

Earth, Water, Air and Fire: The Four Elements of Fashion (Venice, 16–17 Mar 23)

Università luav di Venezia, Venice (Italy), Mar 16–17, 2023

Deadline: Oct 16, 2022

Alessandra Vaccari

International Fashion Conference: Earth, Water, Air and Fire: The Four Elements of Fashion.

Convenors:

Anneke Smelik (Radboud University of Nijmegen), Alessandra Vaccari (Università luav di Venezia).

Sun, air, water and soil are in most of the clothes we wear. In the era of ecological crisis, this international conference aims to investigate the new paradigms of fashion cultures through the four archetypal elements of matter. By doing so, it shifts the attention towards the material and sensory aspects of fashion, features that have been largely neglected by fashion studies over the past forty years. This approach fits in the current debate on the 'material turn' inspired by de-centering the human and re-centering matter and the materiality of things, objects, technologies, and bodies (Latour, 2007; Rocamora and Smelik, 2016; Lehmann, 2019; Smelik 2021). The conference proposes to analyse this ontological shift through the redefinition of the substance of fashion and its history. In Western and non-Western cultures matter is conceived as a coexistence of multiple elements following a tradition that includes, among others, the cosmological treatise of Aristotle, the Hinduist and Buddhist meditations on the 'primary material elements' (mahabhutas), and Jābir ibn Hayyān's alchemy.

The conference will take place in the context of Venice, a city that emerged from water through a process of significant anthropisation, and in which life rhythms and movements historically coexist and are dependent on a critically changing environment. Venice has a long experience with phenomena such as the high tide (acqua alta) and the increasing submersion of the emerged land; but also with air and water pollution due to the nearby petrochemical pole of Porto Marghera and the cruise ships traffic.

The conference aims to provide a fertile ground for interdisciplinary and transnational dialogue to respond to the sustainable fashion challenges posed by the Anthropocene (Payne, 2019), and to envision possible futures engendered by an environmentally and socially aware fashion culture and industry (Vaccari and Vanni, 2021). Scholars, researchers, educators, and practitioners in the fields of fashion theory, history, and design are invited to send a proposal on the following themes:

- Earth recalls a sense of being grounded, interconnecting the material impact of clothes and their lifecycle – between 'hyperobjectivity' (Morton, 2013), recycling and biodegradation. Earth is where

millions of tons of garments are disposed every year into huge landfills, especially in developing countries, but it is also the ground for providing sustainable biomaterials. Bacteria, mushrooms, plants and agricultural by-products take active part in an often high-technological challenge to reconfigure the concepts of nature and artificiality. It draws on the notion of earthbound (Latour, 2019), with its implications in terms of hybridised and symbiotic life forms. The current disruptive anthropogenic impact makes vital the reassessment of fashion studies and design's involvement in reconfiguring an increasingly entangled, queered and multispecies existence on the planet (Barad, 2011; Tsing, 2015).

- Water constitutes the majority of the human body, and therefore it marks the close bond between corporeality and life. The silhouette emerging from a black petroleum sea in Marine Serre's *Marée Noire* fashion film (2019) is highly evocative. Today's dispersion of microplastic particles makes it inevitable to co-live with contamination. The theme of water ranges from the toxic and fashionable aniline dyes of the 19th century (Matthews David, 2015) to the issue of water footprint along the production chain of cotton. It also encompasses the concept of Blue Fashion, a new definition unifying fashion and water, in line with the notion of Blue Economy.

- Air is an element closely linked to the issue of environmental pollution. The atmosphere residues leave a textured patina on objects that remind of the poetic and provocative microbes infestation on Margiela clothes at the Museum Boijmans in 1997. Examples of the close links between air and clothes also include the relics of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – as photographed by Ishiuchi Miyako (2008) – and the post-Chernobyl fashion of the anti-contamination protective clothing. Albeit its negative impact, air pollution can be the starting point for redrawing alternative creative and social practices in fashion.

- Fire is the only natural element not commonly available in nature and is therefore considered a human prerogative. It is defined as the result of a process of energy exchange that allowed for the survival of the human species and, through the calories, has a transformative power on our bodies (Vince, 2020). In the fashion industry, this element allows the exploration of different sources of energy for production. It is a powerful and dangerous tool that is responsible for turning overconsumption and overproduction of textile waste into pollution and dust. Fire is also connected to solar energy and alchemical processes, which can be read as the vibrating force of matter. It is a mix of vital and psychic energy able to bridge the experience of embodiment with a renovated sense of spirituality.

We welcome contributions by researchers of all grades of experience and/or works in progress. Proposals should be structured in: Title; Keywords (max 5); Introduction and research issue to be addressed (max 200 words); Methodology (max 200 words); Achieved or expected results (max 200 words); References (max 5); Short author's biography (max 75 words). Proposals should be submitted in English to fashionfuturing@iuav.it by 16 October 2022 with 'The Four Elements of Fashion' in the subject line.

The conference will be held on 16-17 March 2023 at the Università Iuav di Venezia, in dual mode (online and in presence). If you wish to publish your paper, you should submit a full paper by April 2023. The essays will be reviewed and selected through a peer-review process. Selected essays will be published in the conference proceedings with ISBN in 2023.

Important dates

Abstract submissions by 16 October 2022

Selected abstracts notification by 30 November 2022

Registration by 31 January 2023. Regular fee: 140 €; reduced fee (PhD and MA students): 80 €

Conference: 16-17 March 2023

Full paper submission for publication (optional) by 30 April 2023

References:

Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Polity.

Ferrando, F. (2013). 'Posthumanism, transhumanism, antihumanism, metahumanism, and new materialisms'. *Existenz*, 8(2), 26-32.

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Latour, B. (2007). 'Can we Get our Materialism Back, Please?'. *Isis*, 98(1), 138-42.

Latour, B. (2019). *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Polity.

Lehmann, U. (2019). *Fashion and materialism*. Edinburgh University Press.

Matthews David, M. (2015). *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present*. Bloomsbury.

Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press.

Payne, A. (2019). 'Fashion Futuring in the Anthropocene: Sustainable Fashion as "Taming" and "Rewilding"'. *Fashion Theory*, 23(1), 5-23.

Rocamora, A., & Smelik, A. (2016). 'Thinking through fashion: An introduction'. In A. Rocamora & A. Smelik eds, *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, 1-27. I.B. Tauris.

Smelik, A. (2021). 'A Posthuman Turn in Fashion'. In V. Manlow, E. Paulicelli, & E. Wissinger, *Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, 57-64. Routledge.

Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.

Vaccari, A., & Vanni, I. (2021). 'Fashion Futuring. Rethinking sustainable fashion design'. In *Design Culture(s), Cumulus Conference Proceedings Series*, 2(7), 3448-57.

Vince, G. (2020). *Transcendence: How Humans Evolved through Fire, Language, Beauty, and Time*. Penguin.

Reference:

CFP: Earth, Water, Air and Fire: The Four Elements of Fashion (Venice, 16-17 Mar 23). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 14, 2022 (accessed Jun 4, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/37356>>.