

Reimagining Fashion: The Interplay of Material Dynamics and Affectivity in Fashion Assemblages

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ABSTRACT

When we encounter fashion—whether by looking at it, wearing it, or creating it—we often sense its immaterial affectivity, its ability to connect with and transcend the materiality of a garment or look. Fashion embodies the power to evoke transformation, yet our vocabulary to discuss these affective experiences is limited. This paper explores how fashion’s affective power emerges from assemblages of materials, bodies, forces, spaces, and temporalities. It emphasizes the need to unlearn traditional fashion perspectives centred on visual paradigms and to integrate emergent perspectives from new materialism and affect studies, focusing on relationships, community, and emergence. By reassessing and re-evaluating fashion practices through the lens of material dynamics and affectivity, we can gain new insights and foster innovative approaches.

Focusing on the dressed body as an assemblage, this paper investigates how fashion materialities interact in space and time, presenting opportunities for emergent materialities and new understandings of fashion. Assemblages are considered open-ended gatherings of various human and non-human participants that, through their interaction, become productive. Key discussions on assemblage theory include Manuel DeLanda’s *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2016), which builds on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and Bruno Latour’s *Actor Network Theory* (2005). Drawing on these perspectives, along with Jane Bennett’s concept of assemblages as event-spaces and Karen Barad’s notion of intra-activity, this paper defines assemblages as productive gatherings of diverse participants.

The research presents two speculative fashion performances to analyse the dynamics of dressed body assemblages and their resonances. These performances reveal qualities of movement, emergent power relations, and the shifting volumes of materials and bodies in space. They offer new ways to analyse and attend to affective encounters with fashion.

By focusing on the dynamics of material interactions, this paper provides resources for fashion practitioners to engage with and develop creative materials and attune to affective resonances in innovative performative environments. This approach fosters

a deeper understanding of the interplay between fashion's materiality and affectivity, offering new insights for both theoretical exploration and practical application in the fashion industry. Through unlearning and reassessment, we can transform our approach to fashion, creating more thoughtful, responsive, and dynamic practices.

This paper aligns with the conference theme of communities by advocating for the collective unlearning of entrenched fashion practices. It encourages communities of designers, scholars, and practitioners to reassess, re-analyse, and re-evaluate fashion perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding of the interplay between fashion's materiality and affectivity.

Keywords: assemblage, affect, materiality, performance

INTRODUCTION

Understanding fashion's wider contexts requires recognising the phenomenon of affect. Fashion is often discussed by separating the materiality of garments from the immaterial meanings, values, and intensities attached to them. However, recognizing the mutuality of materiality and affect can illuminate our understanding of fashion phenomena. This research bridges the gap between fashion's materiality and its absorbing affective forces.

When we encounter fashion, its influence often surpasses the mere materiality of a garment or the visual appeal of a look. Fashion's capacity to evoke emotion, transformation, and connection positions it as a dynamic and affective phenomenon. Yet, despite this immaterial potency, our vocabulary for describing these affective experiences remains limited. This paper seeks to expand the discourse surrounding fashion by exploring its affective power through the lens of assemblages, as informed by new materialism and affect studies.

By focusing on the interplay of materials, bodies, forces, spaces, and temporalities, this investigation invites us to unlearn traditional, visually centred perspectives on fashion. Instead, it emphasizes relationality, emergence, and community, offering a new framework to understand and engage with fashion's dynamic materiality and affectivity. This discussion bridges theoretical explorations and practical applications, offering a path toward more innovative and thoughtful fashion practices.

Assemblages: A Framework for Understanding Fashion

The concept of assemblages provides a powerful tool for analysing fashion's material and immaterial interactions. Rooted in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988; 1987), assemblages are open-ended gatherings of diverse participants—human and non-human—that interact in dynamic and productive ways. This framework has been further developed by theorists like Manuel DeLanda (2016), Bruno

Latour (2005), Jane Bennett (2009), and Karen Barad (2007), whose insights illuminate the complex relationships within assemblages and their capacity for emergence.

Assemblage theory shifts the focus from static entities to dynamic processes. Fashion, when understood as an assemblage, is not merely a collection of garments or designs but a vibrant interaction of materials, bodies, and spaces. This approach invites us to consider how fabric, movement, design, and wearer converge to produce affective experiences that transcend the sum of their parts. By redefining fashion as an event-space of assemblages, we can uncover new ways to analyse and engage with its transformative power.

The Dressed Body as Assemblage

Central to this exploration is the concept of the dressed body as an assemblage. The dressed body is not a fixed entity but conceptualised as a site of interaction where materials, forms, movements, and environments converge. Clothing interacts with the body, responding to its movements and extending its presence into the surrounding space. This interplay produces an affective resonance, a sense of transformation or connection that is felt rather than seen.

Theories by Jane Bennett and Karen Barad provide further insights into this dynamic. Bennett's notion of assemblages as event-spaces highlights their emergent and productive nature, while Barad's concept of intra-activity emphasizes the mutual constitution of entities through their interactions. These perspectives challenge us to rethink fashion's materiality, recognizing it as an active participant in the creation of affective experiences.

Speculative Fashion Performances

This section explores the use of speculative performances to investigate fashion's affective and material dimensions. Practice-based methods in fashion research are essential to this exploration, offering tools to engage with and critique traditional approaches. Grounded in creative processes, these methods allow researchers to interrogate and reimagine fashion practices through experiential and embodied techniques.

Drawing on *Fashion Knowledge: Theories, Methods, Practices and Politics* by Elke Gaugele and Monica Titton (2022), the value of practice-based methods lies in their ability to bridge theoretical inquiry with tangible, material experimentation. These methods emphasize the role of the researcher as both practitioner and observer, enabling a deep engagement with the complexities of fashion as a cultural and material phenomenon. Gaugele and Titton highlight how such methods foster critical reflexivity, challenging entrenched hierarchies and creating space for innovative, emergent practices.

Similarly, Heike Jenss's *Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites, and Practices* underscores the importance of site-specific and practice-oriented approaches in uncovering new insights (2016). Jenss argues that by embedding research within the practices of making and wearing, scholars can access nuanced understandings of fashion's materialities and its affective resonances. This integration of practice and theory provides a robust framework for analysing how fashion operates as a dynamic assemblage of bodies, materials, and temporalities.

Rethinking Fashion through Performance-Based Practices

Performance-based works in fashion research have long been employed to explore the materiality and affectivity of fashion in ways that go beyond visual aesthetics. These approaches prioritize the embodied experience of fashion, emphasizing the agency of both material and human participants. As fashion scholars increasingly recognize the limitations of traditional, static representations of garments and design, the use of performance as a research method has gained prominence.

Performance-based research in fashion often emphasizes the physical, embodied nature of fashion practices, where the process of creation and the act of wearing are themselves forms of exploration. This approach is particularly valuable in disrupting conventional, linear narratives about fashion as something that is simply worn and consumed. Instead, it frames fashion as an interactive, performative experience that emerges from the relationships between people, materials, and environments.

Richard Malone, an alumnus of Central Saint Martins, showcased his exhibition "Rinse Repeat" at Now Gallery in London from November 28, 2018, to February 3, 2019. This exhibition aimed to capture the essence of fashion processes, fostering a dialogue among creators, performers, and viewers. Malone crafted a series of wearable patterned textile works, worn by performers who animated them through mesmerizing and rhythmic dance-like movements. These performances were captured in videos and images within the gallery space, with the textile coverings also installed as soft sculptures. The core of Malone's works lay in elevating fashion cloth into something more profound, aiming to democratize fashion toward freedom and expression through movement and spontaneous interaction between performers and constructed cloth sculptures.

Malone collaborated with dancers to create performance works that focused on the materiality of cloth. The performances and images were striking and dynamic, enhanced by vibrant patterns across the wearable sculptures. Malone viewed this performance work not as separate from his high fashion label but rather as an extension of the fashion process, reinforcing aspects of his collections and his views on the body, garments, and fashion-making. Malone emphasized the importance of people in his work, stating, "I don't think there is much to clothes, until people are in them." This perspective underscored his belief that fashion gains meaning and

substance only when connected with the body, making the body central to his practice.

Important work in fashion performance research has been undertaken by Jessica Bugg who utilizes performance in her fashion research, as seen in her work "Red Shoelace Dress" (2003). This performance work aimed to explore the embodied and expressive effects of dress and movement on both the wearer and the viewer. Through qualitative research methods, including questionnaires and interviews, Bugg examined how wearing and moving in garments affected conceptual understandings of the garment by both wearers and viewers. Her performance work focused on understanding movement in design practice and the conceptual garments' responsive and embodied effects on wearers and viewers.

Similarly, Anna-Sophie Berger's "Modeanweisung with Skirts" (2014) at JTT Gallery in New York employed language, performance, and mixed-media installation to explore interactions between the body and garments. Berger directed performers dressed in uniform solid colors, with photographs of their bodies printed onto flat surfaces alongside silk twill fabric pieces of the same size. The performance involved directing performers through a series of mundane movements while exploring the tension between the physical body, flat representations, and fabric.

Ulrik Martin Larsen, a performance practitioner and fashion researcher, focused on interactions between the body and garments in his work. In his thesis "Dressing Wearing, Movement Directed by Dress, Dress Directed by Movement" (2016), Larsen prioritized the pattern of movement in interactions with garments, proposing acts of dressing and costuming as co-productive with choreography and scenography. Larsen's experimental performances explored the ways movement, choreography, and performance could inform garment design, emphasizing the dynamic potential of garments in performance contexts.

Overall, these practitioners utilise performance as a tool for exploring the relationship between the body and fashion, uncovering interactions that inform our understanding of clothing design, materiality, and movement. Through their interdisciplinary approaches, they challenge traditional notions of fashion presentation and invite viewers to reconsider the ways in which clothing can shape and be shaped by human interaction.

Drawing from the work of key practitioner researchers and scholars we see how the integration of performance into fashion research allows for the exploration of new materialities, new ways of perceiving and moving within garments, and new modes of experiencing fashion in practice.

These methodological perspectives inform the speculative performances discussed

below, where practice-based methods are employed to investigate the interplay between materiality and affect. By situating the dressed body as an assemblage and engaging with materials through performative acts, these projects illuminate the transformative potential of fashion, offering fresh insights into its affective power and material dynamics.

Performance 1: Material Interactions

The first performance, titled *Material Interactions*, sought to explore the dynamics of human movement through a structured textile form, departing from previous works focused on fragmented materials. This piece aimed to activate a more stable, cohesive material that would engage performers' bodies in unique ways. The foundation of the performance lay in an abstract sewn shape, which allowed for interactions that fragmented materials could not facilitate.

For this textile form, materials were carefully selected based on their properties and potential for performance. Medium-weight white silk taffeta, with its slightly lustrous surface and structured creasing, was chosen for its sound and shape-retaining qualities, typically associated with formal attire. A piece of blue-striped clear vinyl was incorporated as a whimsical yet industrial counterpoint, and 30 cm of 5 cm-wide strip elastic added stretch, enhancing the materiality of the piece.

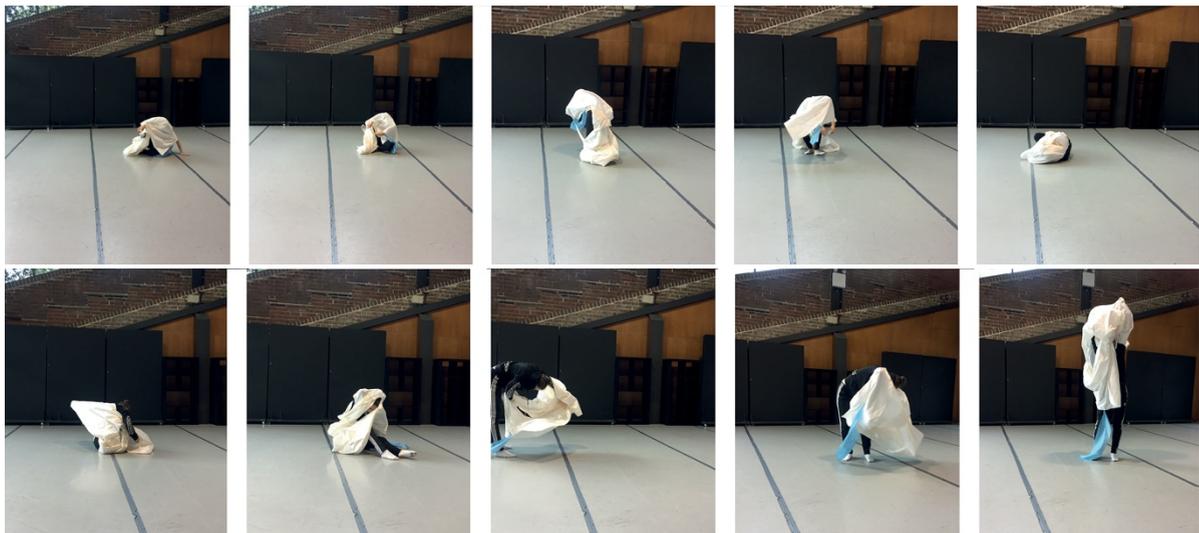


Figure 1. *Material Interactions* (Ellen) (2017), Alyssa Choat, image compilation.

The construction process was largely improvised, involving twisting and sewing the silk taffeta, integrating elastic for varied manipulations, and loosely attaching the vinyl to maintain unpredictability. The performance featured a collaboration with female dancers in Sydney, who explored diverse movement styles through improvisational sessions inspired by techniques like Contact Improvisation and Pedestrian Movement. These sessions emphasized connection, encouraging fluid partnerships and explorations of specific body areas, such as hips or shoulders, through abstract movements.

Performance 2: Slippage

The second performance, titled *Slippage*, explored the human body interacting with materials within flows of movement. This work emphasized the visibility of the body and its intimate engagement with fragmented materials, contrasting with the hidden bodily interactions in earlier projects like *Deframed*. Here, the performer moved with and within the materials, creating a dynamic interplay that highlighted the materialities of clothing during movement.

Staged in a closed studio with only the performer and researcher present, *Slippage* subverted the fashion photoshoot trope by replacing posed models with an active performer. Using crude black plastic as the primary material, the performance foregrounded the lively qualities of the materials over aestheticized body imagery. Large sheets of matte black plastic and smaller shiny plastic strips were curated to allow diverse intimate interactions.



Figure 2: *Slippage* (2016), Alyssa Choat, video still compilation.

The performer, was guided by simple parameters: maintain physical contact with the material, explore movement possibilities, and generate continuous motion. Wearing black shorts and a cropped top, her improvised interactions with the materials created stark contrasts between flesh, fabric, and light reflections. The resulting performance emphasized constant motion, with Penkova bending under, pulling, and layering the plastic materials to maintain contact.

Raw video footage of the performance was edited to amplify movements, exploring temporal manipulations like slowing or reversing sequences. These edits emphasized the interplay between performer and materials, including light effects, offering insights into the dynamic relationship between the two. *Slippage* highlighted the emergent qualities of material and body interactions, setting a foundation for further explorations

in performance and fashion practice.

Implications for Fashion Practices

The exploration of material and affective dynamics in fashion, particularly through speculative performances, holds profound implications for fashion practice. It encourages a shift from traditional, visual-centred approaches to fashion design and production, to more embodied, dynamic, and relational practices that embrace the fluidity of fashion as an event-space. By focusing on the interconnectedness of materials, bodies, and spaces, this research challenges us to rethink how we create, experience, and understand fashion, offering new pathways for practitioners to engage with the deeper, more affective dimensions of fashion. This shift is also aligned with contemporary trends in fashion research, where performance-based methodologies are increasingly being recognized as a crucial tool for investigating the material and immaterial dimensions of fashion.

Material Interactions and Creative Possibilities

The implications for fashion practice, as derived from speculative performances such as *Material Interactions* and *Slippage*, offer a new way of thinking about materials and their roles within the fashion system. Traditionally, fashion design focuses on the final garment and its aesthetic representation, but these performance-based works encourage a shift toward considering the embodied, performative potential of materials and the ways in which they act upon the body.

In the case of *Material Interactions*, the structured textile form engaged performers' bodies in new, innovative ways. The choice of materials, such as silk taffeta, vinyl, and elastic, was not simply about visual aesthetics but was also informed by the properties of these materials—how they responded to movement, how they interacted with the body, and how they created new material experiences. This approach opens up creative possibilities for fashion designers to experiment with the material properties of their creations, designing garments that engage with the body and environment in a more dynamic, responsive way.

This notion of *material interaction* as central to fashion design challenges conventional methods of garment creation, which often prioritize fabric selection based on aesthetics or trends. By focusing on how materials behave and interact with human bodies and spaces, designers can push the boundaries of what fashion can do—creating pieces that are not only visually striking but also interactive, dynamic, and performative. This can lead to more immersive and experiential fashion collections that invite the wearer and the viewer to experience fashion in ways that are emotional, physical, and affective.

In performance practice, the engagement with materiality is also a form of dialogue. As seen in *Slippage*, where large sheets of black plastic were used as both a material

and a medium through which the performer's body interacted, the materials do not just serve a decorative or utilitarian purpose—they become participants in the performance. In this context, material is not static but fluid, constantly in motion and in relation to the performer's body. This idea of *material agency* is central to the emerging field of new materialism in fashion studies, which posits that materials themselves are active agents that shape and are shaped by the bodies and environments with which they interact.

By recognizing the material agency of fashion, designers can move beyond simply thinking of clothing as a "covering" or aesthetic choice, and instead begin to see materials as active partners in the creation of fashion. This perspective opens up new possibilities for how garments are created, worn, and experienced. Designers who engage with this material agency are encouraged to think about how their designs can be participatory, interactive, and transformative, fostering deeper connections between the wearer, the garment, and the environment.

Performance and Sustainability in Fashion

The use of performance-based practices also offers an avenue for rethinking sustainability in fashion. Traditional approaches to fashion production are often centred around mass production, consumer demand, and the aesthetics of a season or trend. However, performance-based fashion research emphasizes slow, experiential, and embodied interactions with materials. This approach prioritizes the process over the product and encourages the creation of garments that have a longer lifespan—both in terms of physical durability and cultural relevance. The process of making and wearing becomes as important as the final garment, with designers encouraged to embrace sustainable practices that prioritize relationships, materiality, and the potential for garments to evolve and transform over time.

The emphasis on performance allows for a more critical examination of fashion's environmental and social impact. As seen in *Slippage*, the engagement with materials through movement and interaction can expose the potential wastefulness of mass-produced garments or the fleeting nature of fast fashion. In contrast, by focusing on how materials interact with the body, designers can create garments that are not only visually compelling but also sustainable, adaptable, and more aligned with the ethos of "slow fashion" and environmental consciousness. Performance-based research invites designers to think creatively about how garments can be transformed, repurposed, or adapted to minimize waste and create longer-lasting, more meaningful fashion experiences.

Expanding Collaborative Practices and Community Engagement

Performance-based works, such as those discussed in this research, also encourage more collaborative approaches to fashion practice. The collaborative nature of performance—whether involving dancers, performers, designers, or other

participants—highlights the importance of shared knowledge, creative exchange, and community involvement in the process of fashion creation. These performances are not individualistic acts; they are collective efforts that emphasize the importance of relationality in fashion.

For instance, in *Material Interactions*, the collaborative sessions with dancers were crucial in exploring how materials could interact with movement. This kind of collaboration underscores the importance of cross-disciplinary dialogue and exchange in the fashion industry. Performance-based works invite designers to think beyond traditional boundaries, engaging with artists from other fields such as dance, theatre, and visual arts. These interactions foster creative innovation, allowing fashion designers to explore new forms of expression and engagement that go beyond the conventional garment.

Similarly, the use of performance-based methods can be seen as an act of community-building within the fashion industry. By moving away from individualistic design processes and embracing collaborative, participatory approaches, fashion practitioners can create more inclusive, sustainable, and innovative practices. These methods challenge the dominant, top-down structures of the fashion industry and advocate for more democratic, community-oriented modes of production, consumption, and critique.

In sum, the implications of performance-based practices for fashion research are profound and far-reaching. Performance allows for a deeper exploration of fashion's materiality and affectivity, encouraging a shift away from static, visual-centred approaches to more dynamic, relational, and embodied practices. By incorporating performance into fashion practice, designers and researchers can uncover new insights into how fashion interacts with the body, materials, and spaces, opening up new creative possibilities for the fashion industry. Moreover, performance-based practices align with broader trends in fashion research and sustainability, fostering more inclusive, collaborative, and innovative approaches to fashion creation.

As this research demonstrates, speculative performances in fashion not only challenge traditional boundaries but also provide new frameworks for thinking about sustainability, community engagement, and creative innovation in fashion. By embracing performance as a tool for exploring the material and affective dimensions of fashion, practitioners can cultivate a more dynamic, transformative, and inclusive fashion practice—one that prioritizes relationality, emergence, and community.

Conclusion: Toward a New Understanding of Fashion

This research into the material and affective dynamics of fashion through the lens of assemblage theory and speculative performances offers a significant step in unlearning traditional, visual-centric understandings of fashion. By prioritizing the

interrelations of materials, bodies, spaces, and temporalities, it challenges the conventional view of fashion as a purely visual and aesthetic practice. The dynamics of these interconnected elements reveal how fashion's materialities extend beyond superficial beauty, calling us to consider their deeper, emergent qualities—qualities that are dynamic, relational, and often affective in nature.

The notion of unlearning fashion—central to the conference theme—invites us to reassess the dominant paradigms of fashion. It calls for a shift from static, hierarchical, and visually driven frameworks towards an approach that embraces fluidity, collaboration, and multiplicity. Fashion is not merely about consumption or the visual presentation of garments; it is a continuously evolving practice shaped by diverse human and non-human participants whose interactions produce new meanings, experiences, and affective resonances. This paper, therefore, underscores the need for fashion communities—whether designers, educators, scholars, or consumers—to engage in a collective unlearning of established norms. By re-assessing and re-analysing the material dynamics and affectivity of fashion, we open the door to new ways of practicing and understanding fashion that are more inclusive, responsive, and innovative.

The speculative performances discussed throughout this paper underscore the significance of engaging with fashion as a dynamic assemblage. These performances provide insight into how materials, bodies, and environments can be reconfigured to create affective experiences that challenge the status quo of visual consumption and representational practice in fashion. The act of unlearning allows us to rethink fashion as an embodied, emergent process where garments, materials, and bodies are not separate entities but interwoven participants in a larger network of relational dynamics. It is through this shift in perspective that we can begin to foster a more critical and nuanced understanding of fashion, one that goes beyond appearances to embrace the complex ways in which fashion affects and shapes human experience.

In the context of the conference theme, "Communities," this research advocates for the collective re-evaluation of fashion practices. Fashion, in this reimagined form, becomes a community-driven process—one in which the boundaries between designer, wearer, audience, and material are porous and constantly shifting. Communities of practice, whether within fashion education, the fashion industry, or broader social contexts, must work together to unlearn the restrictive paradigms that have long defined the field. In doing so, they can develop new, more holistic approaches to fashion that embrace community-building, sustainability, and inclusivity.

Moreover, unlearning fashion to re-assess its material and affective dimensions opens up possibilities for fashion to contribute meaningfully to social and environmental sustainability. By recognizing fashion's capacity to affect not only individual

experiences but also collective identities, we can shift from a consumer-driven, production-centric model to one that values relationality, process, and community-building. The materials we use, the ways we wear, and the performances we engage in all hold the potential to transform our understanding of what fashion can be in a world where the importance of interconnectedness and sustainability is becoming increasingly evident.

This re-assessment is crucial for fashion education and practice. Designers, scholars, and practitioners who embrace this expanded understanding of fashion are better equipped to respond to the complex challenges of the contemporary world—whether they be environmental, social, or cultural. By integrating new materialist theories and affect studies into fashion curricula, we can encourage future generations of fashion professionals to think critically about their work and its implications. We can create a fashion industry that not only responds to trends but actively participates in reshaping the cultural and material worlds in which it exists.

This paper also aligns with the growing demand for more inclusive and diverse perspectives within fashion studies and practice. Fashion has long been critiqued for its Eurocentric, exclusionary approaches to beauty, identity, and design. By adopting an assemblage-based, relational understanding of fashion, we open the door to more diverse and inclusive practices that reflect a broader range of experiences, identities, and cultures. Communities that engage in unlearning fashion can cultivate practices that celebrate diversity and challenge the hegemonic forces that have historically shaped the fashion industry.

Ultimately, this research provides a framework for rethinking fashion as a dynamic and relational practice. By unlearning traditional perspectives and embracing new materialist and affective frameworks, we can foster more inclusive, sustainable, and transformative fashion practices. The insights gained from this research contribute not only to academic discourse but also to practical applications within fashion communities—whether in design, education, or industry. The call to unlearn and re-evaluate is not just a theoretical exercise but a necessary step toward building a fashion future that is more responsive, ethical, and community focused.

As fashion practitioners, educators, and scholars, we are tasked with creating spaces for this collective unlearning. Through this process, we can reimagine fashion as a vibrant, emergent force that connects individuals, communities, and materials in meaningful ways. The work of unlearning is ongoing and collective, requiring active participation from all those involved in the fashion ecosystem. By re-assessing, re-analysing, and re-evaluating our perspectives on fashion, we can shape a future where fashion serves as a powerful tool for both personal and collective transformation.

In conclusion, this paper calls for a paradigm shift in the way we understand and

practice fashion. Through unlearning established norms and embracing a relational, affective, and material approach, we can foster a more dynamic and inclusive fashion ecosystem. By reconsidering fashion as an assemblage—a vibrant and emergent interaction of materials, bodies, and forces—we can reframe the discourse surrounding fashion to reflect its true potential as a transformative and community-building practice. This approach will not only enrich our understanding of fashion but also empower communities to engage in fashion practices that are more attuned to the needs of individuals, communities, and the planet.