

# FASHION AND THE SUFFICIENCY CHALLENGE

Interview with Stéphanie Calvino  
Designer and founder of the Anti\_Fashion Project



Stéphanie Calvino and Li Edelkoort. @Anne Loubet

Stéphanie Calvino is a maverick who studied applied arts, art history and product design before starting her career with a number of graphic design and communications agencies in the French city of Marseille. During the years 2009 to 2015 she worked for La Maison Méditerranéenne des Métiers de la Mode, where her activities centered on helping young brands to develop. Looking for a greater sense of purpose, in 2016 she started the Anti\_Fashion meetings, in partnership with Lidewij Edelkoort. It was the first international conference in France attended by academics and industry figures who came to talk about new societal trends and new, more virtuous, economic models in the fashion industry. As well as face-to-face Anti\_Fashion events, in 2017 she worked with Veja co-founder Sébastien Kopp to develop a mentoring program using fashion and culture to help young people from deprived urban areas in the 18-to-30 age group who are very distanced from the labor market to re-engage with society. Over the following five years, Anti\_Fashion emerged as a leading name in the drive for socially aware circular fashion. She continues to speak all over France, striving to educate people and promote more virtuous forms of production and more responsible forms of consumption. During the COVID pandemic, she helped set up a workshop in Roubaix called Résilience, which employed over 200 people facing difficulties by using the following concept: one skilled person for every two leaners.

The Anti\_Fashion Project, presented by founder Stéphanie Calvino, exists to advocate sustainable models and values, with social impact at the center of its approach. With its origins in the Anti-Fashion manifesto published in 2015 by influencer Lidewij Edelkoort, the Anti\_Fashion Project works with marginalized young people, supporting them toward social insertion. In this interview, she reflects on the resonance of the sufficiency concept in the fashion world, and reminds us of the importance of perceptions and critical questioning as drivers for changing behaviors, particularly among young people.

The Anti\_Fashion Project, an initiative you set up in 2016, embodies a paradox, the desire to bring greater sufficiency to fashion: two concepts seemingly very far apart. What do you think of this apparent paradox, and the concept of sufficiency?

**Stéphanie Calvino:** We need to make a distinction between two linked concepts that make it seem that fashion is very distanced from sufficiency. Fashion and clothing, as items we care for and about, can appear superfluous compared to other more essential needs, which sufficiency demands are met as a priority. And fashion is frequently associated with ostentation and bling, again very far from sufficiency.

In reality, there are ways to respond to this. Let's begin by remembering that the need to clothe ourselves is something essential and lasting, and that filling this need can help support projects that are important and meaningful. Even in the industry, there are initiatives that are helping the emergence of more frugal forms of fashion, as much in looks as in manufacturing. Sitting at the intersection of these challenges, the message of the Anti\_Fashion manifesto published in 2015 by Lidewij Edelkoort,<sup>1</sup> which led directly to the Anti\_Fashion Project, was explicitly designed to sound the alarm about the excesses of an obsolete industry and system, while also stressing the importance and legitimacy of the fashion industry in general. Ultimately, the challenge lies in finding ways to align the fashion industry with the concerns of the age by working to promote a world that is more sustainable in every sense of the word.

<sup>1</sup> Lidewij Edelkoort, world-renowned trend forecaster and founder of the magazine *Bloom*.

In aesthetic and design terms, designers have always tried to co-opt a form of sufficiency into their creations by working with sober shapes, colors and fabrics. Designers such as Alaïa, Margiela and Yoshi Yamamoto unequivocally embrace a very pared down aesthetic, sober by nature, that we also see among a number of designers from northern Europe. But this quest for aesthetic simplicity can sometimes coexist with manufacturing and retailing methods straight out of the fast fashion copybook. Uniqlo embodies this ambivalence: it foregrounds the utility, practicality and simplicity of its products, but is also criticized for its manufacturing practices.<sup>2</sup>

Certain cultural habits, practices, uses and relationships to clothes are worth studying. Japan is an interesting example, with a culture that values alterations, repairs and an anti-accumulation attitude. A Japanese woman will keep her kimono for life. When it comes to objects this same attitude is also found in the practice of *kintsugi*.<sup>3</sup> This humility vis-a-vis clothing is very fascinating.

But putting this aside, it is clear that the notion of sufficiency encompasses a sense of timelessness that is hard to apply to the fashion industry, a byword for constantly renewed desires and aspirations, and endless revivals: we often see certain trends returning in cycles every 30 to 40 years (vintage looks are very on-trend right now). Simply put, the practices of the industry's giants are generally very much the opposite of sufficiency. Here's a number that speaks for itself: Zara releases 52 collections a year, that's one a week... this is close to being out of control.

At the opposite end of the scale, the aim of the Anti\_Fashion manifesto was to call for a return to the fundamentals in terms of materials, style and approaches when designing collections. Far from making designers' jobs easier, this back-to-basics idea is actually far more exacting: how to build powerful signatures while also embracing humility and economy of materials?

At the Anti\_Fashion Project we focus on nurturing and supporting these changes. Founded in 2016, Anti\_Fashion is a participative platform, a research laboratory, that sets up collaborations between different skills and helps create new projects and economic models. The aim of the Anti\_Fashion Project movement is to shine a light on dynamics, initiatives, ideas and actors that are driving renewal in the fashion world and the emergence of a more responsible economy. Some textile and garment workshops are trying to embrace this ethos by thinking very hard about how they make their products using a minimum of materials: every inch of thread is saved to minimize costs in terms of resources and energy.

*Sufficiency goes hand in hand with a return to good sense in fashion, before production as well as afterward*

Sufficiency also goes hand in hand with a return to moderation in fashion, as much before as after production. At Anti\_Fashion we focus on the circular economy, working to ensure that garments that already exist are transformed and recovered, not thrown away. This represents a form of sufficiency. But if these changes are to take root, it is vital to rethink how fashion is taught, to stop telling designers they have to produce a head-spinning number of collections every year if they are to survive.

## FOCUS – THE ANTI\_FASHION MANIFESTO<sup>4</sup>



Published in 2015 by Dutch influencer Lidewij Edelkoort, the Anti\_Fashion manifesto sets out “ten reasons why the fashion system is obsolete.” Edelkoort cites a number of things that have gone wrong, in training at fashion schools as well as in methods used for manufacturing, designing and selling, catwalk shows, marketing, advertising and so on. She is especially scathing of the trend for greater uniformity in design, the shrinking role of creativity and originality, the cult of the “diva”, as well as offshoring and the race for profitability. She calls for a rethink of the entire system so that the fashion industry professions can regain their meaning and dignity.

## Do you see fashion as a lever that can help shape a more desirable relationship with the world and, therefore, encourage changes in behaviors?

S.C.: Of course! Fashion has always been a trend setter, part of the avant-garde, but this is less so today than in the past. If fashion was for a long time almost like a winged horse foreshadowing the changes to come, I feel that for several reasons this is no longer the case today.

The rise of digital tech and social media has revolutionized our relationship with information, allowing often anonymous individuals to gain a profile and potentially far-reaching influence at lightning speed. These changes have reset the dial in terms of how influence is exerted, including within the garment industry where street fashion now dominates over trends dictated by the big-name houses. But if fashion has lost its powers of attraction, this is above all because of the perceived discrepancy between changing lifestyles and changes in the industry: where once

<sup>2</sup> In May 2023, a number of NGOs (Sherpa, Éthique sur l'Étiquette, the European Uyghur Institute) filed a complaint against Uniqlo France, Inditex, SMPC and footwear company Skechers, accusing them of selling products manufactured in Chinese factories that use forced labor by the Uyghur minority.

<sup>3</sup> Kintsugi (金継ぎ, golden joinery) or kintsukuroi (金繕い, golden repair) is a Japanese method for repairing broken pottery using a lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold.

<sup>4</sup> Available from: <https://hkzero851997457.wordpress.com/2021/01/15/anti-fashion-a-manifesto-for-the-next-decade/>  
See also an interview with Lidewij Edelkoort (May 8, 2015): *La mode n'a plus rien à dire [Fashion doesn't have anything to say anymore]*, in *Libération*.

it represented the avant-garde, the industry today seems to be playing catch-up, a prisoner of outdated practices judged harmful to the environment.

Despite this, the fashion world undoubtedly retains its powers of attraction and ability to (re)invent fertile, aspirational and, therefore, desirable new images. We believe that the changes we are working for in the garment industry can have a resonance and influence that extends far wider. The big-name houses have always stood out by using elegant and restrained images, a form of discretion that is the polar opposite of eye-catching bling. Hermès is a case in point.

In reality, what dominates today is the coexistence of contradictory trends: one the one hand the stated desire to see the industry shift to a more responsible model, and on the other hand the success of the trends pages in women's magazines, inciting readers to constantly renew their wardrobes. We're in a transitional phase, one where the out-of-control horse that is the fashion industry continues its frenetic output, despite the increasingly urgent calls to slow things down.

The alternative models we are trying to promote via Anti\_Fashion, focused on recycling and the circular economy, are still very much a minority within the wider fashion and garment ecosystem. And if dramatic events such as the COVID pandemic led some to believe that a trend for degrowth, or at the very least a more restrained attitude to buying clothes, would emerge, in reality people's purchasing practices remain as incessant as ever. If consumers are making judgements, these are above all a result of pressure on spending power, not any green aspirations they may have, despite this messaging being more and more present.

**With these trends in mind, how do you explain the success of platforms like Vinted and leboncoin<sup>5</sup>, which we are told will help encourage consumers to behave with more restraint? Are we not seeing the emergence of a paradox, where buying and reselling secondhand items serves primarily to satisfy the desire to make purchases, which remains as strong as ever?**

**S.C.:** What's interesting about this is the range of uses made of these platforms, and the variety of different types of users.

I feel a distinction has to be made between leboncoin and Vinted, whose communities have very different DNAs. The social dimension is very important to the leboncoin story, much less for Vinted, mostly because interactions are all-digital. For its part, leboncoin has successfully built a community of committed consumers, selling and buying secondhand items because they want to recycle not discard. leboncoin was a pioneer and over the past 20 years it has become something that people do, they consume the leboncoin way, it is like creating a parallel currency.

*We're in a transitional phase, where the out-of-control horse that is the fashion industry continues its frenetic output, despite increasingly urgent calls to slow things down*

These platforms can be used for a variety of ends, not all of them necessarily frugal / sufficient. Buying something cheaper secondhand may, for instance, mean buying more by spending less: this is not a forum where demand and need are questioned, yet this is the first step on the road to sufficiency. It seems that this applies to a good number of Vinted users. At the other end of the spectrum, some users value the recycling that the platform makes possible, using it as a way to reduce their consumption.

Aside from the platforms, it is interesting, sometimes nauseating, to watch how mainstream industry actors have co-opted the codes of the secondhand world. The secondhand racks in the Bon Marché store are priced at top dollar. It is a long way from thrift store sales by the kilo and the System D mindset. Lastly, buying secondhand used to be stigmatized, but has now become a new norm, almost a parallel economy; this is another downside.

**The Anti\_Fashion Project focuses on reimagining our relationship with fashion but it also has a social dimension, working with disadvantaged young people. How are these twin missions linked? How can your "anti" positioning be attractive to young people who have never had the opportunity to renounce it of their own free will?**

**S.C.:** These are core questions. The interplay between environmental and social concerns, as well as between concerns about the garment industry and wider social objectives, has always been part of our DNA. The social side of our work consists of working with young people who are often very alienated from society, supporting them in their journey toward socio-economic integration, particularly through fashion.

Fashion is a tool for capturing their engagement. Our work is to awaken their interest and help them build a professional project, not necessarily related to the fashion industry. What counts is that they find training, a job they're interested in.

By helping them to find their feet, we are fully engaged with challenges that, in the final analysis, relate to sufficiency: how do they want to give meaning to their career path? What are their life goals, their ambitions? Does any of this involve consumption, and is so, to what extent? We try to push them to look critically at these questions, to show them that everything is political, and that consumption is form of engagement. It is not easy! The term anti-fashion is something we're often criticized for. The truth is that if you come from a background where you're struggling, and I've experienced this myself, you're inevitably going to pass through a phase where consumption is important to you. But my view is that this phase comes just before the realization that consumption ultimately contributes nothing, or very little, to our happiness and peace of mind. The paradox is that to leave the consumer society you first have to join it.

<sup>5</sup> Buying and selling platform between individuals such as gumtree in the United-Kingdom, or Marktplaats in the Netherlands.

Of course it takes time before the change of mindset we seek to bring about in these young people is perceptible. Our goal is not to groom them, or to watch them make the leap. Above all else what we do is plant the seed, try to give them the self-confidence they need to feel free to make their own decisions and choices, moving on from the idea that the system is against them. We also believe fashion is a great way to promote social reintegration, which is why we've set up our mentoring program.

On a fundamental level, we feel it is very important never to disassociate environmental and social challenges when addressing sufficiency. This is actually the very hardest part of all.

### Through your work, have you identified the keys to raising young people's awareness of these topics?

S.C.: It varies so much from person to person, there's no silver bullet! We're a small team, a family, and we rely most of all on the willingness of the young people: they're free to join projects or not, to take part in activities or not. The best indicator of success is when nobody quits a project early.

They are the engines and the owners of the projects, ideas, events, etc. We feel this form of empowerment, a somewhat over-used term, is crucial. It gives them the chance to understand how to use the tools we give them, to get messages across, make their own decisions based on content that catches their attention, whether movies, music, book, etc. As I've said, what we're trying to do above all is to raise their awareness so that they come to realize their actions will shape the world of tomorrow. We give them information about the consequences of their choices, particularly in terms of consumption. They then form their own opinions, and can embody the messages they want to send out.

Personally, the chance to work with young people is one of the aspects of the Anti\_Fashion Project closest to my heart. It is through these encounters that we help to provide access to culture and training in communities where these opportunities are lacking. One-to-one support can demand a lot of energy but I feel it is also a lever for genuine change.

Our role is also to support them through situations in their lives that can be quite complicated, finding solutions in an emergency, food or maybe housing. It is really important to help them get their heads above water, so they can see the bigger picture and start making plans.

We are also wedded to the idea of risk taking, of permanent change. Anti\_Fashion was set up without any thought for how to take it forward: I reached out spontaneously to Li Edelkoort after she published her manifesto, after finding her email address on her website. We held conferences in Marseille in partnership with Aix Marseille University, but without planning what this might lead to. As it turns out, over 300 people attended our four conferences. The first year, 2016, we had only three months to put everything together and no budget, only willpower. We've continued down this road ever since, continuing to take risks and keeping a large measure of freedom in our activities.

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### How can other stakeholders – public authorities, businesses – leverage their inputs to help scale up? Do they represent a priority target for you?

S.C.: I'm like a shepherdess with her pilgrim's staff! I think policymakers are essential. You need to go out and convince stakeholders who have such enormous power and resources available to them. It is a matter of knocking on the right doors. The political dimension is at the heart of my engagement, and it takes real powers of perseverance. This quest, this political work, is something I take extremely seriously, in parallel to my artistic and educational activities.

In addition to lobbying and advocacy, we are also developing partnerships that are really important to us. Veja, leboncoin and LVMH are our lead partners, they believed in us from the very beginning. leboncoin shares our commitment to consuming in ways that are less wasteful and more reasonable, supporting actions we run targeting young people. My meeting with Sébastien Koop, co-founder of Veja, led to the creation of a mentoring program for young people who have dropped out of education, and a number of other projects we also run with Veja. The mentoring program is also supported by leboncoin, LVMH and local authorities such as the Roubaix town council. These encounters and collaborations with different partners make it possible to invent futures that are more frugal, rebuilding the self-confidence of young people we support by opening their eyes to the possibilities of a more engaged professional future.



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