Critical Fashion Practices

'A Fruiting Body of Collective Labour:
 Working Towards a De-Hierarchised System
 for Fashion Education'

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[1] https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/artikel/5222740/onveilige-cultuur-mode-opleiding-amfi [Accessed 19/08/2021]

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

Introduction

These quotes come from (former) students of the Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI). In the spring of 2021, a series of articles was published in Dutch media shedding light on the toxic circumstances students experience(d) during their time at this fashion education institute. It was not the first time a Dutch education institute's toxic practices were revealed in the news. In the fall of 2020, Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* published a series of articles[4] on artist Juliaan A. and the trail of destruction he left behind in various art education programmes and art institutes in The Netherlands, often enabled by the people in power at those institutes. The articles led to a wave of revelations and discussions[5] about the (often precarious) circumstances under which students[6] develop their practice and try to kick-start a career in the art and design world. What is supposed to be a safe space for students (and staff), turns out to be a minefield of having to deal with racism, sexual harassment and pedagogical ineptness of the teaching staff. As it turns out, these issues are not unique to The Netherlands. In April 2018, *The Business of Fashion* published the article 'Antwerp Academy Student Suicide Calls Teaching Methods into Question', writing about how after a student's suicide, current and former students have come forward with accounts of depression and drug abuse, calling teaching methods into question.[7] In June 2020, *1Granary* published the essay 'Does It Really Take a Genius?', reflecting on fashion education's fixation with individual talent and to what extent this fixation enables a culture of abuse. Author Mahoro Seward writes:

"In fashion, the opportunity to serve as an accessory to the supreme talent of this-or-that head designer is marketed as compensation in and of itself. But too often do we hear ofprominent industry figures disregarding the people working beneath them. By some warped logic, fueled by an inflated sense of self-importance, such figures mistake the brazen mistreatment of their subordinates for acceptable conduct, on the grounds that they should simply be happy to be there working under them in the first place. If this is the behavioural model set forth by the industry's most senior, it can come as little surprise that asocial behaviours are attested to among those just entering it. Too often, students are encouraged to consume tales of how the most successful participants in the industry, heroes in their eyes, were endowed with a gift that was recognised when they were their age; that their talent was merely incubated at school, not taught."[8]

[4]	https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/10/30/hoe-een-kunstenaar-carriere-maakt-onder-aanhoudende-beschuldigingen-van-aanranding-en-verkrachting-a4018047 [Accessed 19/08/2021]

[5]	https://futuress.org/magazine/calling-out-dutch-art-institutions/ [Accessed 19/08/2021]

[6]	Many articles also reflected on the precarious circumstances under which (often freelance) teaching staff is working. For example this one of the Dutch art magazine *Metropolis M*: https://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/43321_it_s_not_your_fault_how_art_academies_perpetuate_social_unsafety. [Accessed 19/08/2021]

[7]	https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-analysis/antwerp-academy-student-suicide-calls-teaching-methods-into-question [Accessed 19/08/2021]

[8]	Seward, M. (2020). 'Does It Really Take a Genius?' in *1Granary*. See https://1granary.com/opinion/does-it-really-take-a-genius/

In her seminal publication *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (2006), fashion scholar Yinuya Kawamura sheds light on the 'need' for fashion designers to be seen as geniuses. She describes from a sociological perspective the systemic structure that is the 'fashion system',[9] and, among other things, argues that clothing is a tangible material product, whereas fashion is a symbolic cultural product.[10] She also explains how fashion designers "are and must be portrayed as 'stars' in the production of fashion."[11][12] Kawamura draws on sociologist Janet Wolff's *The Social Production of Art* (1993) to debunk this myth of the genius designer—and the artist as a unique and gifted individual—and shows us that the job description of a designer is questionable. Because what does a designer actually do? Do they only sketch and draw? How involved is a designer actually, in the manufacturing process of a garment?[13] Answers to these questions are rarely given.

9   As the fashion system, we refer to—along the lines of Kawamura's *Fashion-ology* (2006)—the interconnected network of actors that decide what it means to be 'in fashion'. This network consists of brands, garment producers, retailers, fashion magazines, designers, fashion weeks and also institutes for fashion education. We would like to point out here that when we talk about 'the fashion system,' we refer to indu-strialised fashion, which is the most dominant one. As authors, we recognize the possibility of multiple fashion systems.

10   Kawamura, Y. (2006). *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies*, Oxford, New York: Berg.

11   Ibid, p. 57.

12   One could argue that perhaps in today's fashion system influencers and celebrities are the 'stars' of the fashion system, rather than the fashion designer. In that sense, we might be returning to the days prior to the insti-tutionalization of fashion, when upper-class men and women initiated trends, with upper-class men and women being replaced by celebrities and influencers. For the sake of this essay however, this statement is irrelevant, as we will argue that the whole concept of there being 'stars' in fashion is toxic and unhelpful for those who seek to participate in fashion.

13   Ibid, p. 63.

Going back to the statement that fashion designers are and must be portrayed as 'stars' in the production of fashion, Kawamura sets out to describe why this is necessary. As fashion (or every other industry for that matter) thrives on a constant craving for new products, it is in need of something that 'sells' these new products. Through the creation of the hierarchical 'star' system, personality can be injected into mass consumption, which allows consumers to form emotional attachments to the 'star' and the products that are connected to this 'star'.[14] [15] Thus, a continuous cycle of consumption is safeguarded and an industry can continue to exist, along with all its participants.

Fashion education plays a crucial role in perpetuating the myth of the 'star' designer. In fact, the future of an industry and its participants depend on it. Without a new accretion of potential 'star' designers, a collapse of the system looms on the horizon. However, as the series of exam-ples show in the first paragraph of the essay, our fashion education system is toxic and quite often, seems not to be a safe space for students to develop their practice and try to kick-start a career. With this essay, we imagine a different type of fashion education, and even more so, a different type of fashion system, or even a multiple of fashion systems; systems that are not predicated on the struggle of a large group of people[16] and the success of some, but systems that help all participants thrive. In order to describe our proposal for a different type of fashion system, we refer to the world of fungi and its mycorrhizal networks. The symbiotic relation-ships between fungi and their environment will serve as the foundation of our investigation into de-hierarchising[17] fashion systems, and specifically into de-hierarchising fashion education. How can the connections between fungi and other organisms inspire an interconnected and rhizomatic[18] learning community that is not focused on individual genius or 'star' but on the thriving of the community and its environment, and help us break with the traditional hierar-chies within the fashion system, and fashion education in particular?

14   Kawamura, p. 66–67

15   Within this system, it does not matter who the star is. So if indeed there is a move from the fashion designer to the influencer or celebrity being the 'star' of the system, it doesn't affect the system as a whole. The only thing that matters, is that the continuous cycle of consumption is safeguarded.

16   While in this essay we discuss the struggle of the fashion student, we acknowledge that struggles take place on many levels in the fashion industry, and in specific, we would like to acknowledge the struggle of the fashion labourer and factory worker.

17   We talk about 'de-hierarchical' rather than 'non-hierarchical,' because within an institutional education context, non-hierarchy is simply impossible to achieve because there will always exist some form of power dynamic between student and teacher as it is the teacher (formalised into the role of examiner) who has the final say about whether a student passes or not. However, there are ways to minimise the distance between student and teacher.

18   The concept of the 'rhizome' will be used in the essay as a metaphor, not as the concrete entity that it is in nature.

Mycorrhizal Networks

An existence on this planet would be impossible without the help of fungi. They are in the ground beneath our feet, aiding in the continuous cycle of decay and rebirth, with their far-stretching mycelium connecting tree roots over many kilometres. We ingest them when eating leavened bread, cheese, kimchi, and beer; and without fungi we would not have been able to develop one of the first antibiotics. As stated by Merlin Sheldrake in *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* (2020), "[a]s you read these words, fungi are changing the way that life happens, as they have done for more than a billion years."[19]

Fungi remain one of the most mysterious forms of life. They speak to the imagination of many, and can be found at the foundation of several folklore tales. Moreover, in recent years it has been discovered that fungi and the networks in which they spread might possess some form of consciousness—they appear to be able to "communicate" with each other. In an article published on *Psyche,* biologist Nicholas P. Money (2021) writes for example about how experiments with fungi have shown that they are able to learn and remember certain patterns during their existence, for example how they should react to temperature changes, and which parts of growing medium would result in the best progression of the mycelium.[20] Apparently, there is quite some scientific debate surrounding levels of consciousness, and traditionally "most philosophers and scientists awarded consciousness to big-brained animals and excluded other forms of life from this honour."[21] In his writing however, Money makes a case for the idea of the existence of consciousness across the many different species in our world. This would mean that the archetype of a conscious species should be reconsidered, especially when it comes to the ever-puzzling fungi: "not to imply that all organisms possess rich emotional lives and are capable of thinking, although fungi do appear to express the biological rudiments of these faculties."[22]

19   Sheldrake, M. (2020). *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures*, New York: Random House, p. 9.

20   The mycelium is a network of fungal threads, which are also called hyphae. It is from this network that mushrooms can sprout, which in turn spread spores that can start a new mycelium.

21   Money, M. P. (2021) 'The fungal mind: on the evidence for mushroom intelligence'. See: https://psyche.co/ideas/the-fungal-mind-on-the-evidence-for-mushroom-intelligence [Accessed 08/09/2021]

22   Ibid.

The aforementioned experiments have shown that fungi, their hyphae, the networks they form, and the mushrooms that sprout from it, might behave and 'feel' in a completely different way than we used to believe. With this knowledge, you could look at several mycelial networks in a new light, especially when considering these networks as a metaphor for being, working, and *learning* together in fashion. Most of these mycelia exist together in symbiosis with another life form—they create a way of living together that is beneficial for all organisms involved. Take for example the mycorrhizal fungi. The hyphae of several fungal species form an "intimate association"[23] with the root rhizomes of trees and other plants. While this behaviour can essentially be seen as infecting the roots of these plants, in this case the infection does not cause a disease. On the contrary: the fungi and the plants start relying on each other for survival, for example by producing and exchanging nutrients. Another result of the mycorrhizal symbiosis seems quite peculiar, but is very interesting when connecting it to system thinking (in fashion). It has been discovered that in certain environments, there are so many mycorrhizal fungi in the soil that the mycelial networks are able to connect the rhizomes of all the different trees together.[24] Through the uncountable hyphae of the mycorrhizal mycelium, trees in all stages of life are able to share nutrients with each other, as well as exchange chemical 'messages' across the forest.
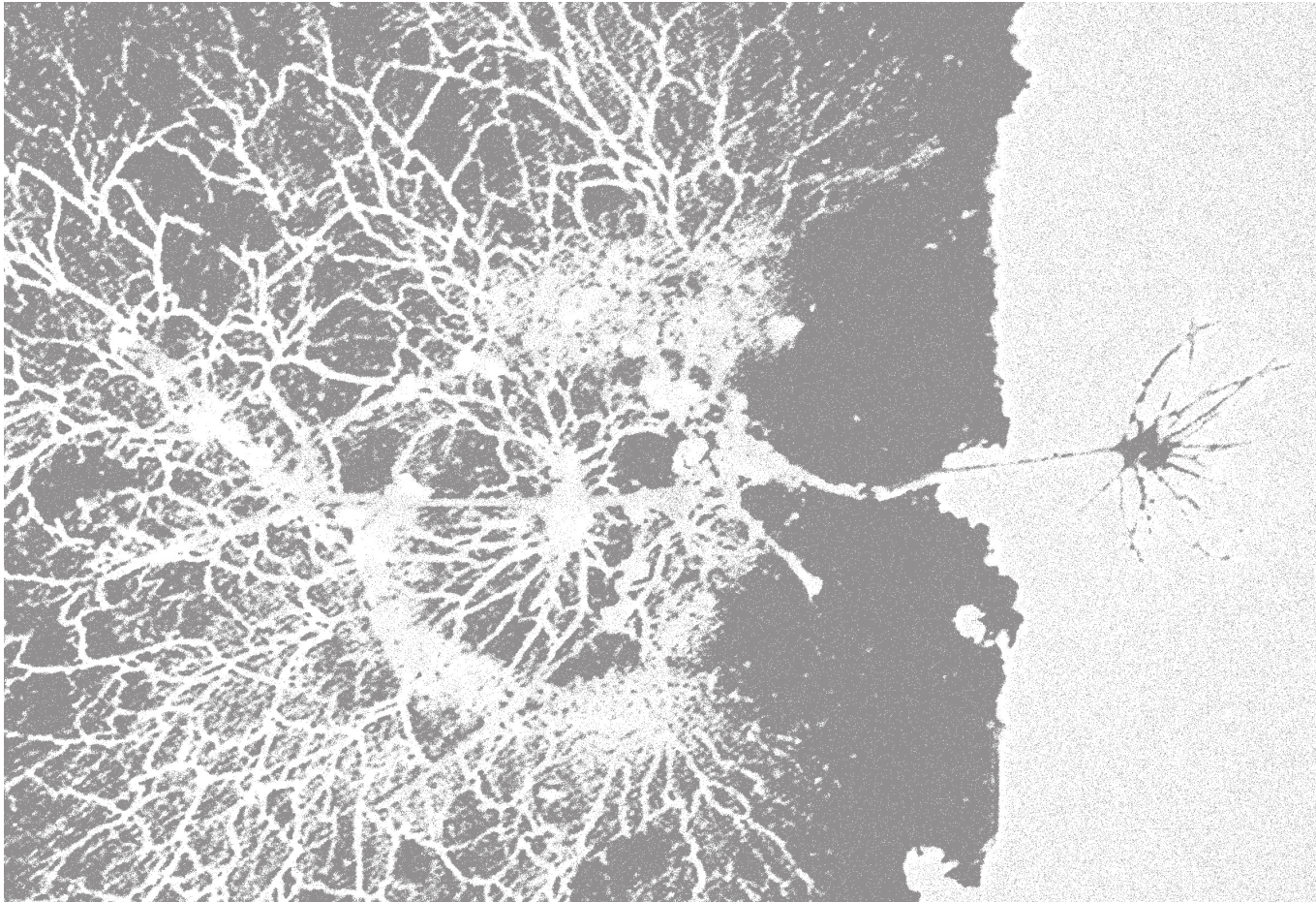
The nutrient- and message-exchange through the hyphae of mycorrhizal networks shows a lot of similarities with—and might have even been the model for—the "distributed network" that sprang from the mind of computer scientist Paul Baran. Baran was one of the founding fathers of the Internet in the early 1960s. During this period the Cold War raged in full, and Baran was concerned about the effects of a possible nuclear attack that would inevitably destroy the centralised switching facilities that were used back then. Baran envisioned a network of 'unmanned nodes' that would act as switches, routing information from one node to another to their final destinations. The nodes were connected through a scheme called a 'distributed network', which would not stop functioning after a (nuclear) attack, because through the distributed network information could simply be rerouted.[25] The fungal nodes in a mycelium work in a very comparable way: constantly growing in new directions, connecting many different nodes in the network.

23   https://www.britannica.com/science/mycorrhiza
[Accessed 09/09/2021]

24   Ibid.

25   https://www.rand.org/about/history/baran.html
[Accessed 09/09/2021]

Mycorrihizal funghi growing on the roots of a plant.

Queer Lichen

When reworking the current system of fashion education, the implication of the aforementioned distributed network could be very significant. The first steps for the de-hierarchisation of the relationships in this system could be made by seeing everyone as a node in a constantly growing and changing network, as opposed to acknowledging certain people as the 'ultimate experts'. This different focus also takes away the connection to 'stardom' that is so apparent in current fashion (and art) education contexts. The role that you take on after successfully completing fashion education as a full-fledged, high-fashion designer, should no longer be the most important. As in the mycelial networks that we talked about earlier, what you see on the outside is not what should count most: mushrooms are not the 'stars'; they are simply the results of a network, a fruiting body of collective labour.

Next to the mycorrhizal fungus, there are many other types of fungi that have created symbioses with the world around them. Take for example the lichen: an organism that consists of either algae or cyanobacteria that live within the hyphae of multiple fungi species.[26] All of us have seen or been in contact with lichen, since they can be found in almost all environments, and are estimated to cover 6–8% of the Earth's surface.[27] In *Queer Theory for Lichens* (2015), David Griffiths writes about their queer nature, and states how "human individuals are indeed all lichens; we are all queer multispecies consortia, always already involved in countless and unpredictable constitutive relationships at all scales."[28] In the article, Griffiths points towards the fact that we need symbiosis to live our day-to-day life, for example through bacteria in our gut that make sure we are able to digest certain foods, and absorb nutrients that otherwise would go to waste. Moreover, he quotes the research of Lynn Margulis, who pioneered research into the origin of cells in the 1960s. She states how the cells that make up our bodies developed through symbiosis billions of years ago;[29] yet another example of how we as a species would not have been able to develop, were it not for the presence of symbiotic relationships.

[26] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lichen [Accessed 09/09/2021]
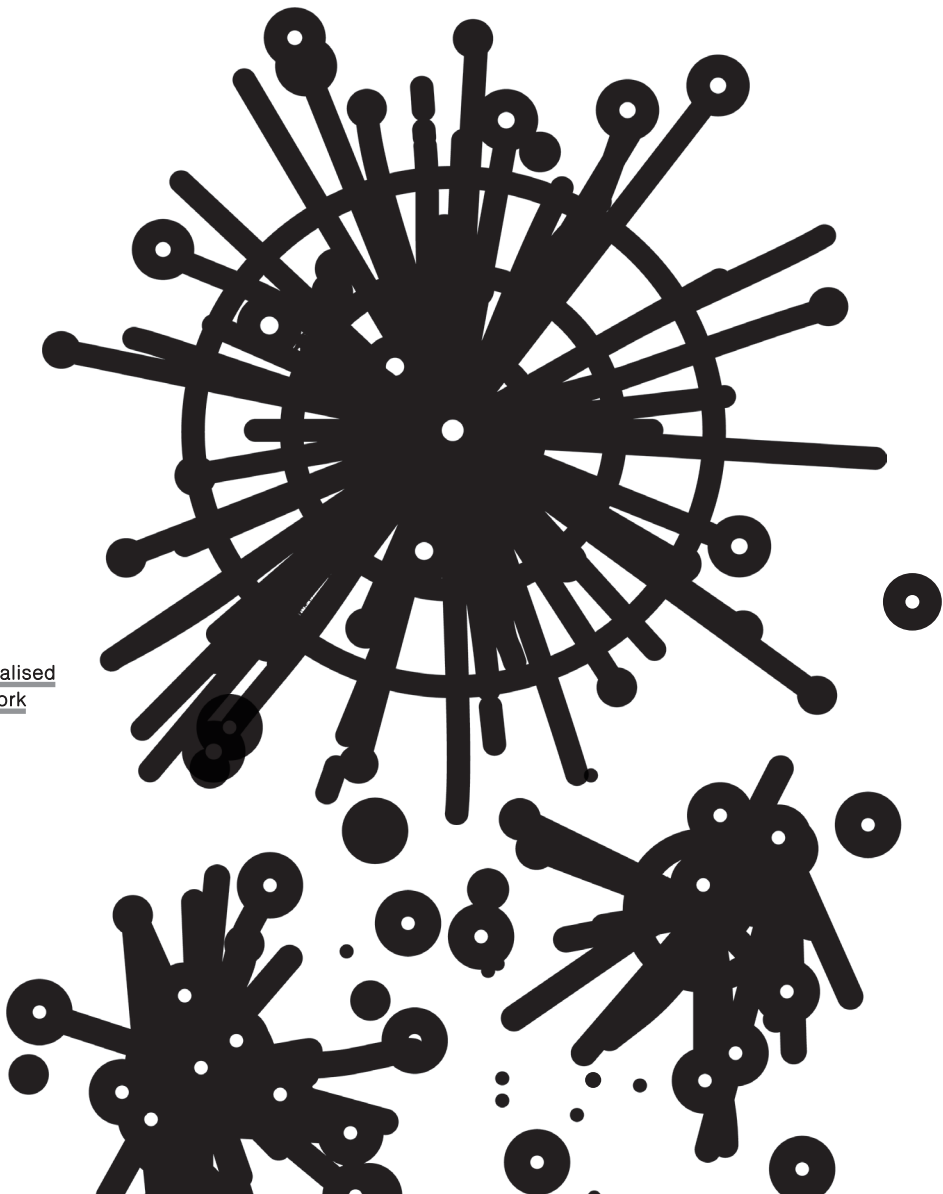
[27] Ibid.

[28] Griffiths, D. (2015). 'Queer Theory for Lichens' in *UnderCurrents*, Vol.19 (1), p. 43.
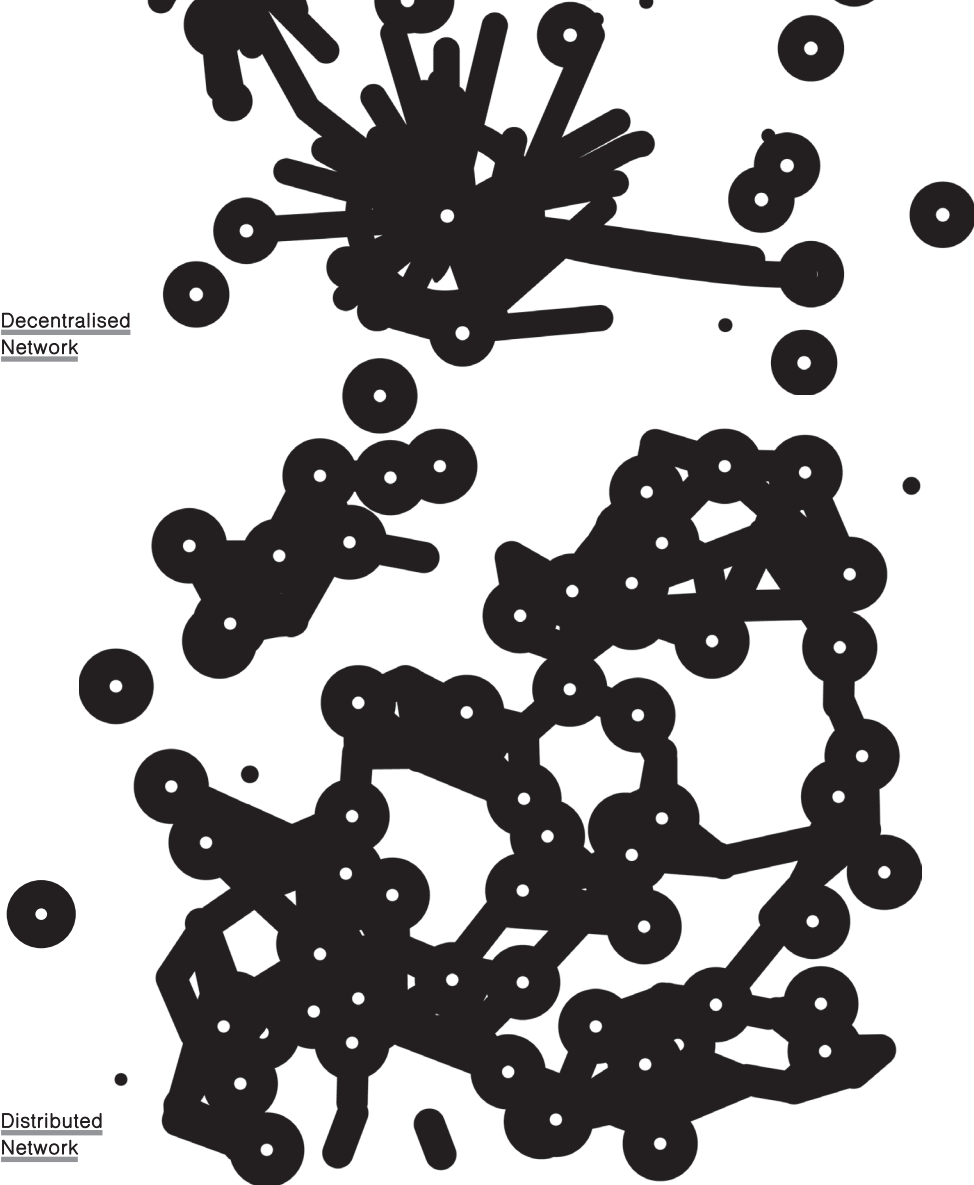
[29] Ibid., p. 38.

Centralised
Network

Decentralised
Network

Paul Baran's Distributed Network, which
is comparable to the mycorrhizal networks
enabled by fungi. Because of this parallel,
mycorrhizal networks are also referred
to as the 'Wood Wide Web.'

Distributed
Network

Symbioses ◉ Require a Non-Capitalist, Decolonial and Intersectional Perspective

As Griffiths' work shows, humans are in themselves a multi-species symbiosis. Biologist Andreas Weber emphasises this too in his *Matter and Desire: An Erotic Ecology* (2017): "there is only one immutable truth: No being is purely individual; nothing comprises only itself. Everything is composed of foreign cells, foreign symbionts, foreign thoughts. This makes each life-form less like an individual warrior and more like a tiny universe, tumbling extravagantly through life like the fireflies orbiting one in the night. Being alive means participating in permanent community and continually reinventing oneself as part of an immeasurable network of relationships."[30]

So, why then should we continue to strive towards educating in a system that is focused on celebrating one-above-all? The most important point that Griffiths and Weber want to make in their work, is how looking at humans as a form of lichen, so as a symbiotic life-form, can open up many discourses surrounding how humans interact with each other. Griffiths states how [a] "symbiotic view of life can also work to denaturalize the primacy of heterosexual biological reproduction in discourses of normative and non-normative bodies, practices and communities."[31]

However far-fetched this point might seem when talking about 'the fashion school', it gives a clear direction for questioning the archetypal standards that are present in every aspect of the fashion education system. It informs our proposed move towards a system of fashion that no longer focuses on genius, but instead centers a 'distributed network' where symbiosis between all players is key, where we strive for an existence that is beneficial for *all* organisms involved, and we participate in permanent community and continually reinvent ourselves as part of an immeasurable network of relationships. In this network, knowledge is not kept, but instead continuously shared and exchanged.

As said before, this 'wish' for a different form of fashion education is in stark contrast with how many institutes of fashion education operate. Quite often, not all organisms within these more traditional structures are equally represented, and as a result are not reaping the benefits they are promised. In *Does It Really Take a Genius?* by Mahoro Seward, we have read that this could be related to fashion education's fixation with individual talent, and the fashion system's need for 'star' designers. Citing fashion scholar Yuniya Kawamura, we posited that the industrial fashion system focuses on the 'star' designer in order to ensure a continuous cycle of consumption.

This 'star' designer is only the tip of the problematic iceberg that is the industrial fashion system. A large part of this problematic nature could be related back to its capitalist and neo-liberal essence, which thrives on the exploitation of natural resources and living beings. So, the industrial fashion system's intertwinement with capitalism ensures that living together in ways that are beneficial for all organisms involved will always be out of reach, simply because "the purpose of capitalist production is exchange value not use value, profit not people."[32] In this context, Clare Farrell of Extinction Rebellion stated that all proposals for a sustainable or ethical form of fashion that come from a capitalist perspective are doomed to fail[33] Farrell's statement follows the lines of Audre Lorde's powerful words: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."[34]

A prerequisite for moving beyond these neo-liberal and capitalist standards, and effectively for making any 'genuine change', is to critically revisit the colonial standards that are tied to the exploitation of bodies and resources in capitalism. Especially in the context of fashion and other design-related education, a decolonised perspective can be of great help in reworking the teaching methods and systems in place. These more "established" forms of teaching are often rooted in an European- and American-centric world view, and hence are not able to create systems that are beneficial for every player within. The decolonial practices and methods that could create substantial change are almost never given attention within traditional fashion-oriented Bachelor programmes, as we have found during conversations with students within our programme,[35] [36] the MA Critical Fashion Practices at ArtEZ University of the Arts in Arnhem. Without fail, our students state that their education within fashion focuses mostly on a Western perspective, solely centering the 'success stories' of Western, star fashion designers, and not opening up to non-Western perspectives if they are not connected to folklore, orientalism and cultural appropriation.

[30] Weber, A. (2017). *Matter and Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, p. 36. See also Nelson, M. (2021). *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*, Dublin: Penguin Random House UK, p. 228.

[31] Ibid, p. 44.

[32] Meiksens Wood, E. (2017). *The Origin of Capitalism*, London: Verso, p. 197.

[33] https://www.stateoffashion.org/en/past-editions/intervention/whatabouterys/rewatch-whataboutery-1-regenerative-fashion-there-can-be-no-other/ [Accessed 14/09/2021]

[34] Lorde, A. ([1984] 2018). *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, London: Penguin Books ltd.

In the essay *Fashionscapes, Hybridity, and the White Gaze* (2019), Birgit Haehnel describes the white gaze-regime as an ongoing power that is active in the discriminatory representations of body, fashion, race, and power, and how it serves to secure European dominance.[37] She refers to Yuniya Kawamura, who stated "fashion is epistemologically a Western concept,"[38] and who advocates "objective research" that overcomes the "Western perspective" and the "Euro-America-centric alignment."[39] Replying to Kawamura, Haehnel states aptly: "As accurate and significant the rejection of an Eurocentric perspective of fashion and its history may be, the desire for objectivity and seemingly neutral research perspectives is highly questionable from a decolonizing point of view, as it perpetuates Western orders of knowledge as well. As has been widely discussed, ideas of universalism with its objectification and essentialism simply follow the current globalization processes and the flows of transnational capital."[40] It is this 'white gaze-regime' and its perpetuation of Western orders of knowledge that is dominant within fashion education and fashion academia at large. It ensures that students, as well as teachers, are excluded from participating in a learning experience that is beneficial for their well-being,[41] and the well-being of their peers. In fact, it will set them up to participate in an industry that perpetuates the toxic patterns they experienced during their education, hence continuing the capitalist and colonial cycle of exploitation.

[35]   We did this at the start of the 2020–2021 academic year, as well as that of 2021–2022.

[36]   We currently have students from The Netherlands, Taiwan, Italy, Ecuador, South–Korea, South–Africa, Mexico, and Ireland in our programme.

[37]   Haehnel, B. (2019). 'Fashionscapes, Hybridity, and the White Gaze' in *Fashion and Postcolonial Critique* (Gaugele, E. & Titton, M. eds.), Berlin: Sternberg Press, p. 172.

[38]   Ibid., p. 171.

[39]   Ibid.

[40]   Ibid.

[41]   This statement is also supported by Tanveer Ahmed in her article 'Antiracist Design: A Decolonial Feminist Approach to Fashion Pedagogy' in *Design Struggles: Intersecting Histories, Pedagogies, and Perspectives* (Valiz, 2021).

To further explore how decolonisation would look like in the context of fashion education, we would like to refer to the work of designer and educator Ramon Tejada, who initiated the *Decolonizing Design Collaborative Reader* (2019): a communally shaped reader that is open-access and ongoing. Tejada's approach is helpful, because it contains a call for action, and he specifically points out the collaborative nature of the process. He states that decolonising is a term that can mean many things to many people. His approach revolves around the fact that "decolonizing is about making space (sometimes taking space…) to allow people that look like me (especially BIPOC people) to be active and essential participants around the table. It is about physical visibility, structural change, representation (not tokenism), acknowledgement (of ideas, land, values that were stolen, repressed, etc), giving up (taking) space, 'responsible expansion' (recognizing what design has ignored and not valued) of

narratives, points of view, perspectives, stories, theories, ideas, geographical references (not just of Northern European and American lineages, which erases everybody else's identity (colonialism), a diversity of lineages (not just the Bauhaus and all its grandchildren) etc. It is about unearthing, shifting the glance, [and] decentering; giving agency, being vulnerable, making mistakes, thinking about our communities (not the design community), thinking about mom/dad/grandparents/your neighbor, our chosen families, acknowledging not knowing and making the periphery the center. This will not happen overnight, in one class, in one syllabus. This is a long and slow process. A collaborative process that demands we all work on this."[42]
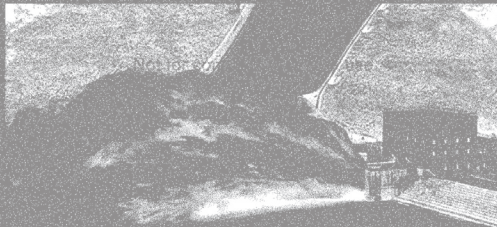
Tejada's approach to decolonising inspired a lot of our own thoughts in regards to changing the nature of fashion education. The open-access format of the reader—it is a Google Doc to which everyone can add their input—reflects the nature of fungal networks as described in our second paragraph. The reader follows the structure of the mycorrhizal networks that we feel so akin to. People from all over the world, no matter their location or status (whether they be students or teachers, or perhaps amateurs, enthusiasts or self-starters for example) have added and are still able to add information to this reader, as well as use it as a resource. The *Decolonizing Design Collaborative Reader* has come to fruition through a 'distributed network' where knowledge is not kept,[43] but instead continuously shared and exchanged.

And in content too, the reader expresses its desire for a symbiotic approach to design, where all participants are both active and essential. Tejada stresses the importance of de-centering, moving away from narratives of Northern European and American lineages and making the periphery the centre, similar to the distributed networks of the mycorrhiza where there is no one central node, but all nodes are important and in need of acknowledgement.

Moreover, Tejada talks about 'making space', an action that is not always comfortable or 'easy'. However, it is something we do not want to evade, as it is essential in formulating new ways of working together. Design educator Nicole Killian talks about this in the article *What Does "Queering Design Education" Actually Look Like in Practice?* (2019). Many of the feelings that come with 'queering' education are comparable to the sometimes complicated tensions within the decolonisation of education: "These are concepts that are unsettling for some people who have been teaching for a while. Sadly, I think there's a lot of people in education who teach because they like the power they have, and that is something that's really scary to me. We need to remove that power and figure out how we can create a space where people actually feel comfortable and excited to be a designer, rather than being siloed at their laptops and trying to "win" against their peers."[44]

42   Tejada, R. et al (2019 – ongoing). *Decolonizing Design Collaborative Reader.* See https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Hbymt6a3zz044xF_LCqGfTmXJip3cetj5sHlxZEjtJ4/edit [Accessed 16/09/2021]

43   Kept for example behind a paywall, as a large part of (re)sources is in academia.

44   Miller, M. (2019). 'What Does "Queering Design Education" Actually Look Like in Practice?' See https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/what-does-queering-design-education-actually-look-like-in-practice [Accessed 23/09/2021]

So, if we manage to overcome this fear of giving up power and making space, and open ourselves up to new perspectives that move beyond existing hierarchies, we can start contributing to a healthier symbiosis in fashion education. As educators and practitioners, our goal of researching, creating, and facilitating alternative systems should have its origins in an anti-capitalist perspective, with a focus on decolonised and intersectional practices and methods. By questioning the paradigms that capitalism has constructed, we will in turn be able to investigate and transform these paradigms within the current system of fashion education. For example, how can fashion arise from and enable de-hierarchised and communal systems and symbioses, focused on welfare for all living beings involved? What if we focus more on the emotional, ethical, and social value of fashion, and how would that take shape? And how can we, as educators, put our responsibility into practice, and together with our student communities explore and create multiple fashion systems, based on alternative, non-industrial modes and frameworks for making, doing, seeing and experiencing fashion and clothes?

← Decolonizing Reader (resources)_Collaborative (open) edition

expand design.
¡Adelante!

*https://giphy.com/gifs/digg-hot-dam-uLj8ZoKkckLx6

→WHY THIS READER? PART 1:
"As a designer, I have come to terms with the fact that what and who design history has been interested in canonizing, up to this point, does not reflect me, my cultures, my

Practicing What We Preach: A Conclusion-For-Now

In our writings, which we have approached as a space for experimentation and speculation, we mentioned how drawing inspiration from the distributed networks of mycorrhizal fungi, as well as the symbioses of lichen, can help us to create a non-capitalist, de-hierarchised approach to fashion education, which centres decolonised and intersectional methods to work towards alternative and non-industrial modes of fashion. In this conclusion-for-now, we would like to focus on the practical actions that we have undertaken within the educational structure of the MA Critical Fashion Practices, together with our learning community of lecturers, students, and peers.

Critical Fashion Practices is a two-year MA programme at ArtEZ University of the Arts, in Arnhem, the Netherlands. The belief in the possibility of multiple fashion systems is at the core of the programme, and our aim is to open up alternative, affirmative approaches that redefine what fashion means in our social, cultural and economic realms. By intersecting theoretical approaches, such as close readings, (popular) academic writing and desk research, with practice-based methods, like artistic and embodied research, (auto-)ethnography, and a strong focus on personal urgency, we explore fashion's language, images, networks, bodies and all its other forms. The combination of practice and theory helps us to move beyond the existing academic paradigms that we mentioned before. The focus on practice can also be seen in the goal that we set for our students, namely setting up and developing their own critical fashion practice, through which we want to challenge our students to work towards a more honest and equitable reality for everyone and everything involved; hence, we guide our students in becoming a part of the distributed network that is our learning community.

In 2021, we—in this case specifically our core team with some of our peers—have worked on sharpening the programme's vision, taking a firmer stance against industrial fashion, its neo-liberal and capitalist policies, and its colonial thinking patterns. We collectively worked towards creating a vision upon our learning community that put into practice what is posited in this essay, namely that each student, but also tutor, alumni, visitor or partner within Critical Fashion Practices is part of an extensive network or community of learning, where all these different 'actors' come together across disciplines. We set out to create a network where each participant within the learning community represents a node with endless new hyphae and rhizomatic connections. The symbiotic relationship between tree roots and the mycorrhizal fungi surrounding them, represents the open and horizontal knowledge exchange that we are working on within our learning community. By sharing experiences, questions, and ideas, we spark conversations, collaborations and collective explorations of a wide range of research methods, design principles, and creative strategies.

We want to move beyond traditional, hierarchical modes of creating and sharing knowledge and instead construct knowledge from the middle of all relations. By strengthening our bonds, we can create an experimental and dynamic process of exchange and learning.[45]

For this symbiosis to be successful, we need to create a caring and supportive structure that is open for continuous dialogue: a safe space that is always in motion, and where rethinking communication is key. Every participant within the network will hence be briefed, made aware of, or introduced to the workings of this safe space, focused on horizontal communication and de-hierarchised modes of working. A key element has been establishing a continuous conversation in regards to feedback from students and alumni towards the course, creating feedback loops about how the programme is functioning. The overall workings of these de-hierarchised feedback loops are safeguarded by a group coach, who guides each generation through the two years of the programme. Moreover, tutors within the programme do not act as all-knowing 'teachers', but instead share their experiences, questions and ideas in order to spark conversations and collective explorations of a wide range of research methods, design principles, and creative strategies. Rather than "teaching to", we practice "learning with". Within our team, the aim is to create a continuous learning process, which also involves inviting alumni back into the course. Some have become tutors, others provide guest lectures and workshops, or contribute to the vision of the course. We see it as vital to connect to alumni, as they can bring their lived experiences back into the course, with new nodes, hyphae and distribution lines.

A very crucial part of our learning community is its international character, both in regards to the student body, as well as when it comes to tutors and other partners. We need to become aware of cultural differences within our network, and how these can influence its workings. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing stated in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015): "Collaboration is work across difference, yet this is not the innocent diversity of self–contained evolutionary tracks. The evolution of our "selves" is already polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaboration."[46] This work across differences and understanding of histories of encounter ask for an intersectional approach where being open towards each other's perspectives are key. The many international perspectives can guide us in the process of decolonisation, as students and tutors bring their own lived experiences into the course, which often differ from the standard, Western approaches that feel comfortable.

To conclude our writing, and hence our forays into changing the approach to fashion education, it is very important to mention that this is not the final stage, or a completion of the work. The learning community from which we strive to create a non-capitalist, distributed, de-hierarchised and decolonised network of fashion education needs constant work, and never-ending effort, from all the participants involved. It is a system in constant flux, with new nodes, hyphae and distribution lines being created continuously. By opening ourselves up to all these alternative branches, we hope to find the answers for questions that will be in the future of our programme, as well as in the future of fashion education at large. How can we for example overcome every form of hierarchy, especially the linguistic hierarchy between 'student' and 'tutor'? And the biggest question of all: can we truly be as de-hierarchised and distributed as we wish, while we exist in the framework of the academic institute? All of these questions can inspire growth into terrain yet unknown, and transform the centralised and exploitative nature of the industrial fashion system into one of community, where symbiosis, horizontal relations, and constant care for all participants will become key.

45   We relate strongly to the 'and–and model' described by Sarah Cheang and Shehnaz Suterwalla in their article 'Decolonizing the Curriculum? Transformation, Emotion, and Positionality in Teaching' (2020) for the *Fashion Theory* journal vol. 24 (6), p. 882–883. The and–and model "offers a critical challenge to empiricist methods that present binary either–or ways of thinking. Either–or thinking clings to hard disciplinary boundaries. Instead and–and opens the potential for inclusive approaches to different ways of learning, knowing, experiencing history and expressing it, leads to journeys through and to the pluriversal (Dussel and Cooper 2011; Escobar 2020). This approach helps us to unthink and unlearn western knowledge biases, whether in the humanities (Escobar 2018, 2020), social sciences, or the sciences (Latour 2016). And–and is a methodological disruption to the orthodoxies of western notions of transparency/universality/clarity (Glissant and Wing 1997). And–and is about pulling together ideas to generate multivalent knowing, without compromising emotional, positional, and relational knowledge."

46   Lowenhaupt Tsing, A. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 29.

47   Ibid., p. viii.

As Anna Lowenhaupt wrote: *"Below the forest floor, fungal bodies extend themselves in nets and skeins, binding roots and mineral soils, long before producing mushrooms. All books emerge from similarly hidden collaborations."*[47] *The same applies to this text. We would like to voice our sincerest gratitude to all participants within the mycorrhizal network of MA Critical Fashion Practices. Without all of your continuous work, we would not have been able to reflect upon the current state of fashion education—and the learning community that we are moving within would not have been a reality.*