KATE FLETCHER

Kate Fletcher is a fashion and sustainability pioneer, design activist, writer, and research professor at the Centre of Sustainable Fashion, University of the Arts London. Over the last two decades, her original thinking has infused the field of fashion, textiles and sustainability, and she has released over fifty scholarly and popular publications in the field, most recently Design and Nature: A Partnership, and Wild Dress: Clothing & the Natural World.

ANIA ZOLTOWSKA: Your new book, Wild Dress, explores where garments and the natural world meet. What was your intention in writing this?

KATE FLETCHER: My intention was to try to change the story. For the most part, I think that work around fashion – including work around fashion and sustainability – puts humans at the top of a hierarchy and nature at the bottom. Nature remains unseen, misunderstood, and subjugated. Nature is seen as a dead resource, separate to humans. It tends to overlook relationships, causing us to establish a world full of disconnections. It distances us from the consequences of our actions. So I started to write Wild Dress in part to make sense of the opposite experience, and to fold together clothing and nature, layering them, blending them, both to show the many interdependencies and the fertility of acting as if it was not so. It’s a personal book. I use “life writing” and the futility of acting as if it was not so. It’s a personal book. I use “life writing” to show the many interdependencies and the fertility of acting as if it was not so.

ANIA: How do you think garments can enhance our understanding of our intrinsic interconnection with nature and with one another?

KATE: Garments can connect us to nature courtesy of being what they are: a steady companion, our second skin, ushering us into places and situations, acting as an enabler, a portal. Sometimes clothes act as a barrier, keeping the world out. At other times they are like a kaleidoscope, totally changing our experience of things, altering what we see, what we know, what we take responsibility for.

ANIA: So many of us within the sustainability space are so focused on numbers, measuring, analysis, checklists that we forget to actually develop an experiential relationship with that which we are “sustaining” – nature itself, which seems quite at odds with what we are trying to do. How does your relationship with the natural world relate to your work in sustainable fashion?

KATE: Wild Dress is different from the fashion and sustainability knowledge gained from measurement, classifying, and naming. It’s about relationship and care. I grew up in a working-class family in a depressed northern British city. It wasn’t a nature-based childhood – in fact, it was quite the opposite – there was no green space where I lived. I even remember the first time that I saw a leaf unfold on a tree – I was sixteen, but I know how to care for things. A caring relationship with nature doesn’t just mean tending to the pristine wild spaces, but to all of it: the abundance, the craziness, the dirt, the rawness, the life, the clothes. This is our world, to which our hope and fate are tied.

ANIA: What is your vision for the fashion and textile design space, and how do you think we could achieve this?

KATE: I see design as needing to foster a new relationship with nature, in which the legacy of modernity – mastery, control, “progress” – is thrown off and design instead embraces interdependency and humility. This requires us to shift our relationship with Earth and to make ourselves, and perhaps even our fabrics and garments, smaller and less central. Nature needs more of the attention that some of us give to ourselves and the things we make. ANIA: Who would you name as your key influences, and what have they taught you?

KATE: I see Wild Dress as a variety of nature writing, and I’ve been hugely influenced by Nan Shepherd, Annie Dillard, and Kathleen Jamie. In terms of the method of life writing, I have been made bolder by Cynthia Chambers. These women all taught me to observe closely, to feel and laugh, to work with details, “to write with the blood of an actual life.”

Wild Dress: Clothing & the Natural World was published by Uniform Books in May 2019, and Design and Nature: A Partnership was released by Routledge in September 2019.

Interview by Ania Zoltowska