarity of 'success'.

Teija Eilola is also a good example of the prize-winner model, having graduated from the RCA followed by five years at *Ted Baker,* which in turn provided her with a valuable network of contacts for when she was ready to launch her own label[15].

> I had been on maternity leave ... and I thought this is a good time to see if I can set up my own label, I had just three weeks to apply for a place as part of the Fashion Fringe/Colin McDowell Programme ... I had to develop a full business plan almost on the spot, To get a place you have to be one of three chosen from so many. I didn't win first prize but I was among the first three and I could not believe it when I got a call from Christopher Bailey (of Burberry) inviting me for a meeting.

And, with extensive coverage from *Vogue Italia*, Carlo Volpi said: 'I got the Cockpit space free for a year and I'm still here several years later ... but I'm not living off my own brand... I need to do a million jobs to support myself, to keep going'.

The second cohort the CREATe study identified were a group who had managed to stay in the profession because they had graduated from the various London art and design schools a few years prior to the massively escalating cost of rent and living in London. Also, having

---

[14] With Volpi moving almost weekly between London and Milan: London for part-time teaching slots, and to retain his small studio space at Cockpit Arts, and Milan for ongoing collaborations. Teija Eilola has achieved starry success allowing her to retain a small work space in Islington North London while selling mostly to boutiques in Paris, Basso and Brooke by the end of our study had moved on a temporary basis to Lisbon with the idea of working on an interiors collection while maintaining their work in creating menswear collections.

[15] Also as she pointed out in interview there was the possibility of some additional freelance work if the label did not bring in enough money.

met each other as undergraduates, they had understood the need for a strong network amongst themselves as a buffer against the fickle fashion industry which they would be working in possibly over a lifetime. This friendship network operated as a jobs grapevine and also as a counter to the rigid status hierarchies which define the London fashion scene. Small-scale, independent, micro-enterprises maintained a high level of recognition and admiration amongst these insiders in a context where there would be movement of designers over the course of time, from working in a middle-ground high street company, to deciding a few years later to once again embark on launching a new label and, in a more online world, working with e- sales only. The ability to create a practice depended on a range of contingent career-biographical factors. Several mentioned the benefit of having a partner or spouse with a full-time job, in one case also able to offer studio space within his own larger office[16]. For others there was a stroke of luck which landed a knitwear designer a long-term space in the highly-coveted Cockpit Arts. These stories swarmed about in our heads for months, precisely because each respondent had such a unique pathway or a particular niche in London fashion that had kept them in business for nearly twenty years. Most of these designers were female. This was fashion-human-capital at work. The knitwear designer who we interviewed reported a longstanding single contract with a well-known London department store for whom she produced, with the help of just one assistant, a steady flow of cashmere jumpers whose unique colour palette she retained as a trade secret. She had a very precise knowledge of how many pieces she could complete each week. These designers were out of the spotlight, typically critical of the commercial superficiality of *Vogue*-led fashion agendas and more interested in wider professional discussions about where and how fashion and clothing can connect with other art and design fields. What emerged from this fashion-human-capital self-audit model was a series of female-dominated self-organised professional fashion urban networks. These existed as a means of extending and sustaining some of the liberal cosmopolitan values and wide cultural interests the designers were exposed to during their time at art and design school, and which they knew they needed to keep their fashion imaginations alive. This kind of network also functioned as a means of keeping abreast of possible job moves and of freelance opportunities; it embodied the kind of 'network sociality' defined by Wittel (2001).

To sum up, the London scene was led by informal networks of former art and design school and predominantly female graduates. In working to maintain a cross-sector involvement in

---

[16] Interview with Rose Sinclair London.

the city's fashion companies, high-end as well as high-street, they had also created a something of a professional support system, a buffer against the hard-edged 'fashion human capital' *dispositif,* which in the context of the modern work society imposed a set of career pathways which were by necessity idiosyncratic and contingent. Thus individuals we interviewed had moved from the likes of *Laura Ashley* and *Dorothy Perkins* to *Margaret Howell.* Dr Christine Checsinka, a former senior designer at *Margaret Howell,* part of this generational cohort, and one of the only two black British designers who we were able to interview for this project, described her career as a designer before becoming an academic, while also retaining her own studio practice:

> I left art school with the offer of a place on the MA at CSTMs but I wanted to earn money so I took a job in the Burton Group (including *Topshop).* Right from the start we were given a free range. There was a large design team and in many ways it was like being back at art school but we also learnt more about the business. We were encouraged to use our imaginations and show our work, we did our research, we went to look at exhibitions, and all the things you do while still studying.

These kinds of biographical solutions which in Checsinka's case have entailed a good deal of movement across different types of work in the sector, followed by a shift into doctoral work and then more recently an independent studio practice which brings fashion and fine art more closely together, belie the dearth of strong policy-making in the field which I referred to at the start of this chapter. There is also an irony here, given the status of the art and design schools up and down the UK, from Aberdeen to Falmouth, as powerhouses for the production of all that is distinctive and successful about British fashion design: their leaders have not, so far, managed to garner the attention of city and regional powers to make a case for a more dispersed fashion industry, including hubs and centres for growth and job creation in those many cities where there are plenty of unused post-industrial spaces. This lack of policy infrastructure accounts for the hardships accruing from both the 'fashion human capital' *dispositif,* and from the absence of accessible 'fashion spaces-of-labour'.

Milan as a city for start-ups?

We have so far commented not just on the structural features of the urban economies but also on the atmospherics of the small-scale fashion scenes as we encountered them. Berlin was both relaxed and dynamic, full of events, projects, bids to be submitted. London epitomised

the idea that time is money. A calculative grid about being available for an interview was evidently in place. The fashion designer appeared to have no option but to consider himself or herself as 'human capital', tutored to invest only where some sort of return could be envisaged. This gave to the interviews and even the events a more formal dimension; the atmosphere was polite and helpful, but 'costed'. In Milan we were not prepared for the much more emotionally highly-charged atmosphere. It was here we witnessed the absolute impact of graduate unemployment and the feelings of despair which having to rely on parents well into the twenties bestowed on young people, especially when they had been trained to expect a full professional life. Therefore the overwhelming reality of the research undertaken in Milan was that becoming involved in a fashion start-up was a great escape from the demoralising experience of unemployment and an emotionally cathartic process, even when the returns were small. Young men and women alike provided accounts of this move into self-employment in vivid terms. As the comments below show, it was a matter of gaining self-respect, being busy and having a professional identity:

'We applied for so many jobs and got so many rejections. We were both depressed. But we started Flatwig, we just invested 500 Euros. Very low budget' (Flatwig).

'I am learning how to become a business woman, an entrepreneur, and its fun, and the more I make money from my creations, the more I gain self-confidence' (Camilla Vinciguerra, BeConvertible).

Most of the cohort were forced to remain living at home with their parents. The small income they managed to generate would be supplemented with other forms of family support, from providing a studio space to help with paperwork. There are no welfare-to-work schemes and nothing in the way of local or national government programmes to encourage cultural entrepreneurship. This means that initiatives are from the start autonomous and self-organised. It also means that many such activities have emerged from within already politicised radical groups, one example of which is the fab-lab movement (titled WeMake) organised by Zoe Romano, Constantino BonGiorno and others (with some trickle of EU funding), and the alternative fashion production activities undertaken at the Isola della Moda on the outskirts of Milan (D'Ovidio and Pradel 2013). The focus for the CREATe work was on the more scattered start-ups which were springing into being in and around Milan, which we heard about through word-of-mouth and social media friendship networks. Here we came

across a range of micro-businesses set up with minimal capital and working on a proverbial shoestring basis. The very existence of such enterprises and the enthusiasm with which they were pursued were counters to the anxiety and depression which unemployment and strings of unpaid internships had wrought upon the young precarious population, as Berardi has described (Berardi 2009). Thus it was the affective dimension which was most prominent in the course of the interviews and follow-up email conversations and Skype sessions with the Italian designers.

At the same time we could see that there was also a way in which this predominantly female cohort was also plugging into and replenishing a number of artisanal and heritage traditions long associated with Italian fashion, working with silks, for example, and in leather goods. Our respondents varied, from those designing and making silk dresses for sale online via Facebook and eBay, to a few who had managed to set up a bespoke atelier system specialising in wedding dresses. Others comprised friends making jewellery together or creating lines of environmentally friendly and elegant T shirts. The 'fashion spaces-of-labour' here were informal and ranged from the home, including the kitchen and bedroom, to the small studio space funded by a parent. There was less emphasis on 'female-led "post Fordist place making strategies"' (Colomb 2012), for the reason that Italy and Milan already many decades ago had forged a globally renowned fashion identity. In this context 'fashion human capital' equated with a pushing forward of young women in areas which in the past had been dominated by skilled craftsmen, a process of 'gendered social innovation' through creative artisanship (Lindberg 2015). While economic geographers have pointed to the death of the so-called 'Third Italy', we saw signs of artisanal fashion being brought back to life at this micro-business level (Hadjimichalis 2005). Having already referred to the prevailing economic structures which underpin the social enterprise ethos in Berlin and the human capital model in London, arguably it is the heritage of the artisan workshop with provides a model of creative labour in Italy, re-discovered, in a climate of economic adversity, by a new generation of mostly female designers[17].

---

[17] Hadjimichalis (2005) makes the point that for at least two decades the children of those who worked for the fashion companies of the 'Third Italy' wanted nothing more than to escape this kind of work, leaving the outsourced production to be taken up by migrant populations, in particular from China. So it is significant to see post- 2008 these new artisan workshops, female-led and self-organised.

Conclusion: change the pedagogy

What this research project has shown with perspicacity is that there is an urgent need for the fashion design sector to develop modes of organisation and association which operate outside the existing frames of the British Fashion Council, the newly formed German Fashion Council and the Italian Chamber of Commerce. Underpinning this call is the need also for a focus on the immaterial labour of fashion working lives, and the tensions between fashion as 'passionate work' and the reality of highly individualised pathways working exceptionally long hours to ensure that rent or mortgages are paid and that food is on the table. The British art and design schools are the envy of the world, and they occupy a leading position in shaping fashion culture. Fashion pedagogy could play an important role in debunking the romanticism that has been so central to its mission, that is an unconscious element of the curriculum. In the light of student activism, this is a good point in time to make the case for fashion precarity to be addressed. We have learnt a lot about the potential for 'female-led "post-Fordist place-making"' in fashion neighbourhoods in Berlin. We have also seen the sheer determination of young Italians to escape the stranglehold of unemployment by means of 'gendered social innovation' through creative artisanship (Lindberg 2015). UK Heads of School could look to these developments and embark on courses of action which would involve forming stronger relationships with local government. Armed with a vocabulary informed by labour rights, and the building up of regional fashion economies as a spur for female job creation, this kind of agenda would be just the beginning of a more diverse fashion industry in the UK. The European element in our CREATe work demonstrated the value of cultural exchanges, which in light of Brexit seemed all the more important. As is apparent from the above account, many of our Berlin and Milan respondents ironically looked to the UK for its radicalism in fashion and for the way in which fashion connected with popular music and working-class subcultures. As one young Milanese designer said: 'the dream would be Brick Lane'.

Let us conclude this admittedly Western Eurocentric account with some further considerations. Is there feminist value to be gained by removing the idea of cultural or social entrepreneurship from the equation despite the heuristic value stemming from Foucauldian understandings of incitements to self-govern? This, in the light of new feminist activisms across so many walks of life, permits closer attention being paid to the potential for the generation of new kinds of livelihoods in the context of post-industrial urban economies where fashion is also now occupying a prominent place amongst environmental campaigners.

Here we can point to local female-led regionalised independent fashion based on re-cycling, upcycling, re-use and with this an influx of new micro-producers able to widen the aesthetic lens of fashion while refuting also the schedules and 'seasons' which have been dictated for so long by the mainstream. Critical fashion studies inside the academy would also attend to a host of issues mentioned in passing in this essay, for a start the under-representation of BAME students training in the field and a similarly low ratio across the industry itself, likewise the bunching of women in the big companies in middle management with a white male hegemony right across the most senior levels something that continues unabated. A final point is one for further reflection. We come up against a longstanding dilemma for feminist scholarship on work and employment. Working in a female-dominated sector like fashion does not guarantee gender equality or indeed even female-friendly policies being implemented. In addition we will find inevitably some women identifying as feminist and others not. Even then the tendency in workplace politics is for liberal feminism with all its concerns about glass ceilings and equal opportunities alongside diversity management to dominate. Elsewhere there is an institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming ideas as signalling an official endorsement of feminist ideals. The challenge then would be for a feminist critical fashion studies to address these issues inside the classroom which suggest also the possible value of a labour and work inflected element not just into the curriculum but integral to fashion design education.

Special thanks to Bettina Springer, Ares Kalandides and Marte Hentschel in Berlin and Giannino Malossi in Milan.

References

Arvidsson A et al (2011) 'Passionate Work : Labour Conditions in Italian Fashion', in Journal for Cultural Research 14.3.

Banks M and O Connor J (2017) 'Inside the Whale (and how to get out of there): Moving on from two decades of creative industries research' European Journal of Cultural Studies vol 20 (6)

Beck U (2000) The Brave New World of Work, Polity, Cambridge.

Berardi F (2009) The Soul At Work: From Alienation to Autonomy, MIT. MA.

Brown W (2016) Undoing the Demos, Zone Books, NY.

 Colomb C (2012) 'Pushing the Urban Frontier; temporary uses of space, city marketing and the creative discourses in 2000s Berlin', in Urban Affairs, No 34 Vol 2.

DCMS (2001) Creative Industries Mapping Document, UK Government.

D'Ovidio M and Pradel M (2012) 'Social Innovation and Institutionalisation in the Cognitive-Cultural Economy' in Cities, August.

Entwistle J (2009) The Aesthetic Economy of Fashion: Markets and Values in Clothes and Modelling, Berg, London.

Entwistle J and Wissinger E (eds) (2012) Fashion Models: Image, Industry, Texts, Bloomsbury, London.

Feher M (2018) Rated Agency, Zone Books, MIT Press Cambridge MA

Florida R (2002) The Rise of the Creative Class, Basic Books, New York.

Foucault M (2008) The Birth of Biopolitics, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

Gilbert D (2011) 'World Cities of Fashion' in Welters L and Lillethun A (eds) The Fashion Reader, Berg, Oxford.

Hadjimichalis C (2005) 'The end of the Third Italy as we knew it ?' in Antipodes Vol 38 Issue 1

Hesmondhalgh D et al (2015) Culture, Economy and Politics: the Case of New Labour Palgrave Basingstoke.

Jakob D (2009) Beyond Creative Production Networks: The Development of Intra-Metropolitan Creative Industry Clusters in Berlin and New York, Rhombos, Berlin.

Kalandides A (2014) Report on Berlin Micro-producers of Fashion, CREATe, AHRC University of Glasgow.

Kern L and McLean H (2017)'Undecidability and the Urban: Feminist Pathways Through Urban Political Economy in ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies 16.(3).

Lange B (2012) 'Value Creation in the Creative Economy: the case of electronic club music in Germany' Journal of Economic Geography 82 (2) 149-169 .

Larner W and Molloy H (2009) 'Globalisation, the 'new 'economy and working women: theorizing from the New Zealand fashion industry' in Feminist Theory 10, 35-59.

Lindberg (2015) Paper delivered at SMART JUMP ERASMUS, Gavle Sweden.

Mentisieri G (2017) Le Plus Belle Metier au Monde, Editions de la Couverte, Paris.

McRobbie (1998) British Fashion design: Rag Trade or Image Industry, Routledge, London.

McRobbie (2015) Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries Polity Press Cambridge.

Manske A (2015) Kapitalische geister in der Kultur und Kreativewirtschaft Transcript Verlag Bielefeld.

Scott AJ (2000) The Cultural Economy of Cities Sage London

Tarlo E (2016) Entanglements:The Secret Lives of Hair, Oneworld, London.

Wittel A (2001) 'Towards a Network Sociality' in Theory Culture and Society 18 (6) 51-76.

Wowereit K et al (2008) The Creative Industries Report Berlin