

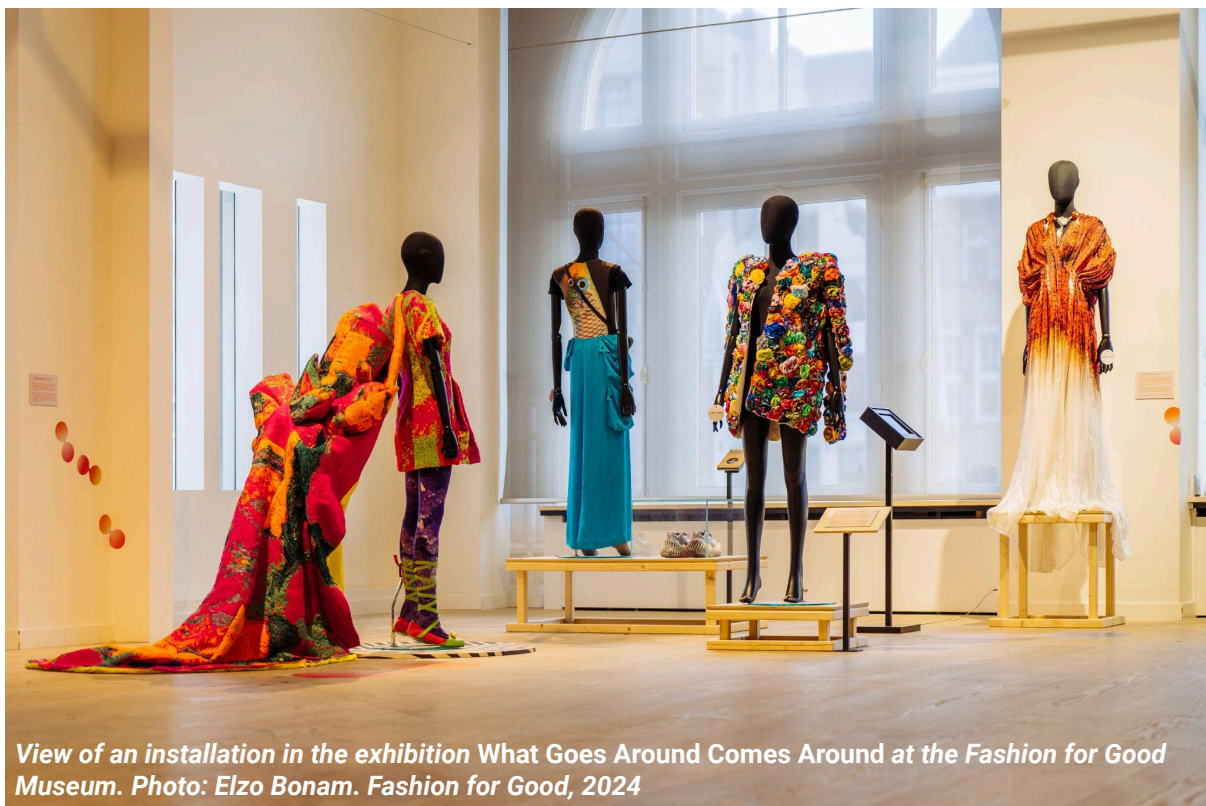
Title: Healing and Confronting: Fashion Exhibitions and Social Responsibility.

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Abstract

This paper traces the development of the exhibition *What Goes Around Comes Around* at the Fashion for Good Museum in Amsterdam (27 January - 5 June 2024), exploring the connection between fashion curation and care practices and sustainability. The exhibition exemplifies the museum's social responsibility as an institution with the mission to inspire, educate, and empower visitors to engage with climate action. Focusing on circular fashion and the critical conversation around a 'circular economy', the exhibition aims to confront visitors with the realities of the current industry. In light of the emotional impact of topics with an environmental focus, and given the museum's explicit intention to affect visitors through confrontation and healing, the exhibition was built around a care structure to guide visitors' emotional journeys. The care structure is based on the framework of the Circles of Influence (Covey, 1989) and serves a dual purpose: emotional wayfinding as well as signposting of the thematic areas of the exhibition. Through these dimensions, *What Goes Around Comes Around* takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining fashion, art and science to tell stories about clothing as the product of a global industry, as well as socio-cultural output. Reflecting on the development of the exhibition and the broader theory of care of the Fashion for Good Museum, the paper proposes how fashion museums can embrace their social responsibility by functioning as community-building spaces, bringing people together and encouraging collective climate action.

Key words: Care, fashion, museology, social responsibility, sustainability



Introduction

This paper was presented at the Pasold Research Fund Conference 2024, titled 'Beyond the Blockbuster: Exhibiting Fashion Now', on the 31st of May at London College of Fashion. It was written as part of the Fashion for Good Museum's legacy efforts, in view of its closing on June 5th 2024. Fashion for Good (FFG) was founded in Amsterdam in 2017 as an organisation composed of two distinct entities: an Innovation Platform for innovative start-ups in sustainable fashion and textiles and a Museum dedicated to sustainable fashion. In 2024, the Museum will be closing its doors as part of a larger strategy shift of the organisation, which will be doubling down on scaling sustainable fashion innovations to increase impact within the textile and fashion industry.¹ This paper explores the Museum's perspective on social responsibility and particularly how fashion exhibitions have the potential to inspire, educate and empower the public to address socio-environmental issues in fashion and beyond.

The authors first introduce the Fashion for Good Museum and the ways in which it subverts conventions in the areas of display, visitor care, and public engagement, as well as the broad understanding of sustainability which underpins the museum's activities. Unpacking how social responsibility relates to fashion in the context of the climate emergency, the museum addresses systemic issues in the fashion industry. The authors' main focus is the museum's theory of care which has emerged over the last six years, highlighting particularly how care becomes a crucial part of the sustainability discourse and a structural component of the museum's operations. Honing in on a case study, an exploration of the development of the exhibition *What Goes Around Comes Around* (27 January - 5 June 2024), details how the museum's broad understanding of sustainability, rooted in care practices, has been applied in a single exhibition. This case study analysis concludes in a reflection on the meaning of social responsibility for museums and exhibitions today, and three key findings which suggest potential areas of further research in museum sustainability.

Fashion for Good and Social Responsibility

The Fashion for Good Museum was launched with the mission to change the hearts and minds of visitors with regard to fashion consumption. By consumption, we understand the financial action of buying as well as wearing, use, reuse, and care of garments and textiles.² The museum aims to achieve this mission by educating visitors about sustainable fashion and the fashion industry as well as by inspiring them and leaving people with hope towards the future. Its exhibitions and public programming are interdisciplinary and multisensory; bridging fashion, fine art, science, music and performance to tell stories behind clothing production and wearing. Fashion for Good is a museum that looks beyond the aesthetic value and cultural significance of a garment to the conditions of its production and its potential futures. This is a broader lens on fashion which includes the global industry of which textiles and garments are products, setting Fashion for Good apart from most other museums with a focus on fashion curating or collecting. Exhibitions unpack socio-environmental impacts across global fashion and textile value chains, from raw materials to manufacturing, dyeing and finishing, retail, wearing and end-of-use. Through this focus on clothing as an object of everyday use, the museum becomes an accessible entry point to introduce the public to current socio-environmental issues in the context of the climate crisis, their individual role and power to make positive change.

¹ For more information around this transition, see:

https://fashionforgood.com/our_news/fashion-for-good-unveils-five-year-strategy-shifting-to-scale-innovation-in-fashion/

² In purely economic terms, consumption is defined as the act of using up a resource. The Fashion for Good Museum embraces this act in the broadest possible sense, echoing the idea of a clothing 'ownership journey' proposed by Orsola de Castro, co-founder of Fashion Revolution in her book *Loved Clothes Last* (2021).

Sustainability represents the foundation of the museum's mission, a common-sense approach which influences every aspect of the museum's operations. This means that sustainability assumes a broad definition across the museum's activities, including embedding responsible material usage and careful decision-making when it comes to creating new exhibitions, new installations, production, or programming. The museum's broad definition of sustainability therefore exceeds the material (or environmental) angle of museum sustainability. It fundamentally includes the dimensions of economic, social and cultural sustainability, through institutional values, choices, storytelling, internal management and more.³ This broader discourse around sustainability calls for an understanding of museums as social actors with a responsibility towards their audiences. The Fashion for Good Museum embraces this responsibility and the role of the museum in influencing people's understanding of current issues (Coffee, 2023), specifically in the context of the climate crisis.

The museum's social responsibility is to inspire, educate, and empower its audience, which mainly consists of local communities, Amsterdam tourists and students of all ages, particularly in fashion-focussed education. The mandate of the Fashion for Good museum prioritises behavioural change and facilitating conversations. Its activities are aimed at encouraging visitors to make more informed and more sustainable consumption choices when it comes to clothing, as well fostering a safe space to provoke conversations and create understanding around topics such as climate justice and cultural appropriation. To inspire, educate and empower, the museum functions as a space for community building and resource sharing, a platform for collaboration and knowledge-exchange through permanent and temporary exhibitions, educational programmes and events, ranging from thematic panel discussions to performances. Across these activities and based on past practices,⁴ its approach became twofold: firstly to confront visitors with harsh social and environmental realities in the fashion industry and the world today, and secondly to provide healing tools and engender positive emotions such as hope by shedding light on existing and future solutions.

Theory of Care at Fashion for Good

This twofold approach of healing and confronting is key to the museum's stance on social responsibility because it requires us to consider the emotional experience of visitors who engage with our programming. It is an approach to sustainability that is embedded in the recent discourse around care in museums, which has yielded new theories of care. These define 'care' as the "interest of one person in the wellbeing of another, and the articulation of that interest in practical ways" (Nuala Morse, 2020). Diverging from the traditional implications of care in museums as synonymous with 'collection care', the new theories around care practices in museums shift from a material (objects) focus to an emotional (people) focus.⁵ Specifically, they refer to the emotional experiences of visitors within and outside the museum space, and the creation of an environment able to meet the needs of the public - an environment that can be perceived as safe, welcoming, and inclusive. When discussing these emotional care practices, it is necessary to make a distinction between public-facing care, which is mainly directed at visitors and participants in our education programmes, and internal care, directed at museum personnel and external collaborators.

³ Generally, the discourse of museum sustainability focuses on the environmental dimension and quantitative metrics of sustainable development (i.e. calculating a carbon footprint). Social and cultural dimensions of sustainability are much more difficult to measure as they cannot generally be put in quantitative terms.

⁴ The museum initially focussed on positive communications, emphasising future possibilities and choosing not to dwell on the dark sides of the fashion industry. Gradually, our exhibitions began to address systemic issues and the scale of negative impacts of the industry, until we came to a healing and confronting balance. This was rooted in the body of research around the Intention- Action Gap. See for example: Sinek, S. (2009) and White, K., Hardisty, D. and Habib, R. (2019).

⁵ Examples of this shift can be found in the work of Nuala Morse (2020), Ealasaid Munro (2013), or Linnea Wallen and John. R. Docherty-Hughes (2022).

Public-facing care at Fashion for Good includes offering tools to manage and support visitors' emotional experiences in the museum, creating an appealing and restorative space through exhibition design, and embedding tools and frameworks for emotional care in educational programming. Internal care at Fashion for Good includes interpersonal care within project development teams and holding space and safeguarding creative decision-making freedom for external collaborators. Bridging these two facets of care, the museum also employs a more holistic approach centred around community building and fostering lasting relationships, uniting all who engage with the museum. As such, holistic care contributes to sustainable development in museums, because it strengthens the social and cultural aspects of museum sustainability through the creation of relationships. This emphasis on emotional rather than material - or collections - care, thereby supports the need for a broadened definition of sustainability in museums beyond material choices and energy usage, which is the result of the narrow focus on environmental sustainability.

This is further underpinned by the museum's belief that the current and future emotional needs of the public play a role in sustainable development. The most prevalent definition of sustainable development is still the one set by the UN in 1987: "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Beyond fulfilling material needs, sustainable development also requires sustained hope, emotional endurance, and the capacity to imagine alternative realities (Macy and Johnstone, 2022; Solnit and Young-Lutunatabua, 2023). Recent research has shown that the many negative emotions associated with the umbrella-terms 'climate anxiety' or 'eco-anxiety'⁶ have a worryingly disempowering effect, preventing and even paralysing people when it comes to more conscious consumption, political decision-making and the exertion of radical imagination (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). Climate anxiety can be caused by a number of factors, including mainstream media accounts of the catastrophic scale and effects of the climate emergency, which are recently being translated in museum exhibitions. Countering this sense of disempowerment therefore becomes crucial for museums with an environmental focus. Museums have the power to help shape our shared consciousness and sense of self (Brophy and Wylie, 2008; Meyer, Struble and Catsikis, 2014), which creates great potential to reinforce, or counter building climate anxiety. Through temporary exhibitions, and cultural programming, the Fashion for Good Museum harnesses this potential, embracing the emotional experiences of its audiences to guide them towards active hope.

What Goes Around Comes Around

This broadened approach to sustainability in museums and the Fashion for Good Museum's emphasis on care practices is exemplified by the exhibition *What Goes Around Comes Around* (26 January - 5 June 2024). The starting point of the exhibition was a noticeable recent language shift from 'sustainability' to the term 'circularity' within the fashion industry. The title of the exhibition refers to the circular patterns of nature, as well as karmic effects of making positive change. The topic was chosen because circularity is an important current political focus, as local, national and international levels of government are pledging to ambitious circularity goals in the next decades,⁷ as well as recent legislation which will create an imperative for the fashion industry to become more circular. This topic also offered a way to address the current state of the fashion industry by exploring circular practices at micro and macro scales through a variety of disciplines, including installation art, couture fashion, sustainable innovation, AR (augmented reality) and documentary films. The exhibition had multiple aims: to make large-scale issues such as overproduction, textile waste and dumping, tangible to the general public; to inspire people with the possibilities of circularity; to create understanding around visitors' own role in the fashion industry; and to offer concrete steps and solutions, based on innovative science as well as ancestral practices that can be adopted by individual or communities.

⁶ See for example the recent writings of Anouchka Grose (2020; 2023), Michael Shellenberger (2019) and Sarah LaBrecque (2023).

⁷ The city of Amsterdam, for example, is progressively working up to become a circular city by 2050, with intermediate goals for 2025 and 2030. See: <https://www.amsterdam.nl/en/policy/sustainability/circular-economy/>

To reach these goals and as part of our approach to public-facing care, we adopted a progressive narrative, balancing positive communication and hard truths in order to ensure emotional confrontation as well as healing for visitors. Circular economy theories are large and layered topics which require sensitive storytelling to showcase their complexity without overwhelming visitors. We chose to start by confronting visitors with the consequences of fashion (over)consumption and -production. This includes highlighting the working conditions of garment workers and the harmful impact of textile waste dumping in Global South countries. As with any climate crisis-related topic, these stories can bring up climate anxiety or other heightened emotional responses for visitors. Considering our focus on visitors' emotional journeys in the museum and our social responsibility to educate, inspire and empower, we therefore developed this exhibition around a care structure, which functions as a tool for visitors to manage their emotional responses and encourage active hope. This care structure was based on Steven R. Covey's framework of the Circles of Influence, often used in mental health practices to help people understand the extent of their impact and control within their everyday lives (Covey, 1989). In the exhibition, the care structure encouraged visitors to reflect on their personal 'circle of influence' within the fashion industry. The care structure was divided into three main dimensions (individual, community, industry). Each dimension corresponded to a different level of impact and responsibility, aiming to help visitors become aware of their own power in the climate emergency. While unpacking common misconceptions of individual responsibility, the intention of the care structure was to initiate a healing journey which extends beyond the museum. This care structure was envisioned as a tool to support mental wellbeing in the exhibition and in daily life, helping people to situate themselves within environmental issues without taking on their full weight.

Curatorial choices and exhibition design were integrated to visually facilitate this healing journey. The exhibition design was shaped by Sara Biatchinyi, who developed a design language which combined text-based communications, object displays and visual wayfinding via floor stickers, text panels and wallpaper design. The visual language of the exhibition was intended to reinforce the care structure through the use of a three-colour scheme, which divided displays into sections according to the individual, community and industry dimensions. It was also intentionally joyful, using colours such as hot pink, sunset orange and lemon yellow, to create a welcoming space able to foster positive emotions (Biatchinyi, 2024). This integrated curatorial approach created an engaging environment for learning and discovery, visually drawing in visitors and countering preconceptions of sustainable exhibition design.

This exhibition was designed to discover current practices and alternative possibilities to engender positive emotions towards the future and help visitors exercise their imagination. *What Goes Around Comes Around* presented existing and future circular practices in the fashion industry through newly commissioned installations and loan objects from emerging as well as established artists and designers. The artists illustrated a variety of perspectives on what constitutes circularity, including upcycling practices, working in non-competitive environments, the use of innovative materials, AR and digital design, and collectivity. Together, these installations were intended to break down the complexity of the topic of circularity into something manageable for the visitors which relates to their everyday experiences. The exhibition's healing journey was ultimately a reframing of what it means to be a fashion consumer, shifting from a focus on buying and wearing to clothing ownership and collective care (de Castro, 2021).

In terms of internal care, the exhibition was co-curated by museum team members with various areas of expertise and created in collaboration with external artists and design collectives. Bringing together their diverging expertises contributed to an experimental approach to exhibition development: leaning into interdisciplinarity, integrating curation and design, addressing different audiences and catering to different learning styles. The exhibition was developed with contributions from experts in the fields of textile engineering and innovation, museology, fine art and fashion design. This allowed us to open up the discourse of circularity in fashion and provide entry points from disciplines including fashion design, psychology, policy-making, new technology and science. Storytelling also prioritised multiple perspectives, using the exhibition as a platform for underrepresented voices and communities in The Netherlands and beyond. The exhibition was an opportunity to give equal space to emerging and

established artists and designers, fostering their alternative ways of working by offering creative freedom and the means to produce new installations for the exhibition.

Finally, *What Goes Around Comes Around* exemplified the Fashion for Good museum's stance on holistic care by engaging in community-building, encouraging people who work in the same industry or closely-affiliated industries to share knowledge and expertise. This form of holistic care and perspective on social responsibility was physically materialised in the final, interactive installation of the exhibition, which was developed to allow visitors to sit down and reflect on their personal journey and their future actions. The installation encouraged visitors to employ radical imagination⁸ and attempt to visualise a better future, as well as contribute small or large individual actions and solutions. Finally, the compounded visitor contributions - in the form of colourful notes pinned to circular notice boards - were designed to leave visitors with an impression of the power of collective action, engendering active hope that visitors were ready to put into practice after their visit. Uniting museum staff, exhibition collaborators, museum visitors and community members in collective action, *What Goes Around Comes Around* provided a precedent for the ways in which a fashion exhibition can become the starting point for collaboration towards the common goal of sustainable development in fashion.

Conclusion

Through the exhibition *Goes Around Comes Around*, the Fashion for Good Museum applied sustainable museum practices in their broadest sense. The topic of sustainability here is not only related to the main subject of the exhibition (circularity in fashion) but it influences the relationship created between the museum, its internal personnel and its external collaborators. Close analysis of this exhibition reveals three key areas which suggest a way forward for sustainable development and social responsibility in museums.

Firstly, as a multidisciplinary exhibition, *What Goes Around Comes Around*, approaches the topic of circularity from different angles, including tools and ideas not necessarily related to the fashion industry. This multidisciplinary began with the curatorial team, formed by professionals with different backgrounds, which allowed the team to bring disciplines such as mental health practice, spirituality and science into fashion museology. Opening up a fashion exhibition to other disciplines facilitated the accessibility of a complex topic such as circularity, presenting different entry points and ultimately reaching a wider audience.

Secondly, *What Goes Around Comes Around* shifts the paradigm of what the purpose of a fashion exhibition can be. Most fashion exhibitions serve as aesthetic experiences, upholding the myths of fashion, celebrating its contribution to general culture, craftsmanship and creativity or exploring its socio-historical implications. *What Goes Around Comes Around* suggests that a fashion exhibition can help reframe people's relationships with their clothes and with each other, illustrating how we all participate in systemic socio-environmental issues and how we can dismantle harmful systems and imagine alternative futures for humanity.

Thirdly, *What Goes Around Comes Around* illustrates emerging functions for exhibitions as providers of holistic care. The introduction of a care structure is a curatorial strategy which embraces the importance of considering people's emotional responses when developing exhibitions, especially when related to the climate emergency. It is an example of the way in which an exhibition can offer tools or frameworks that visitors can apply to decision-making and the management of their mental health beyond the museum.

⁸ For an exploration of radical imagination, see Haiven, Max and Khasnabish, Alex. (2010) "What is Radical Imagination? A Special Issue." *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture and Action*. Vol 4: 2. ppi-xxxvii.

These three areas represent immaterial legacies of fashion exhibitions which suggest a new answer to the key dilemma of museum sustainability. At the most basic level, museum sustainability seeks to justify the costs of operations, such as producing new exhibitions or programming. As the *Atlas for Future Exhibitions*, a Dutch platform for sustainable development in museums, boldly declares: "creating an exhibition is, by definition, non-sustainable" (Atlas, 2022). In other words, in purely environmental terms, the most sustainable exhibition is the one that was not created at all. If we view this as an equation, an exhibition is only sustainable if its impact or benefit to the public is in balance with, or greater than, the resources required to produce it.⁹ Perhaps, in our current context of the climate emergency, a museum's social responsibility should therefore be to ensure this balance from the inception of any newly produced programme or exhibition.

Of course, this raises a number of questions and complexities. Where does that balance lie? Is it universal or context-dependent? What are the criteria by which we measure (social) impact? How can we compare qualitative (social impact) and quantitative (resources needed) factors? These are critical areas worth exploring in current museological research.

Though the Fashion for Good Museum is sadly closing its doors, this answer could be seen as its greatest contribution to the discourse around sustainability in museums. The museum's interpretation of sustainability ultimately begins with a single question, namely: is this worth doing or creating in the first place? Does the positive impact that this exhibition or programme will create, outweigh the use of (new) resources necessary? That may sound like a very radical position, but it is only one step removed from the standard practice of articulating goals and objectives, intended audiences and expected financial costs/gains at the start of any new project development. To achieve structural sustainability, museum professionals collectively need to apply a more critical lens to project development. The act of answering this question within the first ideation of a new project must therefore become normalised, to embed sustainability within project development protocols beyond material considerations.

Author biographies

Sophie Jager van Duren is a curator, creative project manager and producer based in the Netherlands. She holds a background in fashion design and textile engineering with a speciality in fashion sustainability. A major focus of her work is the creation of accessible spaces which bring together narratives around the social, cultural, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Through her projects, she seeks to amplify the need for 'safe' spaces for dialogues and interaction around themes associated with sustainability. Sophie has been working as Curator and Exhibition Development Coordinator at the Fashion for Good Museum since 2018.

Marta Matera has been working as Exhibition Coordinator at the Fashion For Good Museum in Amsterdam since 2023. In 2024, she assistant-curated the exhibition *What Goes Around Comes Around*, mainly focusing on the development of the exhibition care structure and its interactive component. She is currently attending a MA in Museum Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her broader research interests are centred on the development of holistic elements in exhibitions as a way to approach visitors' wellbeing and their emotional journeys, as well as the implications of the introduction of such practices on the social role of museums.

Hester Mauduit is a doctoral researcher at London College Fashion, University of the Arts London. Her PhD focuses on the emotional impact of exhibitions, specifically how to harness curatorial practice for the communication of socio-environmental issues in fashion and instigate lasting behavioural change. Since 2022, she has been working as a Fundraising & Development Cöordinator at the Fashion for Good Museum in Amsterdam, developing exhibitions and educational tools. Most recently, she assistant-curated the exhibition *What Goes Around Comes Around*, launched in January

⁹ Resources include for example: time, energy, financial investments, new materials.

2024. She has previously worked at the Hunterian Art Gallery in Glasgow and the Kunstmuseum in The Hague.

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