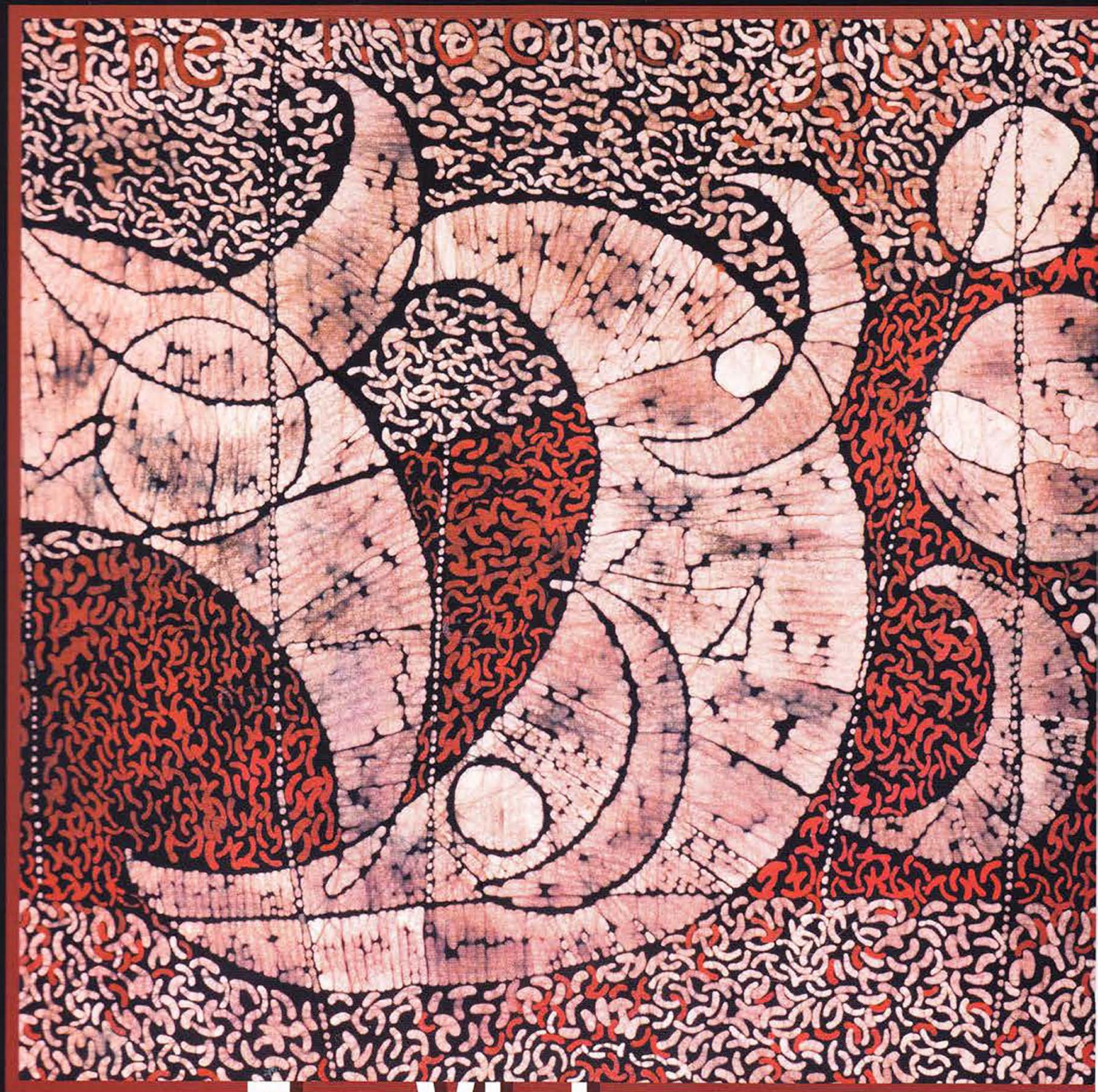


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# Re-Fashion Designing with Sustainable Style Re: Purpose

by Leesa Hubbell

Every day can be lived as a testament to our beliefs and ideals, everyday can be our own political march. Every act we change and revise to better align with our conscience is an activist act, as it is making a step toward a more positive environment.

Betsy Greer, from *Handmade Nation*<sup>1</sup>



*The Whole Earth Catalogue*, launched in 1968 by Stewart Brand, encouraged its readers to ask themselves two fundamental questions:

- 1) Where does your water come from?
- 2) Where does your garbage go?

Forty years later, as new waves of awareness and urgency swirl around environmental issues like carbon footprints and climate change, a rising tide of clothing designers are reflecting on where their materials come from, where they go, and then making activist choices.

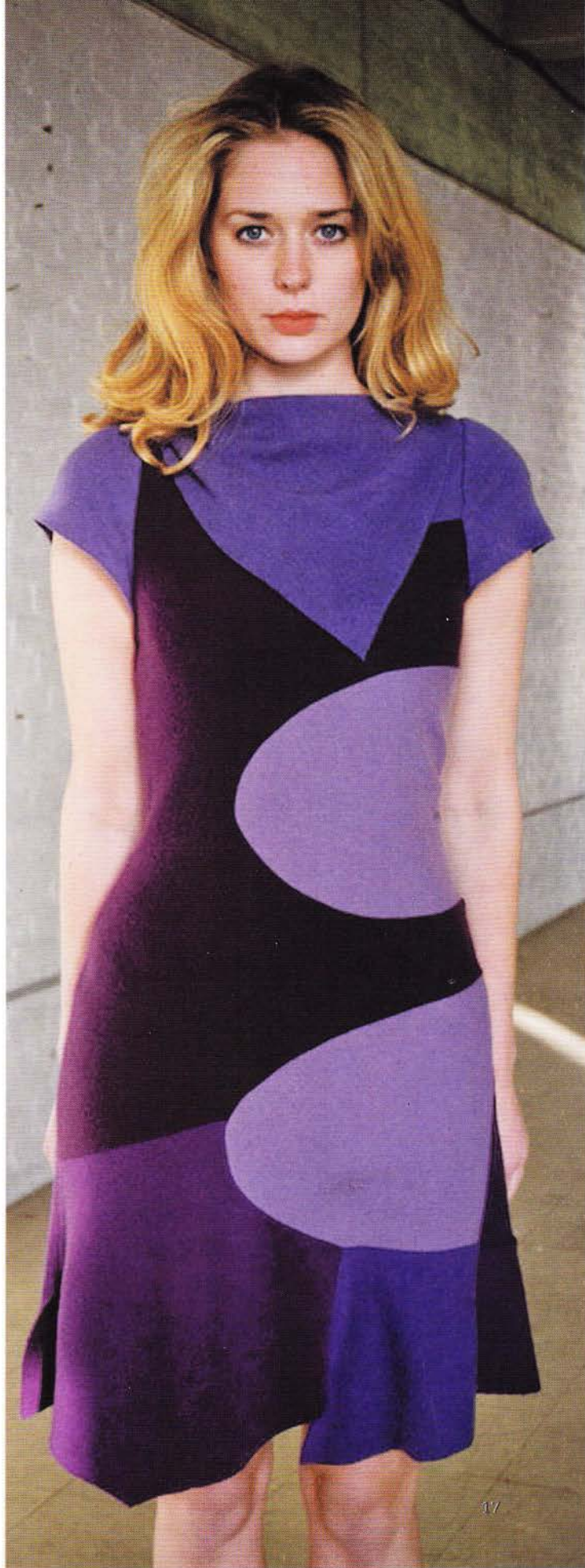
'e ko logic clothing, made from 100 percent recycled cashmere sweaters, sprang forth from Kathleen Tesnakis's active imagination one day in 1996. She was in Portland, Oregon, a budding epicenter of green, after relocating from New York City for her husband's career. Determined to "find herself" creatively, she was taking apart sweaters, adding wool roving, and felting them together when she realized that every time she touched a different sweater she responded in a different way.

She had found a sustainable medium that would also sustain her interest. Since then, seven tons of post-consumer knits have passed through her hands, resulting in more than 30,000 individually designed pieces. Her core collection of felted cashmere hats and topsless mittens (perfect for iPhones) has grown to include artfully reassembled sweaters, skirts, and dresses along with a line of recycled cotton knits.

Procuring the raw materials is a whole art in itself. Her supplier handles 90,000 pounds of premium or second-quality textiles a day. Tesnakis competes with other used clothing buyers who ship container-loads all over the world, from Africa to Japan. Two-hundred-pound shipments land in the "dirty room" of her live/work studio in Troy, New York, located in the former Textile Waste Manufacturing building (c. 1909) facing the Hudson River.

This post-consumer "waste," spanning the design spectrum from Costco to Prada, is first sorted for color, then washed and sorted again for size and quality, and then for knit gauge. Flaws, holes, and worn spots are marked; some pieces are set aside for felting. Stripes, argyles, and Fair Isles go in one pattern bin; cuffs, cables, and button plackets in others—then the palette is ready. The color combinations are put together like little paintings. Even the leftover seams are reused to make sustainable pom-poms.

A BS in Textile Science from Syracuse University and her experience designing historical reproductions for Scalamandr  (the high-end re-creator of traditional textiles, wallpapers, carpeting) gave Tesnakis the technical chops to tackle the challenge of transforming fussy cast-away cashmere into perfectly re-crafted collectibles. Although she credits Crispina French [sic] with pioneering



LEFT: 'e ko logic *Onion Top Hat*, topsless mittens, scarf, 100% recycled cashmere.

RIGHT: *Kaleidoscope Dress*, 100% recycled cashmere.

Photos: Stefano Giovannini.



# Re - Fashion

## Designing with Sustainable Style

# Re: Purpose

recycled knits in the mid-'80s, Tesnakis' s finely tuned antennae guided her to become an early adopter of eco-conscious apparel well before the current frenzy for it from DKNY to DIY. For her efforts, 'e ko logic has received both a nomination for the Rising Star 2001 Fashion Group International award and the ACC Award of Excellence in 2007. Her hats style the big celebrity heads of Brad Pitt, Catherine Keener, Halle Berry, and Lee Ranaldo of *Sonic Youth*.

"'e ko logic is both a design house and a recycling system that has developed over the years," Tesnakis explains. "I consider myself a green textile artist and a recycling designer. I am also a green activist by what I do—but I like to open people's eyes in a gentle way. In Troy I recycle NYC textile waste that travels north 150 miles. With all the green washing that is going on, I feel it is important to find out about the real integrity of the products. You can call your work green or recycled—but where are you getting your materials from?"

Kate Goldwater, a Gen Next alchemist of trash, gets her raw materials from thrift stores or rummage sales and turns them into AuH2O. These chemical symbols for the elements of her last name also tag her re-combine knitwear and East Village (NYC) recycling chop shop. She gives new meaning to "cut and sew knits" by hacking up and rejoining vintage T-shirts into new compositions—with an overt political agenda. Keywords or images from the causes she cares about, like affordable health care or women's rights, are screenprinted onto her hybridized garments. She likes to say she wears her politics on her sleeve.

Voted "most outrageous style" at her high school in Shorewood, Wisconsin (for wearing thigh-high wool hockey socks duct taped and stapled onto cut-off jeans with floral embellishments), Goldwater recalls that no unwanted material was safe from her creativity: scrubs, aprons, table cloths, upholstery fabric—even a tent—were reworked into clothing. Early-onset political awareness led her to NYU's Gallatin division where she designed her own major by studying art, clothing, social justice, and gender studies and then focused on art and clothing as activism. An online design business was the inevitable next step, soon followed by a store, since a desk job at a non-profit was not a good fit.

Goldwater got a spot on a CNN iReport after submitting *Fashion for Change*, a video of her work in support of the Obama campaign. More recently, a fashion show was held on the sidewalk outside her store to raise awareness about health care reform. "Fashion shows are how I campaigned for Obama and support his agenda" she observes. "I don't have a yard I can stick a sign in—so I say 'Turn your body into a campaign billboard.'"

Gary Harvey redefines adaptive reuse at the

'E KO LOGIC *Tree of Life Dress* 100% recycled cashmere.  
Photo: Stefano Giovannini.

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LEFT TO RIGHT: GARY HARVEY *Denim Dress* 42 pair of Levi 501s and cropped denim jackets. *Laundry Bag Dress* 21 recycled plastic laundry bags, basketweave bodice made from handle straps. *Baseball Puffball Dress* 26 nylon baseball Jackets (socks made from ribbed cuffs). *Hawaiian Shirt Dress* 7 vintage Hawaiian shirts. 2007. Model: Tabitha at Models 1. Photos: Robert Decelis.



For Kathleen Tesnakis of 'e ko logic, the bottom line is not trend but intention. "My life philosophy is about holistic living from the ground up," she states. "We are defining what green living is. I know what I can do to live in a green way—and if each of us can just do that—the impact will be huge. We have an amazing opportunity right now to change the world by changing our consumption patterns.

Living a sustainable lifestyle is something you grow into. It's not like flipping a switch. You can't beat your family members into doing it. You have to show people the easy ways to change, with a small starting point, and then they will grow into their own way. There is no set formula. You just look at yourself, your community, your personal power and then ask yourself what you can do."