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Letter from the Editor

Fashion poses challenges for creative minds, and in this issue of *Catwalk* we probe the importance of symbolism for the wearing, designing, manufacturing and promoting of fashion.

The first article, 'Losing Her Religion? The Use of Guadalupan Iconography in Contemporary Mexican Street Fashion,' was written by Jessica C. Locke, Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Mary Washington, Virginia, whose research focuses on colonial and contemporary Mexican literature, culture and society. I learned much from Locke's absorbing study of the ways in which the iconography of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint, has migrated to fashion. Locke analyses how a traditional icon can be used to serve fashion by removing meaning from its symbolism, and at the same time retain its symbolic value for devotees wearing 'Lupe-toons,' cartoon versions of the brown-skinned icon of the Virgin. Products bearing this likeness are now sold in religious stores that have traditionally specialised in more 'conventional' images of saints, and some Catholic priests have approved their appearance on T-shirts, bracelets and handbags as modern-day tools for proselytising and communicating with the Church's flock. I have no doubt that Locke's article will further the discussion of icons and their replication through globalisation and fashion.

Cassandra Gero, who works in conservation at The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, also focuses on the symbolic importance of images displayed on fashion items, but her subject is the clothes that fool the eye with optical illusions. In 'Trompe L'Oeil in Fashion: A Clever and Subversive Technique,' Gero explains how the ancient method, famously well-preserved on the frescoed walls of the villa at Boscoreale near Pompeii and on many a Renaissance ceiling painting, came to be used by designers as a form of fantasy, amusement and social commentary that can raise critical issues about fashion and the nature of contemporary society. Gero provides well-chosen examples from Elsa Schiaparelli, Roberta di Camerino, Franco Moschino, Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, Martin Margiela and Thursday Friday of trompe l'oeil, depicting 'bowties,' 'sequins,' 'jeans,' and 'It Bags,' among other items. The technique has had its detractors, on a long continuum with those like Plato who deplore any simulacrum. One such individual was Henry Cole, the Victorian civil servant, design reformer and trade innovator, who condemned 'fake' printed textiles that allowed working class people to dress in fashions similar to their 'social betters.'

Like many woman, I admit to a love of shoes. Add to that a love of literature, and you will understand why I enjoyed editing, 'Coming Out from Under the Crinolines: Raising the Hem on Literary Representations of Shoes in Alcott, Dickens, Dreiser, Zola and Wharton,' written by Sarah Heaton, Senior Lecturer and Deputy Head of English at the University of Chester, UK. Heaton's analysis of the 'aura,' fetishism and symbolism associated with women's footwear, when it finally emerged from under the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century woman's skirts, is insightful. Footwear production had been industrialized, and shoes were displayed in the new department stores, detailed in the paintings of Giovanni Boldini, and created as art works by the first celebrity shoe designer, Pietro Yantorny. Women's shoes emerge as a complex site of the simultaneously hidden and displayed, and are lusted after, ogled, and the object of stolen peeks. In the novels analysed, 'revealed' shoes appear as symbols of crisis, revelation, and female empowerment. Heaton begins the article with a consideration of contemporary cultural engagement with women's shoes in the television series *Sex and the City*, to re-read representations of them in art and literature in a past culture.

In 'Britain's Brand Story in the Fashion Films of the Central Office of Information (COI),' Jo Stephenson, a films studies PhD student at Queen Mary, University of London,

British branding campaigns from World War II to the present day. Her subject is the films of the Central Office of Information (COI) made in the post-war period to promote the British fashion industry to overseas markets. Critical to the marketing campaigns were constructed ideas of Britishness, especially the symbolic value of the Royal Family, the traditional red post box, London, Carnaby Street, and the Swinging Sixties. By analysing COI films like *Sixty Years of Fashion* (1960) and *Miniskirts Make Money* (1968), Stephenson evaluates what images exactly are being sold and how they are informed by Britain's history, politics, popular culture, cultural geography and urban landscape. She also reflects on the methodological difficulties inherent in any study of archival films and the multiple levels of their curation, and highlights the gap in current fashion film criticism regarding non-fiction fashion films.

For the final article of the issue, 'Branding Sustainability: An Interview with Designer-Entrepreneur Sarah Van Aken,' Natalie W. Nixon, Associate Professor in the Fashion Merchandising & Management Program at Philadelphia University, Pennsylvania, had several conversations with the eco-clothing designer and retailer Sarah Van Aken, whose company SA VA is based in Philadelphia. Nixon talked with Van Aken about sustainability not simply in terms of regenerative materials and the supply chain, but in terms of how a fashion business with environmental ecology goals can be a business model for fiscal and environmental sustainability and viability. Van Aken discusses the origins of her business, her decision in 2008 to move production from Bangladesh back to the USA, her interpretation of sustainability, and the expansion goals for a fashion business in a major urban American city as a model for economic development. The symbolic, as well as practical, value attached to these goals is to be applauded in a time of globalism, debasement of the environment, and outsourcing.

The Reviews section of *Catwalk* is devoted to recent exhibitions and books, and I had the pleasure of seeing *Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity*, reviewed in the issue by Vanessa Rosales, when it made its stop at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. British royals are very much in the news, and Cassandra Schröder Holm's appraisal of *Hartnell to Amies: Couture by Royal Appointment*, held at London's Fashion and Textile Museum, reveals not only the continued fascination with (some) royals and the ways they dress but also the ways in which their clothing can mirror and support the fashion of a particular period. Ericka Basile, a regular reviewer for *Catwalk*, visited The Museum at FIT and wandered in wonder through the galleries of *Shoe Obsession*, a well-named follow-up to the fetishism of female footwear discussed by Sarah Heaton. Information about exhibitions currently showing, or soon-to-be showing, follows the exhibition reviews. The button, a humble item that keeps clothing closed, is the subject of Nina Edwards' book *On the Button*, a cultural history of the fastener, which Elizabeth Kaino Hopper assesses. The second volume of *Exchanging Clothes: Habits of Being 2*, edited by Cristina Giorcelli and Paul Rabinowitz, is thoughtfully reviewed by Paola Colaiacomo. Recently authored books by Kate Moss, Kate Irvin and Laurie Anne Brewer, Marco Pedroni, Elizabeth L. Cline, Caroline Evans, and me follow in Briefly Noted Books.

I would like to thank Michael A. Langkjær for his diligent work as *Catwalk's* first Reviews Editor. Leonard R. Koos, Chair of Modern Languages and Literature, University of Mary Washington, Virginia, and Sofia Pantouvaki, Professor of Costume Design for Theatre and Film at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University, Finland, are taking over the section. Special thanks too for Elizabeth Kaino Hopper, Leonard R. Koos, Desiree Smal, Jess Berry and Lisa Howard for helping us put the issue together.

Enjoy!

Jacque Lynn Foltyn, PhD

Branding Sustainability: An Interview with Designer-Entrepreneur Sarah Van Aken

Natalie W. Nixon

Abstract

Sustainability in a fashion context is often discussed in terms of regenerative materials and the supply chain. What is missing is how a fashion business with environmental ecology goals can be an inspiring business model for other sectors. In fact, the ways in which a sustainable-oriented fashion business can be a model for fiscal and environmental sustainability and economic viability for a range of industries is an underexplored area. Sara Van Aken is a clothing designer and retailer based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with a unique business approach. She seeks to scale the social and environmental sustainability values embedded in her apparel business beyond fashion apparel; she is interested in how those values may provide a prototype for economic development for a variety of industries.¹ Van Aken brands her fashion products in two ways: as a model for sustainability and as a model for economic development. Her business, SA VA, is comprised of a flagship store and design studio in downtown Philadelphia, an adjacent garment production centre, a wholesale brand, and an on-line fashion community and online store. SA VA's brand diffusion includes: 1) the SA VA private label, 2) manufacturing for other designers, 3) custom shirts, 4) restaurant/chef uniforms, 5) a retail line, and 6) a wholesale line. In this interview, Van Aken discusses the origins of her business, her decision in 2008 to move production from Bangladesh to Philadelphia, her interpretation of sustainability, and her expansive goals for a fashion business in a major urban American city as a model for economic development for other industries.

Key Words

Sustainability, sustainable fashion, slow fashion, fair trade, reshoring, disruptive innovation, diffusion of innovations, business model, Sarah Van Aken, SA VA.

1. Introduction

Fashion is a platform for innovation and action. It marks identity, creates well-being, embraces creativity and connects communities around the world. In 2011, US apparel consumption was valued at \$283 billion. Depending on your perspective, this number can either seem staggering for what it indicates about a lack of mindfulness for sustainable living,² or it can be viewed as a huge opportunity for fashion to have a positive impact on a global society.³ Researchers who engage in scenario planning point out that external factors such as emerging economies, the transformative nature of technology, and attitudes towards shortages in resources will compel more apparel businesses to adopt sustainable practices.⁴

Sara Van Aken is a sustainable clothing designer and retailer based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and has a unique business model which embraces environmental ecology. Her goal is to scale the social and environmental sustainability values she has embedded in her apparel business beyond fashion apparel; she is interested in how those values may be a model for economic development for a range of industries. Van Aken brands fashion in two ways: as

flagship store and design studio in downtown Philadelphia, an adjacent garment production centre, a wholesale brand, and an on-line fashion community and online store. The adjacent production centre makes SA VA a more vertically integrated operation, one where design, production and retail operations are managed under a single proprietorship. SA VA's brand diffusion includes: 1) the SA VA private label, 2) manufacturing for other designers (i.e., consulting for product launches, product development, sourcing and manufacturing), 3) custom shirts, 4) restaurant/chef uniforms, 5) a retail line, and 6) a wholesale line.

As a small business, SA VA employs fourteen people and is able to offer a living wage that pays higher than a McDonald's or a Starbucks and also offers health insurance. Van Aken's goal is to be an ethical clothing and accessories brand, built on the platform of effortless, individual style and social consciousness. The SA VA brand is locally made, community focused, and globally inspired, which is underscored by its mission statement:

SA VA is striving to be the most socially sustainable apparel company in the country, developing a lifestyle brand that is a mindful choice for women that care about social and environmental responsibility. We work towards this end by creating local living wage job creation and reducing our carbon footprint by manufacturing locally, use responsibly sourced and often eco-friendly textiles and create community partnerships that help women and children. When our customer buys SA VA she is able to find the image she wants without compromising the values she holds.⁵

Sarah Van Aken graduated from the University of Delaware in 1998, where she studied fine arts and majored in ceramics. She has been a speaker at the BALLE (Business Alliance for Local Living Economies) conferences in 2011 and 2012 and is on the board of the Sustainable Business Network (which is a member of BALLE). In the recent past, Van Aken received the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce Young Entrepreneur of the Year award (2012), The Merchants Fund Business Grant (2011), the Women's Opportunity Resource Center Community Impact Award (2011), and *Apparel Magazine's* Top Innovator Award (2011).

In this interview, Van Aken discusses the origins of her business, her decision in 2008 to move production from Bangladesh to Philadelphia, her interpretation of sustainability, and her expansive goals for a fashion business in a major American city as a model for economic development. While reshoring – the bringing of good, well-paying manufacturing jobs back to the domestic market, is an emerging trend in American cities such as Philadelphia,⁶ there has been a lack of systematic research about the motivations, processes, and effects of reshoring. My interview with Sarah Van Aken provides an opportunity to better assess its merits.

2. Methodology

I am a qualitative researcher, trained in design management, and find value in the case study method because of the depth of insight it brings to a broad topic; a benefit of the approach is that it can reveal motivations for why actors make certain choices.⁷ While it is important to be cautious about making generalizations from one case, the case study method is valuable for the deep perspective it brings to a topic such as sustainability in fashion, which is multi-layered and complex. For example, researchers are interested in the ways that fashion and sustainability intersect in terms of design process, supply chain, logistics and even branding and promotion.⁸

In compiling this interview, I visited the SA VA retail shop on three different occasions, toured the 'workshop' (i.e., the small adjacent factory), and observed customers' interactions with staff. I interviewed Sarah Van Aken twice and asked her semi-structured questions about

her perspective on sustainability as it relates to fashion, as well as her goals for SA VA as a business model for economic development. Both interviews were recorded and then transcribed.⁹ I sorted and sifted through the two interviews to assess key themes. I discuss those themes in the conclusion of this paper.

3. Origins

When asked how her background in ceramics and fine arts influenced her decision to go into mass-produced clothing, Van Aken said that her choice was a matter of lifestyle. 'I didn't want to be a starving artist and found it difficult to be in a space of complete existentialism that I believe you need in order to be a very successful fine artist.' According to Sarah, fashion allowed her to integrate design, art and marketing. She also cites her practicality and simplicity as reasons why the ready-to-wear garment industry was a great career choice for her.



Image 1: Sarah Van Aken checking on production. © Jeff Fusco, image courtesy of Jeff Fusco

NWN: How did you come up with the SA VA retail concept?

SVA: It's a little bit of a long story. I think quite honestly that it was based on ego more than anything else! I went to school for fine arts and had this dream of being a clothing designer. I had been making clothes. I worked in the garment business in New York after school and came back to Philadelphia, and about eight years ago realized that I knew no one who in their right mind would give me half a million dollars to start a women's apparel line. So I created a business plan where I got into the business for \$10,000 [by] sewing men's custom shirts and grew my business from there. I had some success with that and then through sort of a stroke of luck, knew someone who used to work for me, who was from Bangladesh and his brother-in-law used to make denim for us and I sent him over there with some money and told him to open a garment factory for us and it worked. I started designing and manufacturing uniforms for specialty shops and high end hotels and manufacturing them in Bangladesh; that was the bulk of my business for several years. I always knew that I wanted it [the SA VA brand] vertically integrated, because I learned quickly that when the market was moving very quickly, it was incredibly difficult to get a small round of production done. I've always liked the idea of not just controlling the manufacturing, but also of creating the working environment

NWN: What did doing business in Bangladesh teach you?

SVA: That was actually a really great experience. I'm glad it's over; it was sometimes a headache, but overall, a great experience!

NWN: What was the headache about, and what are you glad about?

SVA: Well, I mean, I'm happy about having the experience...at a young age, owning a business in a Third World country and traveling there, and employing people, and the social issues. You know, just the logistics of getting things done in a country where you have to pay off customs workers so your fabric doesn't get stolen in customs, which is absurd!

NWN: One of the costs of doing business.

SVA: At one point, their government collapsed because they failed to have an election, and you know I was on the last plane out of there before the military took control of the government. Luckily, it wasn't at all volatile.

NWN: What years were you in Bangladesh?

SVA: The summer of 2006 to the beginning of 2009. And the headaches were, for instance, I would be on the phone at 3:00 in the morning, asking whether goods had shipped. 'Oh, they shipped. They shipped.' 'What's the tracking number?' 'I don't have it yet from the shipper,' which is ridiculous, and then come to find out that the fabric hadn't even cleared customs, so not only had it not....The fabric hadn't even arrived, let alone been cut and sewn. So....'Oh, it shipped, it shipped.' I'm like, 'But why did you lie to me?' 'I'm sorry.' You know, they want to please, and they don't like telling the truth.

At the same time, it was a really great experience because we ended up hiring all very skilled tailors who could make tons of different garments, who have their own tailoring shops, who we paid five times what a normal wage would be for a tailor.

And so culturally, it was a pretty amazing experience, but it became incredibly taxing. I'm really glad I had that experience, but I'm glad it's over!

NWN: So why did you move production out of Bangladesh?

SVA: By 2008, gas prices had quadrupled so air shipping was ridiculous. The larger my orders got and more high-profile my clients, the more problems I seemed to have with getting the quality of goods I needed out of Bangladesh. I turned thirty and I just really wanted to do something good with my life and I knew I either had to scratch this business entirely or convert it into something that had meaning for me.... I knew there was something missing in the market for women in their 30s, 40s and 50s. I think the 2008 election just took me back to a different set of values and I knew that I wanted a comprehensive approach to socially-conscious clothing. So not just using organic fabric, even though it might be made in China with whatever labour, I wanted to start with local living wage job creation.

But beyond that, I just couldn't wrap my arms around shipping textiles and garments all around the world, and creating jobs in other places. And it was just something that I really wanted to imagine a way to make things here, and I thought, 'Well, maybe I'll just make things in Chinatown....' I wanted to be more sustainable, and I knew that I needed to find a way to do that; it just didn't resonate for me anymore, and I knew I had to either scratch the fashion business, or to turn it into something...good.

Van Aken's motivations for bringing manufacturing of her SA VA business to the United States are part of the larger trend of reshoring, also referred to as 'inshoring.' Reshoring is a phenomenon that is characterized by manufacturing in the USA despite the apparent cost-advantages of outsourcing abroad. While reshoring has not been studied extensively, it has

sector. The opposite of offshoring, reshoring has been clearly defined as the procurement of goods and services domestically,¹⁰ and production facilities which serve the domestic market.¹¹ Reshoring represents a reverse trend, that of bringing portions of manufacturing nearer to the destination market or completely moving manufacturing back to the destination market. The apparel manufacturing industry is a labour intensive industry, and production chases low labour cost environments. This is the principle reason why production has shifted out of the United States and into developing nations where the cost of labour is significantly lower. Cities like Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, whose local economy was once driven primarily by the textile and manufacturing industry, saw a complete exodus by the early 1980's and are looking for ways to revive and reinterpret manufacturing capabilities.

In actuality, the cost advantages to offshoring are diminishing as the intangible costs of extensive supply chains rise to the surface. The hidden costs of offshoring include quality assurance, training, and travel costs of company personnel. The following seven factors are examples of considerations typical in a business's decision to embrace reshoring or not: 1) a shorter product development cycle,¹² 2) easily internalized tacit knowledge, 3) rising labour costs at offshore locations,¹³ 4) fear of knowledge transfer and intellectual capital leaking to competitors and data privacy, 5) inefficiencies (transport related) resulting from distance,¹⁴ 6) quality inconsistency, and 7) better training and development.

Notably, Van Aken's motivations for moving her Bangladeshi operation to Philadelphia include the majority of these seven points; namely points one, two, five and seven. Simply put, with manufacturing closer to the destination market, SA VA product development cycles could be cut by almost 50 percent and supplier relationships better managed. But these were not her only motivations. Integrating social ethics and the triple bottom line of sustainability (social, environmental and fiscal) were huge drivers.



*Image 2: The SA VA window display in Philadelphia.
© Sarah Van Aken, image courtesy of Sarah Van Aken*

4. Financing the Business

NWN: How did you finance your business?

SVA: Because we have diversified revenue streams, such as uniforms and custom services, and we were launching SA VA, our retail women's apparel brand, it was feasible for us to have a sewing factory. It required a lot [of] different classes of labour and arrangements

needed a different model, but if we could do it on a vertically integrated model, we could still make the margins to make it work.

NWN: Right.

SVA: I went to the city of Philadelphia in 2008 and asked them for a whole lot of money, and nobody, no banks were lending in November of 2008. However, you know, based on manufacturing job creation, the city could partner with a local commercial lender. It's the way all industrial development corporations lend. They lend based on manufacturing job creation. I knew that the rules with the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation [are] usually for every \$35,000.00 you borrow you have to create one full-time job.

The way that those loans are structured is you get a commercial lender to come in and partner with the city, and they gave us 45 percent of the total project cost, and took a first lien position. Then the city came in and gave us another 45 percent and took the second lien position, all low-interest financing. And we had to put 10 percent down of the entire project cost, so that included the purchase of the real estate, the equipment, and any of the hard costs of the project; so, everything but the marketing and the inventory.

NWN: Describe that process as an entrepreneur, of figuring that out.

SVA: Yeah, you know, financing is a tricky thing, and it's funny because there's this big scale in financing that you know, bankers know, big-time Wall Street bankers know. But I was fortunate enough to have a lot of experience in real estate, and we were financing this based upon the purchase of a piece of real estate. And we were doing it in Center City [downtown Philadelphia] instead of an empowerment zone, and...we had four corporations. We were buying the building under another LLC, and then there were guarantors...It was not an easy deal, but they worked with me, and we kind of took what structure they had initially given us that they thought would work. And it took a while. We met with them in November of 2008; we closed on the building in the beginning of June of 2009, so it took time to do that.

5. Interpretation of Sustainability

One way to posit SA VA's business model is in terms of an industrial ecology perspective. This perspective attempts to use analogies of natural ecological systems and looks for the potential of environmental improvement of nature.¹⁵ To the extent that industrial ecology looks at an industry's environmental improvement by a reduction of energy costs and waste management costs, SA VA can be viewed through such a lens. Two economic and social advantages of the industrial ecology approach that are seen at SA VA are: 1) a more diverse economic base, and 2) greater potential for job creation by forming niche firms.

NWN: How, in your opinion, can sustainability be branded?

SVA: It isn't a characteristic that is slapped on top of any X product. It is really a core platform of how a business works, the 'Why.' It also can't be in lieu of a good, stylish and quality product, at the appropriate price point. There are also challenges to branding it in that the word *sustainability* itself has been overused and abused and most folk's eyes glaze over when they hear [it.]

NWN: In what ways does SA VA brand sustainability? What is your particular take on branding sustainability through SA VA?

SVA: Sustainability – social and environmental – is the core of how and why we do business and it is branded in everything, every choice we make – from how we relate and build relationships with our customers to choices we make in materials selection, community

tags on each garment are a physical checklist of what elements of sustainability the garment contains.

NWN: Do you think there is any inherent conflict in trying to brand sustainability through fashion?

SVA: I think there are challenges but I believe that the conflict or difficulty rather exists in the lack of awareness and education of consumers on their impact on the environment and [on] people around the world, as a result of the choices that they make in their clothing.



Image 3: Dress, Fair Trade silk, digitally printed, Spring 2013 Collection, manufactured in Philadelphia.¹⁸ © Sarah Van Aken, image courtesy of Sarah Van Aken

NWN: Your vision for your business seems to encompass a broader vision of sustainability – that the clothing portion is just a start, and that you are also very interested in developing a model of sustainable economic development for a region. Would you explain that?

SVA: What we do differently is take a more comprehensive approach to sustainability. It's not just impact on the environment but also on people and the economy. It is the convergence of three core principles:

First, think local first: three times the amount of money you spend in a local sustainable business stays in the community that it is spent in. The ability to create local living wage jobs through apparel [manufacturing] in our region.

Second, be environmentally sustainable: reduce the carbon footprint created by local manufacturing. Use sustainable, recycled and organic textiles when possible; we try to source these local first, as well.

Third, be ethically sustainable: fair trade fabrics, living wages, recreating the industry as a noble profession. We believe it is possible to create new models within the apparel industry for it to become economically, environmentally and ethically sustainable, using Philadelphia as the incubator.

NWN: And your notion of sustainability, as you said, started out with trying to make sure you employ people with a fair, liveable wage.

SVA: We also did a lot of little calculators online that show the reduction of our company footprint by manufacturing here versus Bangladesh and also buying more domestic things like cotton. And then we also use recycled paper hangers in the store [and] compostable

shopping bags. All the fixtures in the store, with the exception of where the cash register sits, were reclaimed from other stores and refurbished.

6. SA VA's Business Model

When I asked how she thought her version of a sustainable business model was distinct from others, Sarah responded that SA VA's B Corporation certification, granted in 2011, means that its approach to sustainability is comprehensive. A 'B Corp certification' does for a sustainability-oriented business, what a LEED certification does for 'green' architecture; such corporations are 'certified by the nonprofit B Lab to meet rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency.'¹⁷ Her considerations go beyond how much water organic cotton consumes or poor labour conditions. Multiple factors are analysed for each SA VA garment produced, including if it meets fair trade standards, is locally made, is organic, is recycled, is renewable, etc. 'We try to get as many as we can and do the right thing.'



Image 4: Flutter Dress, Fair Trade silk, Spring 2013 Collection, manufactured in Philadelphia. © Sarah Van Aken, image courtesy of Sarah Van Aken

Sarah Van Aken's motivation to embrace reshoring goes beyond tangible and intangible costs arguments. A great motivator has been the opportunity to offer a business model that stems from an industrial ecology perspective which incorporates principles of the circular economy, where regenerative, closed loop systems are key principles.¹⁸ SA VA is an example of a new type of business model that considers the economic business opportunities and ethical payoffs that come with transitioning to a restorative, circular economy.

NWN: So how would you describe your business model? What would you say is your value proposition?

SVA: It's a little bit hard to quantify. I mean, we say that it's a vertically integrated ethical apparel company; that's the easy way to say that. First and foremost, in terms of SA VA, it's a fashion brand, but we take a comprehensive approach to social sustainability, so I don't look at sustainability this way, of sustainability as being eco friendly. I look at it

comprehensively as [involving] ethical and social issues, transportation, and also the environmental impact of the textile and the garment. It's impossible to have a 100 percent sustainable garment.

NWN: What would a 100 percent sustainable business look like?

SVA: If I was going to have this sustainable garment from my business in Philadelphia, I would have to grow organic cotton and organic berries on the roof of my building. And I would have to use recycled water, and no heat to dye, and use a hand loom, and pedal sewing machines, and sell those clothes to people who walked in the store. That would be a sustainable garment, right? And you know, they would look incredibly granola and folky, and it would be really ridiculous, and it would take me probably eight months to make one garment. So knowing that that was impossible, I guess what resonated for me, and I think resonates for our customers, is that we decided to start with people.

If we could create local living wage jobs in Philadelphia, where people had health insurance that would be a great place to start, and take the premise of the Slow Food Movement and think local first. And of course, the component of that, too, is that we reduce our carbon footprint in half by manufacturing locally. So I'm not shipping textiles and garments all around the world. I produce about half, and we try to source as much domestically as we can, so all of our knits are domestic.

So we wanted to create a dialogue with our customers and have a different kind of relationship with them, and have it be interactive, and community based. And then also create community partnerships with organizations that have women transition back into the workforce or help women's issues, such as supporting the Career Wardrobe.



Image 5: Pants, hemp-linen blend; top, USA milled viscose, Spring 2013 Collection, manufactured in Philadelphia.

NWN: Tell me about your Honest Denim Program.

SVA: Sure. All of our denim comes from a company in the United States called Safe Denim. So it's U.S. grown cotton, milled in the United States. We are using low-impact dyes, manufacture it here in Philadelphia, and wash it with low-impact enzymes.

NWN: So you've said before that sustainable fashion isn't a language that makes sense to fashion consumers. Why do you think sustainable apparel is more realistic and more relevant?

SVA: Well, I think that the majority of people in the United States do not consider themselves part of the fashion world. There might be people, a lot of people who like fashion, buy clothes, who you know, want to be stylish or whatever. I think the vast majority of people want to look good and have style but they don't consider themselves part of fashion. I think that fashion is too limiting. The word sustainable doesn't mean anything anymore. It's one of the reasons why we got our B Corp certification, because it differentiates companies who have good marketing from companies who really have strong social missions. You're not just saying that you're socially driven, but through B Corp, people come in and qualify and quantify what you're saying you do.

NWN: What are ways that you're trying to educate people about sustainability in a fashionable context?

SVA: You know, you gauge customers. If they don't care, you're like, 'Okay, let me show you this dress.' And if their response is, 'Oh,' then it enters a new conversation, and we can say 'Well, this is the impact. This is this garment, and what's so great about this is we can trace this cotton back to the southern part of the United States where it was grown.' Those little quick facts that you can give people, such as: 'The apparel industry is the biggest polluter of the environment in the world.' People are like, 'Really?' 'Yes, really; and this is why.'

NWN: And your hang tags are also pretty cool.

SVA: They're compostable. Without having to say anything, [our tags] tell people that we considered all of these elements when making the garment, and you know, people walk by our store and don't realize that it's local-made or sustainable, because it looks like a fashion brand, which was the other key thing, because it has to sell. If I put a garment on the rack that didn't fit well, that didn't look good on a hanger, or was overpriced, it wouldn't sell, so it has to be fashion first and foremost. And the end, also, is the added value of sustainability and local-made.

But I'll tell you that more people are interested and excited about the fact that it was made in Philadelphia or the United States than they care whether something's organic.

NWN: Why do you think that resonates more with people, to learn that the product is locally made?

SVA: I think it's a human connection. I think that they've already been educated in the Slow Food Movement, and thinking local first and local produce, and building, and energy. So they're already a little bit accustomed to this idea of local, and what it means in those areas. And fundamentally they know that jobs are created through independent manufacturing and retail.

NWN: You recently took part in the BALLE conference. Would you explain what the BALLE conference is, and how that conference has been shaping the way you think about your business model?

SVA: BALLE is the umbrella organization [of] all of the regional and international sustainable business networks. I was incredibly inspired by what people were doing out of nothing, all around the world.

So think local first about everything you do. If you're giving Walmart a tax credit to

create [a] cash vacuum, and create only \$8.00 an hour jobs. If you think of it, none of their [Walmart's] legal services are handled locally. Their payroll's not handled locally. Their IP is not handled locally. None of their products are sourced locally. So the only thing that happens locally is their trash removal. ...Even their executives are often times brought in. So they're not creating local jobs; they're brought in to open a store. BALLE did an entire, all-day intensive workshop on community finance, and I found that very profound. I grew up on a dairy farm when I was a kid. And there was this woman, Mabel Fisher, who, whenever my parents, if we needed a car, or we needed a tractor for the farm, we would go see Mabel Fisher, and I would love playing in her yard! And she would give us the money to buy things, and we'd pay her back. And I didn't even really know that you got money from banks, because banks [were] a place you'd put your money when you *had* it, and you'd go to Mabel Fisher if you needed money. She was lending to people in the community, and that's how things were financed.

If we could think local, first, and then have a global network of local, sustainable apparel businesses that created jobs in communities, and people did what they were good at because, you know, we're never going to grow silk here. It's not indigenous. We shouldn't try, but there are things that grow well in the United States and those are the things we should do. If we could shift back the cash flow to people who make it, and have that be a noble profession, where people took pride in what they did and about making it a noble profession again, that's the opportunity.



Image 6: Juniper skirt, organic cotton jersey; jacket, USA domestic linen, Spring 2013 Collection, manufactured in the USA, © Sarah Van Aken, image courtesy of Sarah Van Aken

7. Future Options

NWN: What are your thoughts about how you want to see your business grow?

SVA: Well, I don't want to be the only person making things here. I want everybody to do this, because I think it's a really good idea. But how do you create a viable model for them to transition to make things better? And [come] up with something that's a sensible solution to give people answers where they can actually make sensible choices? So it's getting to people who have the right value set and can help change the industry from within.

So we have a plan, but you know, I always think it's funny to talk about it because it doesn't happen that way. The plan shifts. So I'm just going to work hard, and we're going to see what happens, and we're going to let things come, and we're going to push in certain directions, and if things feel right, we'll do that, and if it kind of happens that way, we'll do that.

NWN: Thank you Sarah, I appreciated your time!

SVA: Thank you!



*Image 7: Sarah Van Aken in her retail store, Philadelphia,
© Sarah Van Aken, image courtesy of Sarah Van Aken*

8. Concluding Thoughts

Interestingly, Sarah's final words in this interview – 'we're going to let things happen... if things feel right, we'll do that' – are a clear reflection of SA VA's circular economy principles. While we would like to believe that challenges such as 'sustainable fashion,' could have neat, three bullet point resolutions, the truth is that a much more iterative, intuitive and prototype-approach that embraces ambiguity is more viable and realistic. The SA VA business model gives other firms that are mindful about sustainability the impetus to be trailblazers, prepare for a radically different future, and develop skills for a rapidly changing landscape.

This interview offers two major contributions.

First, it positions a fashion retailer as a model for economic development in a major American city. This is a new and broader perspective about the ways that sustainable business practices can be leveraged from the fashion industry and for the broader good. Innovative business models from fashion that spawn economic development in municipalities are rare and should be closely watched. Unfortunately, public policy in the USA is not making it attractive enough for more companies to consider reshoring, even as a Boston Consulting Group survey

shifting production back from China to the USA. This is noteworthy when we consider that by 2015 it will cost almost the same to manufacture goods in regions of America as in China.¹⁹ Why? Certain costs in America are decreasing. The cost of energy for running plants is decreasing. Wages are dropping. (Because of the economic recession of 2008, more people are willing to work for lower wages because of high unemployment in the USA.) The dollar is weak. The workforce is becoming more flexible and productive. Add to these, the facts that supply chain costs for transport are increasing and advanced manufacturing techniques such as 3D printing are more widely available for small manufacturing quantities. All of the above can advance reshoring's business case. SA VA's timing may be perfect for spawning more micro-fashion apparel businesses which are inspiring not only for the fashion sector, but for micro-enterprises across sectors.

Second, this SA VA interview presents a case which connects the dots among fashion apparel firms, the industrial ecology, and the circular economy perspective. SA VA's motivation for moving production from Bangladesh to the USA was an internal one. Sara would love to see more public policy incentives in place in local, state and federal governments, but unfortunately, they are far and few between. As was noted in a special report published in the January 19, 2013 issue of *The Economist*, innovation and quality suffers as distance grows between manufacturing and design.²⁰ SA VA's business model can help more fashion firms to identify the fiscal viability of socially responsible businesses that integrate regenerative, closed loop processes in their production, marketing and organizational design. The result would be a fashion industry, better prepared for a future that will have very different environmental, fiscal, labour, and social constraints than those present today.

In conclusion, SA VA shows us that fashion can advance the business case for embracing a comprehensive sustainability approach.

Notes

¹ Elizabeth Wellington, 'Sarah Van Aken,' *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 13, 2012, accessed 17 April 2013, http://www.philly.com/philly/style/20120613_Sarah_Van_Aken_a_leader_in_Made_in_America_movement.html.

² 'Apparel Stats 2012,' *American Apparel & Footwear Association*, October 12, 2012, accessed 13 April 2013, <http://www.wewear.org>.

³ 'Consumer Goods: Global Industry Guide,' Research and Markets, accessed 13 April 2013, http://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/838232/consumer_goods_global_industry_guide.

⁴ 'Fashion Futures 2025: Global Scenarios for a Sustainable Fashion Industry,' *Forum for the Future*, accessed 4 April 2013, <http://www.forumforthefuture.org/project/fashion-futures-2025/overview>.

⁵ 'About SA VA,' SA VA, last modified April 2013, accessed 13 April 2013, <http://www.savafashion.com/blog/about>.

⁶ Jane Von Bergen, 'Knitting Together Textile Manufacturing,' *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 1, 2011, accessed 3 April 2013, http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/jobs/Inq_JobbingBlog_Knitting-together-textile-manufacturing.html.

⁷ Robert E. Stake, 'Qualitative Case Studies,' in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., ed. Norman Kent Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), 443-446.

- ⁸ Kate Fletcher and Lynda Grose, *Fashion & Sustainability: Design for Change* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2012), 56.
- ⁹ Sarah Van Aken, interview by author, 3 April 2012 and 14 September 2012. Follow up phone calls for clarification made on 8 November 2012 and 21 April 2013.
- ¹⁰ Wen-Chi Liao, 'Inshoring: The Geographic Fragmentation of Production and Inequality,' *Journal of Urban Economics* 72, no. 1 (2012): 2-4; William Skipper, 'Services Offshoring: An Overview,' *Anthropology of Work Review* 27, no. 2 (2006): 9-17.
- ¹¹ Rama Kompella, Nikhilesh Dholakia, and Douglas Hales, 'The Dynamics of Inshoring,' *Knowledge Globalization Institute* 6, no. 1 (2012): 92.
- ¹² Dave Johnson, 'Re-Shoring, On-Shoring and Insourcing,' *Huffington Post*, April 2, 2010, accessed 17 April 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dave-johnson/re-shoring-on-shoring-and_b_523740.html.
- ¹³ John Ferreira and Len Prokopets, 'Does Offshoring still Make Sense?' *Supply Chain Management Review* 13, no. 1 (2009): 24.
- ¹⁴ Kompella, Dholakia, and Hales, 'The Dynamics of Inshoring,' 90.
- ¹⁵ David Gibbs, Pauline Deutz, and Amy Proctor, 'Industrial Ecology and Eco-Industrial Development: A Potential Paradigm for Local and Regional Development?' *Regional Studies* 39, no. 2 (April 2005): 173.
- ¹⁶ Utilizes less dye and therefore less effluent is emitted into the environment. Original graphic is a hand batik made from potato resin and was digitized.
- ¹⁷ Certified B Corporation, Accessed 4 April 2013, <http://www.bcorporation.net/what-are-b-corps>. LEED : Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design is an internationally recognized green building certification system.
- ¹⁸ 'Towards a Circular Economy,' *Ellen MacArthur Foundation*, accessed 4 April 2013, <http://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/business/reports/ce2012>.
- ¹⁹ Tamzin Booth, 'Coming Home,' *The Economist*, January 19, 2013, accessed 3 April 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21569570-growing-number-american-companies-are-moving-their-manufacturing-back-united>.
- ²⁰ Ibid.

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Natalie W. Nixon, PhD is an Associate Professor in the Fashion Merchandising & Management program at Philadelphia University and Director of the Strategic Design MBA. She earned her PhD in Design Management from the University of Westminster. She is a design thinking researcher focused on fashion diffusion (applying strategies from the fashion industry to other realms), and on business design.