

**May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016 Blog – Prof. Angela McRobbie**

# **CREATe event: Fashion as Urban Creative Economy: Start-ups, IP and the Rise of Ecommerce.**

**Glasgow School of Art**

The CREATe event hosted at the Glasgow School of Art May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016 had the aim of bringing together our research and collaborative activities on questions relating to fashion start-ups, IP/Copyright and new business models that have been carried out over the last 3 years in London, Berlin and Milan. Although focused towards the continuing Phase 2 work on the rise of digital fashion and its impact on fashion culture in general and also on IP/Copyright, we wanted to use this opportunity in Scotland to pull together our investigations and look towards the book which will be produced in the coming 12 months.

The following blog comprises our shared notes from the event with a short section at the end which makes some provisional conclusions as well as opens the debate up for further discussion.

We were delighted that the Principal of the Glasgow School of Art, Professor Tom Inns was able to welcome the speakers, guests and audience to the event. We were also extremely grateful to Jimmy Stephen-Cran (Head of Fashion and Textiles GSA) for giving us a guided tour of the studios in the new Reid Building at the GSA.



Jimmy Stephen-Cran (left) commencing the tour of the new Glasgow School of Art building.

As a way of opening out the topics to the attendees Angela McRobbie presented a summary of the findings from the interviews with around 10 fashion designers which the team working on the project have carried out since 2013 in each city. This has been supplemented with additional interviews with senior designers, with legal experts, policy-makers and consultants, all of which have fed into the emphasis on career pathways within the independent or small-scale fashion sector, and on dilemmas posed by the distinctive role of IP/Copyright in the fashion sector. Angela emphasised the shaping role which distinctive urban cultural policies played in developing the kind of fashion 'independents' or 'micro-enterprises' which could be established and achieve success and recognition in each of the three cities. However, the research has also been concerned to look in some detail at the obstacles and the range of difficulties the designers have experienced and these also were described in the course of the presentations. Overall a defining feature was the need for a policy agenda less dominated by the highly selective model of London, and more geared towards the importance of space, time and location for designers wishing to have a studio doubling as a shop. Likewise the question of being able to work according to a tempo less driven by anxiety about the high cost (or prohibitive cost) of rent emerged as a priority for maintaining a sense of creative freedom and identity. This short paper was followed by a talk by Dr Heather McLean (Glasgow University) who addressed again the question of urban space, creative economy and the role of artist populations. More specifically and drawing on her research on Toronto she posed the challenging question regarding the way in which artists and young creative professionals were often used (unwittingly) as a drive to gentrify run-down city areas inhabited by poor people and by disadvantaged populations. While this process has had attention drawn to it in recent years, McLean's ethnography in Toronto shed new light on a discourse of 'cleaning up' and 'sanitising' city areas, which not only had racializing connotations, but also directly impacted on the ability of these populations to earn a living, e.g. sex workers.



Designers Basso and Brooke and presenter Dan Strutt speak to the atelier technician at GSA.

Dan Strutt opened the second panel, chaired by Prof. Chris Breward, with a wide ranging account of how the digital economy had been impacting on the fashion industry from high end to start ups, in a pervasive and challenging way. He drew attention to the new landscape of jobs and employment which digital culture, from advertising and branding platforms to online sales, has given rise to, and the consequences this has for 'bricks and mortar' stores. He pointed to the emergence of figures such as Chief Data Officer in fashion companies and he commented on the mountain of data now available to fashion companies, 'more than they know what to do with'. This does indeed indicate a novel scenario for the sector, one which the Phase 2 of CREATE is attempting to investigate by focusing again on companies based in the three cities. With this bigger picture in mind Bettina Springer followed up with a more nuanced analysis of the rise of *Zalando* – a Berlin-based fashion e-retail 'giant' which quickly became the world leader in online orders, sales and delivery. While much has been written about *Zalando* in the German press the details of its operations are less well-known in the UK and English-speaking world. One of the interesting points Bettina made was the volume of employment which the company has generated and the kind of jobs, many of which are routine, being done by graduates in the city i.e. packing, delivery, orders and system maintenance. Bettina's talk was followed by a presentation by Carolina Bandinelli which outlined the rich ethnographic techniques she has developed as a way of pursuing a more longitudinal understanding of her key respondents' career pathways in Milan and how they also negotiate the world of online retail, whether through etsy.com or other platforms. She focused on the professional biography of a young woman 'Ella' who, leveraging on the means of promotion and distribution offered by the internet, set up a zero capital fashion enterprise. This case study revealed both the potential of digital media for the development of new business models, and the precarity of an entrepreneurial scene that is not supported by proper governance at a regional and national level.



Overall, this panel offered an articulate overview of e-commerce in fashion, highlighting its impact on big corporations as well as on the lives of independent designers. At the end of it, we all had an increased awareness of both the possibilities and dangers opened up by the digitalisation of the industry.



Designers Teija Eilola and Esther Perbandt, and innovator Marte Hentschel on the fashion professionals panel.

This session on digital platforms and the fashion economy was then followed by a panel which comprised some of the designers and practitioners we have been working with over the last three years. They were briefed for the event to provide an account of their career pathways and the kind of business models which they had developed since starting-up. Basso and Brooke offered detailed insight into the way in which their pioneering of a kind of digital print technology attracted a good deal of attention when they first set up their own label. Many well-known bigger companies wanted to work with them and the income which was accrued from this work allowed them to further develop their own label. The audience was impressed to see in one of the final slides from the designer, an image of Michelle Obama wearing one of their dresses. This presentation was followed by Esther Perbandt from Berlin who showed a film from one of her recent collections, and what was striking to the audience was the different approach adopted by Perbandt and her openness about the difficulties faced by designers in Berlin keeping a shop going, doing collections for Berlin Fashion Week and also keeping up a flow of press material etc. Perbandt also described her creative identity as a designer as one which embraced 'slowness', working more like a fine artist, her priorities are the work itself, the ideas, the collaborations and projects such as those she has developed with dance companies in Berlin and with a leading orchestra in the city for whom she provided a distinctive new style of dress. Teija Eilola followed this up with an account of her career, having trained at the Royal College of Art and then worked in the industry as a designer for Ted Baker for more than 5 years. This work experience was followed by a short maternity break at which point she applied for a

Fashion Fringe award which she won (as one of three). Since then her own label work has won a good deal of praise and is sold in the most significant London outlet for designers i.e. Dover Street Market. Teija's 'own label' work has also been foregrounded at London Fashion Week and she has received significant amounts of press coverage in leading fashion magazines. Lastly the audience had a presentation from Marte Hentschel also from Berlin. She started her career as a designer and then moved into forming an innovative fashion producer services company called *Common-works*. After 5 years with this company as founder and director Marte decided to get involved in the new technology start up scene in Berlin where she could develop the producer services into a fully online platform. In her talk she described in some detail the scale of the activities which she could perform for fledgling designers as well as existing and well-known companies in Germany and potentially elsewhere.

The impression of this fascinating panel was of the unique compromises that both rapid success and slow growth bring to designers. For Basso and Brooke, being projected to fame very soon after forming their company and being within a large fashion house brought them great support and professional skills as well as international esteem, but they also became limited in what they were permitted to do. For Esther Perbandt, slow development led to more organic growth and creative freedom of expression, but this was only possible through her cheap living environment in Berlin, relying upon friends' labour, and with other work on the side. Teija also reflected on her lack of freedom within a commercial design company, before motherhood and the increased creative freedom of her own brand, though she continues to need to consult with other corporate clients for additional income. Acknowledging these difficulties, Marte Hentschel provides a seemingly very useful, if not indeed vitally important, platform for designers that provides them with information, mentoring and assistance in maintaining their creative freedoms while gaining the professional expertise and associations that can assist them to be successful.



CREATE's Dr. Sukhpreet Singh chats to presenter Carolina Bandinelli

As the afternoon drew to a close, we moved on to a session focused on IP/Copyright issues for the sector. Nicola Searle provided an up-to-date account of the current state of thinking regarding the dangers of copying for the sector. She described what has been called the 'piracy paradox' which holds that to an extent copying in fashion, especially when it is done in a rather nebulous way, is seen by many experts as an incentive to growth and competition rather than as a wholly negative force. Clearly however it is also a problem for designers themselves. Reflecting her background as an economist and someone who worked in the UK IPO Nicola provided a rounded and fascinating account as to how copying in fashion is viewed from an economic and business perspective. Next up, Sian Prime drew attention to the needs of young designers for affordable legal support and advice as to how to manage their IP and copyright issues. She also pinpointed something which has emerged in the course of the CREATE research which is designers forming collaborative partnerships with companies which might otherwise be seen as 'copiers' of their work. Angela McRobbie wound up this session by detailing the actual findings from the CREATE interviews. She also painted a more sociological perspective which drew attention to the kind of training fashion students receive in the under-graduate and post-graduate education and how this is typically reliant on the idea of copying, and learning through working out how well-known designers developed their distinctive style and techniques. Often their submitted work while in college took the form of a 'homage' or else they would talk about their being 'inspired by' this or that well-known designer, and this whole process carries on to an extent in the world of fashion commerce as well as in the small 'own label' companies. Angela referred to how the rapid pace of the fashion cycles and the sheer scale of the industry also acclimatised designers into the idea that they could see their work on occasion being copied. She reported on the range of response to copying, from anger and annoyance (with steps taken via social media to attempt to publicise the 'theft' and point a finger at the copier), to the issuing of lawyers letters, to a sense of now and again 'shrugging it off'.

The whole event concluded with a plenary which comprised three leading figures in the field of arts, cultural and creative industries, policy and education. Prof Philip Schlesinger (CREATE and Glasgow University) opened the session with a forceful challenge as to the value of retaining the term 'creative economy' in policy worlds. The words had become hackneyed and over-used and Philip looked to the idea of returning to the idea of culture. Chris Breward (Principal ECA and Edinburgh University) took a quite different track, pointing to the historically unique role of the UK art schools and the role they have played in producing well-rounded and highly trained young people whose talents were regarded with admiration and envy across the world. Chris was worried about the threats to art school education, he likened these remarkable institutions to the great teaching hospitals, typically part of the whole university environment. Likewise with the art schools which have attracted some of the world's best-known artists as teachers. Janis Jefferies from Goldsmiths wound the session up commenting on how the kind of autonomy the art schools had once had, was now severely curtailed, reducing significantly their ability to remain world-leading.





The final plenary panel with Philip Schlesinger, Chris Breward, and Janis Jefferies.

At the end of the day, all our attendees and contributors noted the variety of presentations and appreciated the way it was pitched not only to academics, but offered real insight into working practice. The designers in particular enjoyed the networking opportunity, the discourse around issues which do affect them in the day to day, and the opportunity to tour the fashion ateliers in a way that inspired some nostalgic feeling towards their own experience of fashion education.

Thanks again to the CREATE team in Glasgow, to the Glasgow School of Art, to the London and Berlin designers who gave up their time unpaid to attend the event, to Goldsmiths University of London for supporting the activities of CREATE and to Paula Delgado Iglesias (Goldsmiths MA Culture Industries) who has worked as an intern and as photographer for the project.



A smiling Angela McRobbie with designers and presenters on what was a successful, fascinating and useful day