

# The entangled threads of life and cloth

An exploration of the value of textile, eco-anxiety, imaginaries of  
the future and their entanglements among sustainable textile  
workers in The Netherlands

Master's thesis  
Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

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## Introduction

‘We all have to start being more sustainable at some point. That is the thing, there will come a moment when no one can get out of it anymore. It is up to us to decide when we start to make a difference and I’d rather be early.’<sup>1</sup>

In 2009, a group of scientists discovered fibres in a cave in Georgia. The fibres date back to 34,000 years ago and are the oldest fibres known to have been used by humans (Lavoie 2009). The fibres could have been used to make linen or thread, which could be turned into items that were helpful in their daily lives. They could for example make cloths that would protect them from harsh weather conditions or bags that would make it easier for them to move (Lavoie 2009). Humans have always needed nature to simultaneously protect them from the natural forces itself, and textile illustrates how nature and man come together to create something new and useful. However, 34,000 years later, the tables have turned. It is now that nature needs us, humans, in order to protect it from ourselves. Anthropogenic meddling with the environment has resulted in climate change and global warming, which makes the future of human life on this earth uncertain (Tsing 2015, 7). Moreover, nature seems to be in desperate need for us to make changes in order to protect the future of life as we know it on this planet. Since the textile industry is the second biggest polluter on the planet (Niinimäki et al. 2020), it emits about 1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gases each year (Mckinsey Sustainability 2019), it is highly important that changes are made within this industry.

There is a group of people, such as Olivia, who was quoted in the beginning of this introduction, who act upon the dynamics and pollutionary character of the textile industry. It is their goal to make the textile industry more sustainable. This thesis explores how the actions of this group are underpinned by three different processes: valuing textiles, experiencing eco-anxiety and imagining the future. I further look into these processes in order to find out how people in the sustainable textile industry attach value (Graeber 2001; Graeber 2018) to textiles, which often transforms in different contexts. This context, in turn, is informed by the ways in which they are confronted with a sense of eco-anxiety – stress and concerns about environmental crisis (Usher 2019) – and related to their present-day engagements with an imaginable unsustainable or uninhabitable future (Bryant & Knight 2019). Through their work with textiles, they challenge the ways in which we care for, produce and treat the material

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<sup>1</sup> Interview Olivia, 11.3.21

and thus position themselves within the debates that surround these processes. This is done by engaging in recycling practices, making, re-making, mending textile and developing innovative fibres, thread and textile designs.

In her book ‘The mushroom at the end of the world’, Anna Tsing (2015) traces mushrooms to uncover stories about living life in the ruins of capitalism. She reveals how mushrooms can have different values for everyone and shows that they are in constant dialogue with the people and context around them. This thesis is inspired by her work as I trace sustainable textiles to bring to light the processes that surround it. The journey of tracing sustainable textile starts with exploring what kind of values the people in the sustainable textile industry attach to textile. It will then move on to what working with sustainable textile reveals about eco-anxious experiences and imaginaries of the future. These three stories, or processes, are not linear but part of a larger open-ended assemblage. Therefore, the chapters in this thesis represent three different ‘threads of life’ that influence working in the textile industry. The chapters can be read apart from each other, but they also tangle and interrupt each other. I invite you to read the chapters like they are threads that are carefully woven into a cloth, yet at the same time interrupted, ruined or suddenly steered into a different direction.

The first process that underpins the work of the people in the sustainable textile industry has to do with value. Graeber (2001) argues that value is about what people believe to be good and desirable and it is produced through human action. People invest their energy into what they believe to be important. Furthermore, actions get their meaning when they are understood within a personal or larger social context (Graeber 2001). Values can thus shift, depending on the context in which actions are understood. The sustainable textile workers invest their energy into making the textile industry more sustainable, and through their actions they attach different values to textile. The context in which they attach these values to textile is, among others, informed by the other two processes that underpin sustainable textile practices: eco-anxiety and imaginaries of the future.

Eco-anxiety is the second process that underpins the actions of the people working in the sustainable textile industry. It is often understood as feelings of doom and stress about the current ecological crisis, and it is becoming more and more common (Usher 2019). Role model figures like Greta Thunberg have started to talk openly about these issues which has expanded the public debate (Washington Post 2020). Clayton et al. (2017) argue that knowing about changing conditions in the environment can cause mental distress that gets worse with rising temperatures, loss of biodiversity, and other environmental crises. This mental distress can eventually impact people’s everyday lives. Pihkala (2020, 1) emphasizes that eco-anxiety can

have important health impacts, and that therefore there is a strong need to better understand the phenomenon. At the core of eco-anxious experiences is the knowledge that we now live in the Anthropocene, which is the current geological epoch that is marked by the irreversible ways in which humans have affected the climate and the environment (Ray 2021). There is a general realisation that we cannot continue living on this earth the way that we have done for generations and that change is necessary (Bladow & Ladino 2018, 11).

Eco-anxiety and sustainable practices are connected to ideas about the future, which is the third process that underpins working in the sustainable textile industry. Sustainable textile development is in its essence focused on keeping the world a liveable place for the next generations, and eco-anxiety is underpinned by the knowledge that the future of our lives on this planet is at stake. The future orients and structures our present through imaginations, desires and thoughts (Bryant & Knight 2019, 2) because we arrange our lives in the present with a certain future in mind. In addition, Taylor (2002), Appadurai (2013) and Khasnabish (2019) argue that imaginations of what the future will be like, influence the practices and actions that we undertake, such as making and mending sustainable textiles. Imaginations of the future thus both help us understand why we do what we do in the present, and also shape the future by influencing our actions.

Building on the high urgency for sustainable change, this thesis aims to gain deeper knowledge of the three underlying processes of sustainable textile practices. Therefore, I trace sustainable textile in order to find out how processes of value, eco-anxiety and imaginaries of the future underpin the sustainable textile practices of sustainable textile workers. This will be done by answering the main research question:

*How do people working in the sustainable textile industry in The Netherlands value textiles, experience eco-anxiety and imagine the future as they engage in making the textile industry more sustainable?*

I will analyse these different processes for which I draw from several key theories and concepts. The shifting values of textile are explored by the use of Graeber's theory of value (Graeber 2001; Graeber 2018) which has been introduced above. According to him, value is produced through human action and it gets meaning when placed in a particular context. I use this argument to look at the actions of the sustainable textile workers and in what context they do so, to uncover how the sustainable textile workers value textile.

Eco-anxious experiences are unpacked by the use of the concept of affect (Massumi 2015; Bladow & Ladino 2018). Bladow & Ladino (2018) state that to better understand eco-anxiety we should focus on affect. Eco-anxiety is related to the changing conditions in the environment and affect considers how we form relationships with the social and physical environment around us. These ‘affective relationships’ result in responses, such as eco-anxious feelings and emotions (Bladow & Ladino 2018). Affect offers a framework to explore which factors are part of affective relationships that result in eco-anxious responses, and it helps to uncover what these eco-anxious responses look like.

Imaginations of the future are uncovered by using Bryant & Knight’s (2019) work on ‘orientations’. Orientations are ‘open ended teleologies that are concerned with the practices of everyday life’ and they help us understand how the sustainable textile workers imagine and engage with the future. By looking at the orientations ‘hope’ and ‘speculation’ I show how the sustainable textile workers imagine the future and how these imaginations structure their life in the present.

Furthermore, I propose that the physical structure of textile, the interwovenness of thread, is illustrative of the relationality between the three processes. That relationality can be understood by the use of Ingold’s idea of ‘entanglements’. Ingold (2008) argues that to inhabit the world, is to live life in the ‘open’. With his idea of openness Ingold (2008) goes against the idea that we live in a closed off or limited space. Rather we are constantly influenced by what is happening in the world around us, which he calls ‘fluxes’ or ‘threads of life’ (Heidegger 1971). To live in the open is to constantly be immersed in those fluxes (Ingold 2008, 2). These fluxes are entangled and weave together the textures of our lives and the land. In this logic, humans, animals and materials are not fixed entities, but are made up out of endless ‘flows and fluxes, interwoven lines of growth and movement, constituting a meshwork’ (Ingold 2008, 10). I argue that the three different processes are examples of these fluxes, or ‘threads of life’, and that just like how cloth is woven together in a pattern of entangled threads, working in the sustainable textile industry also consists of endless entanglements of these flows and fluxes.



## **Methodology**

### **The field**

In the last few years there has been a substantial growth in the amount of entrepreneurs and designers who are active in the sustainable textile industry in The Netherlands (Lampe 2020). This has been stimulated by the need for sustainable change in the industry and agreements such as the ‘Green Deal Circular Denim’ which aims to reuse denim and other textiles on the Dutch market (Rijksoverheid 2020). Next to that, The European Union has chosen Amsterdam as a host city for research on the renewal of the textile industry (Reflow EU 2020). Amsterdam has been chosen because the city is a ‘global centre for sustainable apparel’, which creates a fertile environment for people and businesses interested in this industry (Reflow EU 2020). For these reasons, I have conducted this research in The Netherlands with a focus on Amsterdam and Utrecht. Both cities are especially rich in sustainable fashion development practices such as thrift stores, recycling practices (Wieland Textiles 2020 & Relove Foundation 2020) and textile innovation initiatives (Waag 2020). These initiatives can be found in the city centres but also in creative and innovative hubs. Within these cities, I have visited art studios, workspaces and met research participants for walks around town. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the request by the Dutch government to limit traveling as much as possible (Rijksoverheid 2021), I have also met people online and via Zoom.

The sustainable textile workers in this research are entrepreneurs, designers, volunteers and activists and their age range differs between early twenties and early sixties. I have met people from different parts of the industry: Mikkie, Peter, Eva, Mieke, Irene, Charlie, Tilly, Jule, Jess and Jelte are entrepreneurs and/or designers. Some of them run independent fashion labels and others are invested in recycling practices or in designing new textiles. Olivia and Riley went back to school to be able to do research on sustainable textile innovation and Mark, Leah and Alex are focused on creating sustainable change within the textile companies they are working in. Victoria, Kaylee and Mirthe are involved in activist practices. The sustainable textile workers and their spaces will be further introduced in chapter one in the paragraph ‘research spaces’ and in the interludes.

## **Research methods**

Between February 8<sup>th</sup> and May 10<sup>th</sup> 2021, I have traced sustainable textile by doing ethnographic research among people working in the sustainable textile industry in The Netherlands. I focused on understanding the emic perspectives of people working in the textile industry, which offered me the opportunity to gain rich and sensitive knowledge of the lives of the participants (O'Reilly 2012) such as feelings and imaginations. I used several qualitative research methods to understand these emic perspectives, among which: participant observation, interviews, analysis of online content and focus groups. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown in The Netherlands at the time of the research, entering the field was designated to start in an online environment. I was able to do this by attending my first online event called 'Social Impact Night: The Textile Industry'. In this meeting, people from all over Utrecht came together to discuss and brainstorm about issues and opportunities for sustainable textile enterprises. It is through this online event that I got to make the first few contacts and it gave me an idea of the type of people who are engaged with the subject.

Next to attending this event, I have also sent many emails and messages to people that I found online and I used my personal network from my work at a foundation for sustainable education to get in touch with sustainable textile workers. Via email and social media, I got in touch with Riley and Mieke who served as gatekeepers and allowed me to make use of the snowball effect (O'Reilly 2012, 44). Through them I have gotten to know several other people in the industry since they connected me with them through email, social media or in real life. However, I also made use of theoretical sampling. This means that I have also contacted specific people, such as activists, during my research in order to check for contradictory information that might delimit or strengthen the information that I was gaining throughout the research (Wasserman & Clair 2011).

Once I got in touch with the sustainable textile workers, I was very warmly received by them. Several people expressed that they were happily surprised that I was interested in their personal story and not so much in the technical aspects of their work. This warm welcome allowed me to conduct nineteen enjoyable semi-structured interviews on different topics such as motivations and ideas about the future. Some people, like Jelte and Tilly, welcomed me in their homes or at their workplace, other interviews took place online, during a walk or while having a coffee. The interviews were very informal, I started with telling a little bit about myself and my interest in textile and continued by asking them to tell something about themselves and their relationship with textile. This approach allowed space for the participants

to relax, let the conversations flow naturally and create a safe space to ask more in-depth and personal questions (O'Reilly 2012, 116). These conversations provided me with several topics, such as 'valuing the material' that I decided to focus on more during the focus groups and participant observation that followed. After these informal interviews, I invited them to stay in touch with me by attending a focus group, meeting more often for a coffee or by sending me articles, pictures or videos that spoke to them or that reminded them of this research.

Alongside semi-structured interviews, several informants allowed me to take part in their 'daily activities, rituals and events' (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011, 1) and carry out participant observation. By joining Tilly, Peter, Charlie and Mikkie in their work environments, I was able to uncover the tacit and explicit parts of their life experience. Tilly taught me the beginnings of sewing and working with thread, and I helped Mikkie and Charlie with their daily tasks as sustainable textile entrepreneurs by sewing, organizing and modelling in their creations. Being part of their daily life helped me better understand what it is like to do their work, what influences their decisions and what they believe to be important. For example, helping Mikkie sew her creations allowed me to uncover that she uses every single leftover piece of textile for something else, since she believes that we should not throw anything away.<sup>2</sup> She did not tell me about this in our interview, but I uncovered this in the time we spent working together. Learning how to sew myself gave me a better idea of what it is like to work with textile because I now understand all the phases that go into making a clothing item. Based on what I learned during my interviews, special attention was given to how the sustainable textile workers treated the objects around them and cared for the things that they make. I listened carefully to the stories they told about the products and the textile that they use. During all this, I made field notes by writing down what happened on my phone and I recorded voice notes. These notes were mostly things that I saw happening around me, but also included more analytical ideas. After every interview or participation moment, I wrote down a brief reflection of the experience. I captured how I felt and what stood out to me.

Approaching the end of the research, I organised two online focus groups in which eight sustainable textile workers participated, who were all strangers from each other. The topics of these focus groups were in line with what we discussed earlier but provided me with more in-depth knowledge since the informants would respond to each other's stories with their own views and ideas. It really gave attention to the notion that feelings, attitudes and perceptions are formed in interaction with others (O'Reilly 2012, 135) and I noticed these ideas and

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<sup>2</sup> Field notes Mikkie, 19.3.21

perceptions develop throughout the conversations. It was interesting to see how some of the people joining the focus group opened up more about eco-anxious experiences once they felt like they were not the only ones experiencing it. Here, the importance of data-triangulation really became visible, since what people say does not always correspond with what they actually do or experience, due to for example societal pressures or taboos.

## **Positionality and ethics**

Since the position of the ethnographic researcher is situated within the field, there is no clear distinction between field and life, and between researcher and informants (O'Reilly, 2012). As O'Reilly (2012, 100) states: 'We cannot undertake ethnography without acknowledging the role of our own embodied, sensual, thinking, critical and positioned self', because the ethnographic researcher is part of the research itself and therefore not neutral. This research is positioned from my frame of reference as a 24-year-old, white, middle class, Dutch woman, who is an advocate for sustainable development and is very aware of the impact of the textile industry. My interest in sustainability developed about four years ago, and ever since I have been very involved with the subject through my studies, work and volunteer work. Despite my involvement in the 'sustainability scene', I noticed that I was being regarded as young and inexperienced, especially by some people that were much older than me. This could make me feel insecure and prevent me from asking certain questions. However, I reflected on what was happening within me during these situations and understanding this personal process helped me to guide myself towards a more confident role as a researcher. Once I reassured myself that I am here to learn and that I do not need to know everything immediately, I managed to feel more comfortable and confident in my position as the research went along.

Something that almost all research participants told me is that they are part of a so-called 'green bubble'.<sup>3</sup> With this they mean that they are surrounded by people who are also interested in sustainability and that their social media and news feed is filled with green news and sustainable developments. I would also position myself as being part of a 'green bubble' and even though I do not have full blown eco-anxiety, I do recognize some of these feelings. Coming from a similar background made talking about opinions and sensitive subjects easier as it created a mutual understanding and trust between us. I felt like I was received as being 'one of them' and I have heard phrases along the lines of 'it's so nice not having to explain

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<sup>3</sup> Interview Charlie, 17.2.21; Interview Jess, 18.3.21

myself<sup>4</sup> or ‘I think you know what I mean’<sup>5</sup> several times. However, the downside of this is that it could have framed my position to focus on what I recognized in them, instead of on what was unfamiliar to me. I tried to minimize this possibility of bias by constantly reflecting on how I framed the questions that I asked, and asking the participants to confirm whether I understood them right.

Through reflecting I was able to make sure that I was constantly aware of my positionality and was paying attention to the ‘socially constructed nature of social research’ (O’Reilly 2012, 62). I kept a log during the fieldwork that captured my experiences, feelings and assumptions. It not only helped me in being aware of my own position, but also allowed me to conduct ethical research. As Madden (2017, 34) argues ‘at every phase of ethnographic research there is an ethical backdrop’. From my position as a researcher, I carry the responsibility to do no harm to the informants nor to myself. All participants have been asked for informed consent (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 215) and have been anonymized to respect their privacy. Through listening, being open minded and staying away from judgement as much as possible, I was able to build relationships of trust and show my respect.

## **Thesis outline**

This thesis starts off with a conceptual note on Ingold’s (2008) ‘entanglements’ to show how everything in life is constantly influenced by the flows and fluxes of the world around it. This line of thinking helps in uncovering all the flows and fluxes, or processes, that surround sustainable textile practices. This conceptual note is followed by a contextual introduction into ‘a story of textile’ which gives insight into the wider context, and the flows and fluxes, in the current textile industry. The story leads up to an introduction of the people, and their environments, who try to change this industry.

Thereafter follow three ethnographic chapters which each unpack one of the processes that underpin working in the sustainable textile industry. In chapter two, I turn to what values the sustainable textile workers attach to textile and how that value is dependent on the context in which they encounter textile. This context is, among others, informed by eco-anxious experiences and imaginations of the future. In chapter three I show how the sustainable textile workers form ‘affective relationships’ with triggers in their environment and how these relationships result in different eco-anxious responses. These affective relationships are not

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<sup>4</sup> Informal conversation Mirthe, 22.4.21

<sup>5</sup> Interview Alex, 1.4.21

only given in by a trigger, but also by knowledge about what might happen in the future and by a fear that their values might not be met. In chapter four, I explore how the people working in the sustainable textile industry interact with the future by speculating and being hopeful about what is coming. I also show that through a dialogue between these imaginations, they get active and try to influence the future through their work.

In between the chapters are two interludes, these are vignette-like and not inherently connected to the chapters but specifically serve as background stories to give extra context and feel to the research. Lastly, in the concluding chapter, I formulate an answer to the research question and explain that the three different processes are entangled with each other. Furthermore, I touch upon on the limitations of this research and future recommendations.

## Chapter 1 - Introducing textile: interwoven stories & spaces

‘Every piece of textile has a story’<sup>6</sup>

On one of our walks, Leah told me that ‘every piece of textile has a story’. Knowing that story is essential to understanding the lives that are concerned with textile. This chapter serves as an introduction to that story. It starts off with a conceptual note on Ingold’s (2008) ‘entanglements’ that serves as a lens to understand how stories of textile are made up out of different ‘threads of life’. Next, you will be introduced into ‘a story of a cotton shirt’. Keep in mind that the industry is highly complex and that the story only highlights the most pressing sides of the textile industry. Lastly, this chapter ends with an introduction into the people and spaces that work on the creation of a different story, namely, a sustainable one.

### **A conceptual note: ‘the interwovenness of textile’**

To create a cotton t-shirt, several elements such as fabric and thread have to come together in a specific way. Aristotle claimed that to make something one has to ‘bring together form and matter’ (Ingold 2010a, 92). This reasoning was the birth of the hylomorphic model of creation that became dominant in Western thought. The hylomorphic model assumes that objects are a fusion of matter and form. *Matter* in this viewpoint is seen as passive and powerless, and *form* is imposed upon matter by an agent with a particular design in mind (Ingold 2010a, 92). Ingold (2010b) is critical of this model and aims to replace it with ‘an ontology that assigns primacy to processes of formation as against their final products, and to flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter’ (Ingold 2010b, 3). With this he argues against the idea that making something is imposing a ‘form’ on a substance, like imposing a pattern on cloth that turns it into a t-shirt. Rather, making is a process of weaving (Ingold 2010b, 3).

Makers connect their own ideas and pathways of life to the texture of material flows, which is what makes up ‘a thing’. Heidegger (1971, 177) substantiates this by arguing that a thing, such as a piece of textile, is not really an object, but rather a gathering and specific binding together of the ‘threads of life’. Ingold (2008) defines this ‘binding together of the threads of life’ with his idea of ‘entanglements’. He argues that human beings, materials and the human body, ‘are constantly made up out of endless flows and fluxes, interwoven lines of growth and movement constituting a meshwork’ (Ingold 2008, 10).

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<sup>6</sup> Field notes Leah, 26.3.21

How can we envision such a meshwork? I propose that the physical structure of textile itself is representative of these entanglements. *Texere*, literally translated from Latin means ‘to weave’. Threads in a piece of textile are all woven into each other, entangled, going in many different directions and have no clear end or beginning. The tension of one thread influences the shape of the thread next to it, and the one next to that and so on. Approaching sustainable textiles from the perspective of a meshwork of entanglements, allows us to uncover all processes and forms of life that are involved to create that piece of textile. For example, approaching a cotton shirt as an entanglement of different threads of life, highlights the material and human processes that are involved with the creation of the shirt. Like the stories of the people that sewed the shirt and the plants that grew the fibres. Olivia stated that ‘everything in the textile industry is so interwoven’<sup>7</sup> with which she referred to all actors, elements and dimensions of life involved into creating a piece of textile. Approaching a piece of textile with this interwovenness and in mind, can thus help us understand how everything in the human and material world is influenced by the forces and fluxes of the world around it. And how it in turn influences the world as well.

The next section introduces the story of a cotton shirt. By following the shirt throughout its life, I uncover the flows and fluxes and the entanglements of the different ‘threads of life’ that make up the shirt.

### **Contextual introduction: A story of textile**

Most people have a cotton t-shirt. It is comfortable, breathable and easy to take care of. Cotton as a material is very popular for textile design, it is used in more than 40% of manufactured textiles (Better Cotton Initiative 2020). It is not only used in clothing but also in home goods, such as furniture and curtains. Making a cotton t-shirt is a demanding process, both for the natural environment and the people involved. It starts with the growth of cotton plants, which are often grown in countries in the Global South. Cotton plants are thirsty and need a lot of water, the creation of just one cotton shirt takes up about 2700 litres of water (Better Cotton Initiative 2020). To keep yields as high as possible, cotton farmers use about 10 kilogram of fertilizer and 0.5 kilogram of pesticides and insecticides for the creation of one t-shirt (Tamil Nadu Alliance 2020). These chemicals affect local ecosystems as well as the workers because they make it hard for local communities to grow their own food and they also impact the health of the farmers. A 2019 study found that female cotton pickers in Pakistan suffered from skin

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<sup>7</sup> Field notes Olivia, 11.3.21



and eye injury, headaches, stomach aches and fever due to high exposure to pesticides. Next to that, the pesticides increase disability rates and mental illnesses among the people in cotton regions (Memon et al. 2019).

Once the cotton fibres are grown and picked, they are spun into threads. Nowadays, the cotton fibres are often mixed up with synthetic fibres such as polyester. Demkes (2018b) explains in her article that polyester is a synthetic fibre that is made from oil and natural gas and that it was long thought of to be a miracle fibre: it was believed to be cheap and durable. Now, the knowledge about polyester has grown and research shows its damaging effect on the ocean and its contribution to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Demkes 2018b) The cotton and polyester fibres are mixed up and spun into threads and after that they are woven into each other to create cloths. These cloths are dyed in different colours using more than 2000 different chemicals. These chemicals are inhaled by the textile workers who then have to deal with the medical consequences of this inhalation, such as respiratory problems (Nadu 2020). After the dying process, the chemicals and dye are often dumped into local rivers, poisoning the ecosystem and the people living in it (River Blue 2017). The United Nations Environment Programme has identified the textile industry as one of the top contributors to the pollution of water, producing 20% of global wastewater (UN Environment Programme 2018). The textile industry is also responsible for 10% of all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, making it the second largest polluting industry in the world (Niinimäki et al. 2020).

The cloths are just one step away from becoming an actual t-shirt. They now need to be sewn together. Tracing that process displays fractures in the global political economy in which there is an immense power imbalance between countries in the Global North and the Global South. Textile companies have been outsourcing their work for decades to countries with low-income standards and little to no regulation on safety measures or corporate responsibility (Demkes 2018a). Seamstresses sew the cotton t-shirts together for very low financial compensation and in poor working conditions. The neoliberal system in which this takes place allows the growth of the dependent relationship between the manufacturers and buyers of the product. This power imbalance results in a lot of purchasing power for the brands and retailers, which is used to lower income and speed up delivery times. This results in long working shifts, poor working conditions and low incomes for the people that ensemble the t-shirts (Clean Clothes Campaign 2021). The Rana Plaza disaster that happened in 2013 exposed much of this power imbalance. The factory, located in Bangladesh, collapsed resulting in 1134 people who lost their lives and more than 2500 people got injured. Cracks in the building were discovered the day before, but the garment workers were ordered to return to their work anyway since the

demands of the buyers would not allow them to lose any time. The next morning around 9:00 AM the building collapsed, making this the most tragic garment worker disaster thus far (International Labour Organisation 2018).

Once the cotton t-shirt has been completed, it has seen many hands and places. But now the shirts are about to embark on their biggest journey: packed in containers they are shipped to countries on the other side of the world, mostly to the Global North where they are sold. According to McKinsey Sustainability (2016), the global textile production has doubled between 2000 and 2014 and people in the Global North buy 60% more clothes than 50 years ago. This is part of the rise of fast fashion in which clothes have become cheaper and the production has become faster. Fashion retailers used to release two collections each year but these numbers have grown substantially with retailers such as Zara releasing 24 collections each year (European Parliament 2019). While the number of collections is going up, clothes are worn about 50% less than 15 years ago and are thrown away much more easily (McKinsey Sustainability 2016).

Now that the cotton shirt has arrived in someone's wardrobe, it is worn by its owner. When the shirt needs to be washed, it releases micro plastics that end up in rivers and oceans. The International Union for Nature Protection estimates that the washing of clothes is responsible for about 35% of all microplastics in the oceans (Boucher & Friot 2017). A variety of reasons can make the owner of the shirt decide to throw it away in a bin designated for clothes. The discarded cotton t-shirt then goes on to its second large journey: it ends up on the second-hand market in Asia or Africa. However, because of the large amount of clothes that are thrown away and the low quality of these products, most of them end up in the landfill (Demkes 2019).

The journey of this cotton shirt shows the different dimensions and flows and fluxes of life that make up the entanglements of the shirt. Like the stories of the seamstresses who are subjected to immense power imbalances and the needs of the plants that were grown to create fibres for the shirt. In the subsequent paragraph, I introduce you to the people and their spaces, who try to change the story of textile as we now know it.

## **A different story of textile: The research spaces**

‘Why do you work in the sustainable textile industry? I asked. Jule let out a little laugh. ‘Because I cannot do anything else, once you see how the industry works, you cannot unsee it. I cannot not work on making the industry more sustainable.’<sup>8</sup>

In the last few months, I have gotten to know several people who make a counter movement against the previous mentioned story of textile. They have decided to put their energy into creating sustainable textile. Most of them, like Jule, have argued that they feel like they ‘cannot do anything else’.<sup>9</sup> Knowing the story and all the dimensions that are involved in the making of a shirt, has left them wanting to make a difference. The following paragraphs highlight Charlie, Tilly and Olivia and their spaces. This is done to give an idea of the people and the environments in this research. Other sustainable textile workers are introduced in the interludes or during the chapters.

### *Charlie’s studio*

When meeting Charlie, I immediately felt very welcome. She opened the door for me with a friendly smile on her face and invited me into her studio. The studio is situated in a building with other entrepreneurs and I had to walk up the stairs to the fifth floor to get to it. The space is big, on my right side there are big white walls and, on the left, there is a big row of windows that offer a view of the local park and the apartment buildings across the street. In the middle of the space, there is a big blue and white curtain that separates one area from the other, and behind the curtains is the area where Charlie spends most of her time. There are racks full of discarded jeans and shirts and there is a big table with a sewing machine and a lot of yarn on it. At this big table Charlie assembles the designs that she makes out of second-hand clothing. She works together with a local thrift shop that offers her the jeans and shirts that are not sold and turns them into new jackets, skirts and dresses or furniture covers. The couch I was sitting on is covered in one of her furniture designs, made up out of patches of old jeans. Charlie likes to work with music in the background, a soft woman’s jazz voice filled the room as she offered me a cup of tea. Her motivation is inspired by her knowledge of the industry and her sense of

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<sup>8</sup> Interview Jule, 13.4.21

<sup>9</sup> Interview Jule, 13.4.21

responsibility: ‘We have to change how we treat the world, we are responsible for the mess that we make. That is why I do what I do.’<sup>10</sup>

### *Tilly’s thrift shop*

Tilly, a young woman in her late twenties was very enthusiastic when she welcomed me at the thrift shop. She works there on a weekly basis to sort out second-hand textiles and next to that she teaches people how to sew. I met Tilly several times. Every time I entered the shop, people would greet me and give me a smile, which made me feel very welcome. The space where Tilly works the most is in the stockroom of the shop, it is a big space with an industrial look. Steel beams cover the ceiling and the radio is playing in the background. Together with three other women, we sort out the textiles that are handed in. There is a big table where we open the bags of textile and divide them into different piles. Everything with stains, holes or pills is sent to a recycling company. The rest is put in containers and divided per item. Behind the table there are three big containers with sorted clothes and on the wall to the left there are even more bags and boxes with clothes. The boxes almost reach the ceiling, which is about five meters high. It is kind of messy, but the women are happy and relaxed. I do have to sneeze a lot because of all the dust on the clothes.

Tilly is very passionate about her work and said that she gets confronted with the ‘story of textile’ almost every day: ‘Every time I see something that is stitched, I realise that there is a story behind it. There is a human being that has been doing that and rivers have been contaminated. Even this ugly Ikea bag, there is someone who stitched the sides of that bag for us!’<sup>11</sup>

### *Olivia’s online space*

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, I met Olivia, and some others, online. In the comfort of my own home, I got to know her. Situated at my small desk, I opened the Zoom link that I sent her. With my headphones on, I was able to create a world in which it was just Olivia and me and it allowed space for deep and personal conversations, despite us having to meet online. The background of her Zoom call had a picture of a Chinese street on it. She lived there for a couple of years while working for commercial fashion companies. In China she experienced the hardships of the industry and decided to turn her life around: at 34 years old, she went back

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<sup>10</sup> Field notes Charlie, 12.2.21

<sup>11</sup> Field notes Tilly, 15.4.21

to school to research sustainable textiles and moved back in with her parents. ‘I have seen everything, all the factories, rows and rows of seamstresses, endless trash and a terrible smell. That did not leave me cold, that changes a human being, at least it changed me. And once you start to learn more about the industry you kind of commit yourself to a lifelong research of how things can be better and the realisation that we really fucked up.’<sup>12</sup> Olivia almost screamed through the computer screen when she said that. I had to be careful that it did not hurt my ears. Her hand was covering one eye and she was shaking her head. ‘I have decided, and it is a decision that I have to make every day, that I do not want to be part of this gigantic problem. But I want to be part of the solution, that is my mantra.’<sup>13</sup>

Charlie, Tilly and Olivia have committed themselves to creating a different story of textile and doing so, they try to make it more environmentally and socially sustainable. In the following chapters I show how three different processes underpin their actions: valuing textile, eco-anxiety and imaginaries of the future. These processes are different ‘threads of life’ that are entangled with each other and inspire the making of sustainable textiles. The chapters each focus on one of these processes, but are part of a larger open-ended assemblage.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview Olivia, 11.3.21

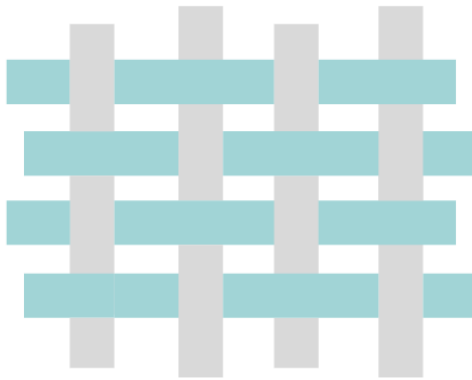
<sup>13</sup> Interview Oliva, 11.3.21

## **Interlude 1 – ‘Making textile valuable again’**

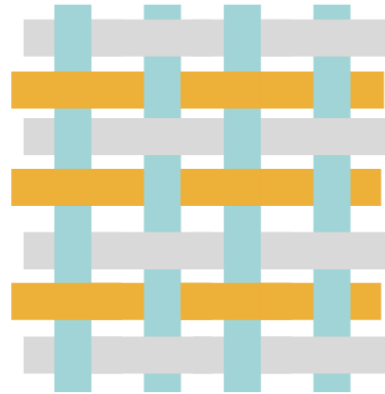
Peter holds the door open for me. ‘Welcome’ he says as we walk into the white building. On the outside it looks like a big box, just like you would expect a building in an industrial area to look like. Once I step inside, I see a big canteen area on my right side. The kitchen has blue doors and some employees are drinking their coffee. I hear the humming sound of machines coming from my left, the only thing that separates me from them is a big white wall with a few picture frames on it. My journey of tracing textile has brought me here: right at the end and beginning of textiles. Peter owns a textile sorting company that has devoted itself to the newest science of textile recycling. It is here where discarded textile finds a new life. Peter is very passionate about what he does. His office is large, it is an area of about 30m<sup>2</sup> in which there is very little furniture compared to what you might expect from an office this size. Except for a sitting area, a desk and a closet filled with coloured yarn that has been made in his company, there is not much else. When we sit down, he enthusiastically tells me about his work and why he does what he does. Later that day, I find myself in another room with bags filled with fibres. Here he keeps his ‘experiments’ as he calls them himself.

There is wool, woven material and fibre material, which all come from old sweaters and jeans. ‘This is the base of where we want to go, it is actually raw material’ Peter tells me as he shows me the fluffy fibres in his hands, some of them are blue and others white. ‘So this is going to be something new?’ I ask, it actually blows my mind that every piece of textile that we use is in its essence just made up out of thousands of tiny fibres. He looks at me and reveals a smile. ‘Yes’, he tells me ‘we are making the worthless valuable again’. ‘Where this is normally the end of the chain’, he points at a shredded pair of jeans, ‘these fibres give you a new start at the beginning of the chain. We’ll turn this into yarn, let me see if I can find an example.’ Peter looks through all the bags that are displayed on the table. It’s a cold February afternoon, but inside it feels warm. ‘Look, this is cotton, it is an open fibre and these fibres used to be clothes. But our machines were able to pull it apart and now you can make yarn out of it again. And once the yarn has been spun, you’ll go on to weave it and we then can once again turn it into a sweater.’ ‘Do you know the different ways of making cloth?’ he asks me. I shake my head, I really do feel like a newbie in this field. ‘Well, knitting consists of little tiny knots which makes the cloth stretchy. Your jeans are woven, that is a different way of textile production. With weaving there are two threads, a warp and a weft, and they are interlaced to create fabric. You have probably seen it before, there are these long threads in a loom and another thread is constantly pushed through them from the left to the right.’ I nod, I find it very

fascinating how many ways there are to make cloth. ‘You can weave threads together in many different ways to create fabric, the options are almost endless (see examples of the two most common weaving patterns in figure 1 and 2)’ Peter says. When I leave that day, Peter gives me a blue cap that is made out of his own recycled fibres. ‘Promise me you will wear it!’ he says. ‘Yes of course I will’ I answer with a smile.<sup>14</sup>



*Figure 1 – Plain weave<sup>15</sup>*



*Figure 2 - Dutch weave<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Field notes Peter, 15.2.21

<sup>15</sup> Field notes Peter, 15.2.21

<sup>16</sup> Field notes Peter, 15.2.21

## Chapter 2 - Valuing textile

Throughout the journey of tracing sustainable textile, I have seen that textile is valued in different ways. The value that it gets assigned, shifts depending on the people and context involved with the textile. In the interlude for example, Peter shows that he sees value in the fibres that are often considered worthless in society. This chapter illustrates how the people working in the sustainable textile industry value textile and in what context they do so. This is done by drawing on Graeber's (2001) theory of value, who argues that value is created through human action and understood within a particular context.

### Understanding value

Within anthropology several attempts towards understanding value have been made.<sup>17</sup> Both Turner (2008) and Graeber (2001) argue for an action-oriented approach. They focus on the role of human practice in the creation of value. Turner (2008, 46) states that the value of something or someone has to do with 'the proportion of the total social labour power of a system that is invested in it' and he based this upon Marx's labour theory of value. Graeber (2001) builds on Turner's work, but he approaches value not from an economic perspective but rather from a sociological one. According to him, value has to do with what people think is a good and desirable life. He argues that people invest their energy in those things that they consider to be most meaningful and that value is 'the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves' (Graeber 2001, 45). Through human action value is produced. These actions get their meaning when they are understood within a larger social or cultural system, a social totality, even if this totality exists primarily in the persons imagination (Graeber 2001, 7). This larger social system, or context, serves as a reference to which human action can be compared. Graeber emphasizes the importance of comparison in generating value, and argues that something takes on meaning in relation to something else, like a story or event or goods and services (Graeber 2001, 86-87).

According to Graeber, value can take on 'socially recognizable forms' (Graeber 2001, 47) like a currency. However, money is not the actual source of value, but rather a medium through which value can travel. He brings up the issue of 'value' versus 'values' (Graeber 2018). 'Value' refers to the monetary value of something, 'value' assumes that human life,

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<sup>17</sup> There is a wide variety of theories about value. Next to the action-oriented approach that is mentioned in the text, there is also a structuralist approach that argues that values are embedded within cultural structures (see also Kluckhohn 1951; Dumont 1980).



work and products are all commensurable which can be expressed by attaching a monetary price to it. ‘Values’ on the other hand represent the good and desirable life, things that are defined as important within a certain group and cannot be reduced to numbers. Graeber (2018) claims that in the past 50 years monetary ‘value’ has entered the domain of ‘values’.

Tsing (2015) shows how meanings and values that are assigned to the Matsutake mushrooms that she researched, shift depending on the context, spaces and people who are involved with them. In the subsequent paragraphs I show how the sustainable textile workers also attach different values to textile and in what contexts they do so. Lastly, I show how these values operate in a tension between ‘value’ and ‘values’.

## **Valuing textile**

### *Textile in constant transformation*

‘Click click.’ ‘Can you look to the left for me please?’ the photographer asked. I look to the left and she continues shooting photos of me. On my left side there are piles of pre-loved jeans and shirts and when I look a little further, I can see the blue curtains that lead to Charlie’s workshop. ‘Now put your weight on your other leg please.’ I change my position and feel the dress flow around my body. I actually feel comfortable in front of the camera wearing one of Charlie’s creations. She has asked me to model for her so she has new photos to use on her social media and website. Charlie reveals a smile and walks up to me, ‘this waistband is supposed to go in the other direction’ she says as she adjusts the belt of the dress I am wearing. The dress is made for summer and would be very suitable on hot days. Charlie has made the dress out of several second-hand men’s shirts. They are each cut into different rectangles and then sewed together to create a patchwork effect. Most of Charlie’s designs are made this way, the dresses, jackets and skirts she makes are created out of different patches of pre-loved jeans or shirts. Signs of usage are left to be seen in her designs, since it is ‘part of the story of the fabric’. Last time we met, Charlie told me that her designs are inspired by the Japanese. Japanese kimonos were originally worn by people who did not have a lot of money. Through the use of patches, they can be adjusted and grow with us. The Japanese also have a way of handling broken porcelain that inspires Charlie. They don’t just throw

broken porcelain away, but they repair the cracks with gold, which makes the product even more beautiful. Charlie uses that philosophy in her designs and hopes that we might shift from single use products, back to repairing and caring for our clothes. ‘I believe it is absolutely ridiculous that we throw away our clothes with such ease and do not even think twice about it, it stresses me out. We do not appreciate the material anymore, what a shame!’<sup>18</sup>

Charlie makes clothing pieces out of pre-loved jeans and shirts, in which there is attention for the previous life of the material. She specifically chooses to leave in ‘signs of usage’ and bases her practice on Japanese philosophies that focus on repairing and the transformative character of material. Drawing on Graeber (2001), her investment of energy into creating these new pieces out of old ones, show that she values the reuse of textile and celebrates its transformative character. To her, a pair of jeans is not just a finalized product, but the fabric is constantly changing. Alterations and mistakes in the fabric can even add to its beauty and story. As Graeber (2001) has argued, actions get their value when they are placed in and compared to a specific context, this context can be a social system or be part of the imagination. For Charlie, this context is the consumerist society in which we ‘use single use products and throw away our clothes with ease’. It is important to her not to contribute to this behaviour because it ‘stresses her out’. This is rooted in her personal context of experiencing eco-anxiety (see also chapter 3) and speculating the worst about what might happen in the future if we do not make changes (see also chapter 4). This larger social and personal context makes that Charlie values textile as something that is transformative and long lasting.

Another example of valuing already used textile is illustrated by the practices of Mirthe, Victoria and Kaylee. They all participate in so-called ‘guerrilla repairs’ of Extinction Rebellion Fashion Action. In these repair sessions they come together in a public place, often a mall, to repair or remake their clothes. ‘It’s really fun to (re)make our own clothes to show people that you can do things differently. You don’t have to buy something new just because there is a hole in your shirt. And it is so much better for the environment as well.’<sup>19</sup> Several people of Extinction Rebellion Fashion Action have shared how they make and mend their clothes: when fabric shows a defect, thread and patches are used to repair it. Sometimes this is done in an invisible manner, but other times one can opt for a ‘visible’ repair.<sup>20</sup> Using mending techniques

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<sup>18</sup> Fieldnotes Charlie, 1.5.21

<sup>19</sup> Interview Victoria, 18.2.21

<sup>20</sup> Online participant observation Extinction Rebellion Fashion Action, 16.4.21

like Shashiko, fabric is strengthened by the use of visible patterns. The thread is woven through the fabric in a decorative pattern and is supposed to be seen (Handwerkwereld 2021). Through the repairing of their clothes several values become visible: one should be careful and mindful with the textile that we have and if something is broken, one should repair it instead of throwing it away. These repairs are nothing to be ashamed of, but instead are allowed to, or even should be, seen. By literally placing themselves in a mall when they do this, they give value to their actions by contrasting the people who are walking by and shopping for new clothes. Their practices generate meaning within that consumerist system. To them, the textile that they work on represent transformation and growth, as opposed to finished material. Building on this, in the next section, I show how textile is not only valued for its transformative character, but also for its capacity to bring about effects.

### *Textile as able to bring about effects*

‘I barely buy anything new, I just use it for a very long time. But that damn fast fashion! People wear it six, no five times on average and throw it away after six months. On average! Think about that, it is bizarre! Bizarre what we are doing. People enter Primark, fill five bags for 50 euros. That fucks things up. That creates so much pollution! Not only when making it, but definitely also afterwards, after they have tossed it. We are ruining the earth!’<sup>21</sup>

The frustration was not only hearable in Peter’s voice, but also visible in his face. His eyebrows were raised and his hands were thrown up in the air to express disbelief and anger. His frustration about throwing away our textiles with such ease is shared by many others. ‘Textile is not a disposable product, come on people!’<sup>22</sup> Tilly shouted during our focus group. Her work in the thrift shop confronts her with the number of textiles that are being thrown away each day. In the following excerpt I am standing in the stockroom of the thrift shop with her:

‘Remember the photo I sent you?’ Tilly asked. We are standing in the stockroom of the thrift shop that she works at. The radio is singing in the background and other volunteers are walking by. I do remember the photo, it was a picture of her amongst

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<sup>21</sup> Interview Peter, 15.2.21

<sup>22</sup> Focus group 2, 22.4.21

dozens of bags filled with discarded textiles. The bags were piled up to the ceiling of the stockroom, which is about four to five meters high. ‘Now you can actually see the wall, which honestly is a miracle. Normally there is so much stuff here. It is all being thrown away with such ease, but for me it is very important not to do that because where is “away”? It does not just go away. I believe we have to use our clothes for a long period of time, repair it, take better care of it and maybe upcycle it. There is so much textile already and we just waste it! I do not care what you do exactly, as long as you don’t treat your textiles as a disposable product.’ Tilly looked at me and raised her voice. ‘The thing is, there is no “away”. It doesn’t exist! It gets burned, and if you are lucky it is used to generate energy, but mostly it just gets shipped to Africa! And once it is there, there is no option to recycle, so it gets stomped in the ground or put in a landfill. With all its consequences.’<sup>23</sup>

In the excerpt above, Tilly expressed her frustration about people who throw away their clothing very easily. Both Peter and Tilly, work on the backside of the clothing industry, in a recycling company and a thrift shop, where they get to see the number of textiles that are being discarded. This context makes them very aware of the fact that once a piece of textile is thrown away, it still takes up its place on the earth and pollutes the environment. Gell (1998) has argued that we should understand that things are not passive but can bring about effects. Tilly acknowledges this effect by stating how ‘putting things in a landfill has its consequences’ with which she referred to the environmental pollution and putting people out of work. Thinking in this manner goes against our habit of dividing the world into living and non-living things (Bennett 2010, 8). Bennett (2010) calls the influence that things can have in our life ‘thing power’ and she argues that we should acknowledge the capacity of materials to bring about effects. This is exactly what Peter, Tilly, and other sustainable textile workers, do. They understand that textile will affect its surroundings even after being thrown away. Therefore, they do not work with ‘litter’, they work with material that can cause effects in the future, if not being handled or discarded properly. The sustainable textile workers imagine these effects as detrimental to future life on this planet. In context of their work amidst all the textile waste, they invest their energy into preventing that textile is being shipped or thrown away. What they do gets value when it is compared to the standard system of ‘dumping things on a landfill’ in which there is no attention to what that might cause later on. Rather than understanding textile

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<sup>23</sup> Interview Tilly 23.2.21; Fieldnotes Tilly, 3.3.21

as a non-living thing, they value it for its capacity to bring about effects and believe that it should be treated as such.

In these previous paragraphs I have shown how the sustainable textile workers value textile in different ways depending on their social and personal context. In the following paragraph I explain that these values are in situated a tension between them and monetary ‘value’, which is dominant in our consumerist society (Graeber 2018).

### **‘Value’ versus ‘Values’**

As has become clear, textile shifts in value depending on the personal and social context of the person who encounters it. The examples above have shown that textile is, among other things, being valued for its transformative character and its capacity to bring about effects. Leah, a woman who spent ten years lobbying for the creation of sustainable textile cloths in her company, told me the following during our focus group: ‘textiles should be known and appreciated for the values that they represent and that should not be diminished by consumer culture’.<sup>24</sup> With her comment, she referred to something that the sustainable textile workers all come across: the tension between how they believe that textile should be valued and treated, as being transformative and able to bring about effects, versus how it is often valued in society, as reducible to monetary value. Irene, who runs her own sustainable fashion label, compared how her grandparents valued their stuff to how the current younger generations treat their materials. ‘My grandparents had one pair of fancy leather shoes and they took really good care of it. They knew which farmers and even which cows had created the leather for them. They brought it to the shoemaker when something was broken, and they really valued their shoes for what they were. Now we just do not, we do not know anything about our stuff, and we do not care either!’<sup>25</sup> Mirthe, who makes her own clothes and teaches others about the sustainable ways to create textile, showed her frustration about our focus on money: ‘our entire culture is focused on buying more, more, more. Even our government has a goal to grow its gross domestic product. We are addicted to buying new things.’<sup>26</sup>

Their frustrations are an example of what Graeber (2018) calls ‘value versus values’. He argues that more and more we approach aspects of life from the viewpoint of ‘value’, meaning monetary value, instead of from a point ‘values’, that which is considered good and desirable (Graeber 2018). The comments of Mirthe, Irene and Leah, are in line with this idea.

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<sup>24</sup> Focus group 2, 22.4.21

<sup>25</sup> Interview Irene, 24.3.21

<sup>26</sup> Interview Mirthe, 22.4.21

They long for textile to be appreciated for what it actually is, transformative and able to bring about effects. To speak in Graeber's (2018) terms, they long for a focus on 'values' over monetary 'value'. To get the focus back on 'values', Leah believes that we should 'use our stuff as long as possible [...] and buy and make better quality products that take the people and environment involved in mind. We should figure out ways to reuse them, share them and make something new out of them. Doing this, we can become proud of our products again and re-appreciate the material that we use and have.'<sup>27</sup> The sustainable textile workers believe that we have shifted away from the values that are important, to a focus on money. Through their actions of making the textile industry more sustainable, they try to put the attention back to the values that they believe textile should be appreciated for.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has shown how the value that is attached to textile shifts, depending on the context in which the sustainable textile workers encounter it. Building on Graeber's (2001) theory that argues that value is produced through human action and understood within a particular context, I have shown that the sustainable textile workers value textile for its transformative capacity and its capacity to bring about effects. When they are aware of the single use products and the high levels of consumerism around them, they bring attention to how textile can be repaired and adjusted. They celebrate that textile is constantly changing and believe that its transformative capacity should be appreciated. When textiles are about to be discarded and put on a landfill, the sustainable textile workers acknowledge and value textile as something that can bring about effects and believe that it should be treated as such. However, in the consumerist society that the sustainable textile workers are part of, there is often a focus on monetary 'value' over 'values' (Graeber 2018). This results in a tension in that the sustainable textile workers experience between how they believe that textile should be valued as opposed to how it is mostly valued in society. Through their work, they aim to put the focus back on the values that they believe textile should be appreciated for. This is done through repairing, remaking and recycling textiles.

The values that the sustainable textile workers attach to textile, and the tension between these 'values' and 'value' that they feel, are in turn, influenced by their personal experiences with eco-anxiety and what they imagine the future to be like. Both processes inform the personal context from which the sustainable textile workers value textile and they are thus

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<sup>27</sup> Interview Leah, 23.6.21

entangled with each other. In the next chapter I unpack the dynamics of how the sustainable textile workers experience eco-anxiety to uncover how eco-anxiety influences their lives and their actions.

## Chapter 3 - Eco-anxiety

‘You ask if I experience climate anxiety? Oh yes.’ Jule is silent for a few seconds. ‘Honestly, I notice it on a daily basis. You know, even when I walk in Albert Heijn to get some groceries, I just get disturbed by all the plastic. Just watch Seaspiracy or Cowspiracy and you’ll get nauseous by the state of the world. It keeps me up at night. I try not to judge other people, but actually I want to shake up the world, because apparently that is necessary.’<sup>28</sup>

In the excerpt above, Jule describes her encounters with climate anxiety. Together with a friend she runs an independent fashion label that actively tries to make the fashion industry more sustainable. Her knowledge about the ‘story of textile’ is impressive and she feels responsible to make the industry more sustainable for the people and the natural environment involved. In the introduction of this thesis, I have mentioned that the tables have turned. Where we used to need nature and natural fibres to create cloth that would protect us from natural forces, like harsh weather conditions. Now planet earth and its eco-systems need us in order to protect it from us.

Since the fashion industry is the second largest polluter in the world (Niinimäki et al. 2020), working in this industry, and especially the sustainable textile industry, has gotten an entirely different meaning as well. It is no longer about just creating textiles for us to use and enjoy, but about creating textiles that are sustainable for the social and natural environment. For Jule, knowing this means that she has started to feel anxious about the state of the environment. These feelings are often referred to as eco-anxiety. According to Clayton et al. (2017), this means that the state of the environment does not only affect our outer world, with rising temperatures, biodiversity loss and other environmental crises, but also induces psychological struggles. Eco-anxiety is becoming increasingly common (Usher 2019) but there is still relatively little research done on the subject. Pihkala (2020, 1) argues that there is a strong need for a better understanding of eco-anxiety since it is believed to have important health impacts such as depression and high levels of stress.

Definitions of eco-anxiety differ between disciplines and scholars. Pihkala (2020) has highlighted the explanations provided by Clayton et al. (2017) and Albrecht (2012). Clayton et al. (2017) explain eco-anxiety as a chronic fear of environmental doom and Albrecht (2012,

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<sup>28</sup> Interview Jule, 13.4.21



250) defines eco-anxiety as ‘the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse’. Most scholars agree that eco-anxiety is future oriented and related to a threat that is uncertain (Pihkala 2020, 2). Social scientists often refer to eco-anxiety as connected to an uncertain or ‘uncomfortable change in the social order of things’ (Pihkala 2020, 5). Sociologist Norgaard (2011) says that eco-anxious feelings are multifaceted. They are caused by changes in the physical environment, but also by how the people and the social world around us respond to these changes. This is in line with Milton (2002, 148) who argued against the idea that people are only influenced by their social world. She says that people are not only shaped by the relationship that they have with their own social environment, but also by non-human actors around them, such as water, animals and land. According to her, we do not only form relationships of the social kind but also of the natural kind. How these relationships take shape, is dependent on someone’s personal experiences throughout their lifetime (Milton 2002, 148).

Many of the people in the sustainable textile industry expressed to me that they suffer from eco-anxiety. Some participants were very straightforward about it such as Olivia: ‘Oh god, yes of course. Definitely, definitely, absolutely I do experience eco-anxiety’.<sup>29</sup> And others were not as clear: ‘You know, I thought I did not but when I start to think about it, I really do experience stress’.<sup>30</sup> In this chapter I aim to learn more about eco-anxiety by analysing eco-anxious experiences using the concept of affect. Affect offers a relevant framework since it allows us to examine relationships between subjects (Skoggard & Waterston 2015), such as the sustainable textile workers and their natural environment. In the next section I delve deeper into the concept of affect and experiences of eco-anxiety by analysing the different subjects that are involved in the affective relationships that cause eco-anxiety.

## **Experiencing eco-anxiety**

### *Understanding affect and eco-anxiety*

As mentioned earlier, Ingold (2008) states that everything and every organism consists of a whole bunch of lines or flows and fluxes of the world around us. Just as yarn is woven into each other to create fabric, our lives are also ‘a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement’ (Ingold 2008, 3). Both Norgaard (2011) and Milton (2002) argue that eco-anxiety is caused by the social and the physical world around us. We form a relationship with these

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<sup>29</sup> Meeting Olivia, 11.3.21

<sup>30</sup> Meeting Jelte, 12.3.21

worlds, which influences the ‘meshwork’ of our lives and decides whether we experience eco-anxiety. The concept ‘affect’ considers how the relationships between us and the social and physical world around us come to be, and what kind of responses these relationships evoke. These responses, or ‘being affected’, are the result of being in an affective relationship with something else. Using the concept of affect in analysing eco-anxiety offers a framework to explore which factors are part of affective relationships that result in eco-anxious responses, and it helps in uncovering what these eco-anxious responses look like.

Previously, anthropological scholarship used to mainly focus on emotions (Bladow & Ladino 2018). Skoggard & Waterston (2015) highlight the ‘affective turn’, a rise of a new theoretical frame that happened around the turn of the century. The affective turn came to life to better understand different layers of experience, it aimed to understand how intimacies, feelings and emotions work in the public realm (Skoggard & Waterston 2015, 110). Affect is often thought to be richer than emotions because it is about what happens between two subjects, rather than what happens within an individual. When visualising this, you could consider that there is a line between you and something close to you. The thing close to you influences what you are doing and feeling, and your behaviour influences that thing in return. Massumi (2015) states that affect is not constricted to human-human relations but also happens between human and non-human objects.

Additionally, Massumi (2015, 11) explains affect as ‘the capacity to affect something and to be affected in return’. Affect is transpersonal and trans-situational, meaning that it is a process that takes place not only within one body but happens between different bodies and in different situations (Massumi 2015, 11). Anderson (2006, 736 - 737) explains that affect is a constantly ongoing project. We are constantly affected by our surroundings and our surroundings are constantly affecting us. He adds to this that feelings and emotions are an expression of being affected. Affect shapes our relationship with other people and objects around us. Furthermore, Bladow & Ladino (2018, 3) argue for more ‘environmentally attuned affect studies’. They address that to understand emotions that are related to environmental issues such as eco-anxiety, and to understand how the circulation of these emotions works, we should focus on affect. Therefore, in the following paragraphs I explain how we can understand eco-anxiety from the perspective of affect studies. First, I will explain the triggers that are involved in eco-anxiety and then I move on to exploring eco-anxious responses.

### *Triggering eco-anxiety*

As Anderson (2006) has argued, feelings and emotions are an expression of being affected. Experiencing anxiety because of the state of the environment is therefore evidence that a relationship in which two subjects affect each other, has formed. Many research participants who say that they experience eco-anxiety have thus formed an ‘affective relationship’ with something that triggered their anxiety. These triggers can be a variety of things: ‘plastic in the supermarket’<sup>31</sup>, ‘news articles’<sup>32</sup>, ‘seeing people buy cheap low quality stuff’<sup>33</sup> or ‘buying kiloknallers<sup>34</sup> in Albert Heijn’.<sup>35</sup> But also things that are more nature related such as ‘flowers that bloom a little too early and biking past meadows that have lost all their biodiversity’<sup>36</sup>, ‘the sudden switch in temperatures last February’<sup>37</sup> and experiencing air pollution like Olivia:

‘When I was in China when I still worked for fast fashion companies, I started waking up in the middle of the night because the air just was so bad. I looked at the meter of the Air Quality Index<sup>38</sup> and it would be a 300 in air pollution. For your information, on a bad day in The Netherlands it measures to a maximum of 90. And then you would have the pure realisation that you’re breathing in this heavy air pollution, it is not pleasant to say the least. Things like this would just add up.’<sup>39</sup>

The previously mentioned triggers are subjects that affect the participants when they come across each other. However, for these affective relationships to cause feelings of eco-anxiety, there also has to be some sort of knowledge about the trigger involved. The importance of this knowledge is given in by ideas about the future and about value. For example, a flower that blooms<sup>40</sup> can form an affective relationship with the person that sees the flower. However, it is the knowledge that the flower blooms too early, and what that might mean in the future and what values are afflicted by the flower blooming too early, that sparks anxious responses. Charlie exposed this dynamic when she talked about people who are shopping:

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<sup>31</sup> Interview Jule, 13.4.21

<sup>32</sup> Focus group 1, 20.4.21

<sup>33</sup> Field Notes, 19.4.21

<sup>34</sup> Kiloknallers are cheaply prized packages of meat with no animal welfare certification (Wakkerdier 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Field notes Charlie, 1.5.21

<sup>36</sup> Interview Jelte, 12.3.21

<sup>37</sup> Field notes Tilly, 23.2.21

<sup>38</sup> These numbers are part of the Air Quality Index (AQI) that measures air quality around the world. AQI below 100 is considered good or acceptable, values over 100 are concerning and values exceeding 300 indicate hazardous conditions (Airnow 2021).

<sup>39</sup> Interview Olivia, 11.3.21

<sup>40</sup> Interview Jelte, 12.3.21

‘When I see people shopping clothes and ordering so many packages, I get stressed. Or when I feel like I have to wear something fun and new to a certain occasion. Because all these things cause pollution, and I am so aware of the climate and what will happen later on if we do not make changes. I do not want to contribute to messing up the earth the way that we are doing now. It is our responsibility to keep it healthy!’<sup>41</sup>

She argues that the knowledge that she has about the polluting aspects of buying new clothes makes her think about a possible negative future and about how ‘buying new clothes’ does not align with her values. It is this combination that creates stress within her. Affective relationships that cause eco-anxious responses are thus a combination of a trigger and knowledge which is informed by ideas about the future and about value.

### *Affective responses*

In this paragraph I show how the affective relationship between the sustainable textile workers and their trigger results in different responses. Triggers can, in combination with knowledge about the climate, evoke eco-anxious responses. Bladow & Ladino (2018, 5) and Anderson (2008) understand these responses as precognitive bodily feelings or ‘intensities’ that emerge as bodies affect each other. Massumi (2015) argues that emotions are one form that affect can take within a particular body, but that affective relationships can be expressed in many different ways. These responses are emotions such as powerlessness, worry, sadness and frustration, but also constantly ongoing processes like inner conflict. Pihkala (2020) has argued that knowing these responses contributes to insight into how eco-anxiety manifests itself and can be signalled. Moreover, I show that these responses influence the lives of the sustainable textile workers and how they engage in textile practices.

### *Response: Powerlessness, worry, sadness*

The first eco-anxious response that the sustainable textile workers experience, are emotions such as powerlessness, worry and sadness. These emotions result from a circulation of affect (Bladow & Ladino 2018) between the trigger, knowledge of the state of the environment and

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<sup>41</sup> Field notes Charlie, 17.2.21

values of the sustainable textile workers. This circulation is visible in many moments. Eva, a young mother who makes sustainable towels for kids, expressed the following:

‘I worry about the climate a lot. I really do believe that our generation was really lucky with everything that we have been able to do, how we were able to play freely, and my children can still sort of experience the same but they will face a tough future. And you know when I think about possible grandkids...’ Her voice breaks and she stops talking for a second. Tears are coming up in the corners of her eyes and start to roll down her face. She looks away from me and grabs a grape from the bag that is on the table next to her. ‘I can cry about that, it worries me very much.’<sup>42</sup>

Eva shows that she is affected by the thought of her kids or grandkids not having a relaxed worryless life. For this affective relationship to manifest in tears, there is a certain amount of knowledge involved about the state of the environment. She also shares that she values freedom and would love that for her kids. The knowledge of a possible tough future for her kids, in which they cannot experience freedom so much, makes her sad. For Mirthe, this sadness has even expressed itself in depressed feelings: ‘If you really learn more about it, it is unbelievable how bad it is. You can really get sick because of it. It can be really tough, I sometimes wonder: does it even matter what we are trying to do?’<sup>43</sup>

Jess, who is a designer and remakes second-hand clothing, became very silent when I asked her about experiencing climate stress. We were sitting amidst her workshop that was filled with clothing pieces that she made. The table was covered in buttons, a sewing machine and her latest creations: yoga cushions out of scrap fabric. It took her about fifteen seconds to respond to me, indicating that the subject was very sensitive to her: ‘yes, I do feel very gloomy about it’. The expression on her face showed discomfort. ‘Honestly, I try to stay away from it. I don’t want to ignore it, I read these things on Instagram and I just read a book about it, but it just makes me sadder.’<sup>44</sup> It was almost like Jess was trying to stay away from the affective relationships that would make her feel sad. The things that she reads and learns make her feel so uncomfortable that she sometimes prefers to stay away from them.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview Eva, 19.3.21

<sup>43</sup> Interview Mirthe, 22.4.21

<sup>44</sup> Interview Jess, 18.3.21

Feelings of worry, sadness and depressive episodes are underpinned by what Irene calls ‘that big sense of powerlessness’.<sup>45</sup> Mirthe shares those feelings: ‘I feel so powerless, so very often.’<sup>46</sup> Several people clearly expressed that the complexity and the extent of the issues within the industry is so large that it is overwhelming for them. ‘The complexity makes it so difficult, how are we going to fix all of this? When everything is so interwoven. I do fear the worst.’<sup>47</sup>

*Response: Frustration*

Eco-anxiety is often thought of as being directly triggered by signs of environmental degradation (Pihkala 2020). However, as shown before, other people’s behaviour, such as ‘buying kiloknallers’<sup>48</sup> can also trigger eco-anxious responses. The affective response resulting from these triggers is often frustration with other people’s behaviour. The following part of my online conversation with Kaylee is very illustrative of this observation. Kaylee identifies herself as a sustainable textile activist at Extinction Rebellion and was very passionate when talking about her work:

‘People that deny or ignore climate change just make me angry. You know it is like our backyard is on fire and people are just ignoring it! People are saying it does not exist, they ignore it or deny everything that science tells us. But this is everyone’s problem. Our earth is on fire!! HELLO PEOPLE! I am not doing all this just for myself, but for everyone. And if people would read a little and think for themselves everyone would come to the same conclusion. It is so frustrating.’<sup>49</sup>

Not only Kaylee’s eco-anxiety is expressed through a frustration with human behaviour. Everyone who experienced eco-anxiety mentioned a feeling of frustration with others. Eva was wiping the tears off her face when she switched from being sad to frustrated: ‘Guys, you just have to look a little further than what is right in front of you. Take a drive and look around!’<sup>50</sup> Mikkie, an entrepreneur who makes clothing out of second-hand woollen blankets, shares an office with Eva and joined in on what she was saying: ‘What worries and frustrates me the most is the attitude that most people have: “it is not my problem, so I do not need to do anything

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<sup>45</sup> Interview Irene, 24.3.21

<sup>46</sup> Interview Mirthe, 22.4.21

<sup>47</sup> Interview Olivia, 11.3.21

<sup>48</sup> Interview Charlie, 1.5.21

<sup>49</sup> Interview Kaylee, 28.4.21

<sup>50</sup> Field Notes Eva, 19.3.21

about it”<sup>51</sup> Eva nodded her head and continued: ‘It is so complicated because most people just do not care, it is only about having more, more, more! It is crazy to me that the Action is the store that people missed the most during the corona crisis. I cannot believe it! Did you really need those – way too cheap – nail polishes and that plastic mirror?!’<sup>52</sup>

As Eva showed, the frustration with human behaviour also corresponds with the tension that they feel between their ‘values’ and the monetary ‘value’ that is often seen as most important in society. Eva cannot believe that people choose cheap stuff over high quality things that keep the environment in mind. This difference in values, and the tension that it creates, can thus also be expressed in eco-anxious feelings and frustrations.

### *Response: Inner conflict*

Many sustainable textile workers who experience eco-anxiety, experience an ongoing form of inner conflict about the choices that they make or believe they should make. Considering this from an affect theory perspective, this conflict resembles the experience of being affected by multiple things at once which results in conflicting feelings. The following excerpt is very illustrative of this experience. In the excerpt I am sitting with Mikkie and Eva in their workshop. We are chatting and suddenly Mikkie notices that she is drinking orange juice from a disposable plastic bottle:

‘I just realised, I never ever do this.’ Mikkie says as she points towards the plastic bottle with orange juice. Her face looks a little shocked. ‘But today I was so in the mood for some orange juice. But how ridiculous, I am talking about how plastic frustrates me and I am doing the exact thing right now!’ ‘Does it really bother you?’ I ask. ‘Yes, definitely. I was just craving some orange juice. I never do this, I hate all these plastic bottles.’ A couple of minutes later Mikkie tells me that she bought something on Vinted.<sup>53</sup> ‘I found myself scrolling through Vinted and I bought something from France. Honestly, I did not intend to do it. But it was exactly the skirt that I saw a while ago and yeah...’. ‘At least it is second-hand’ I say to her. ‘Yes, that is true but it is shipped from France. And Vinted also messes some things up. And when we stop buying at Zara should we then ship 10 packages from Vinted to our house every week?! You might think okay at least it is second-hand clothing,

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<sup>51</sup> Field notes Mikkie, 19.3.21

<sup>52</sup> Field Notes Eva, 19.3.21

<sup>53</sup> Vinted is a platform on which people can sell and buy secondhand clothing (Vinted 2021).

but it is just so much and so fast. We really need to be aware of that. Now it is becoming a replacement for fast fashion. We are buying so much stuff on there and that is not what we should do.’<sup>54</sup>

From Mikkie’s response to drinking orange juice from a plastic bottle and her opinion about buying a skirt on Vinted, I have drawn the idea that she is twisting and turning about doing the ‘right’ thing. She is affected by the craving for orange juice and the plastic of the bottle that it is in, at once. Similarly, she shows that she wants the skirt from Vinted, but is also influenced by the shipping that needs to happen for it to get to her. These contradictory affective relationships that take shape simultaneously, result in clashing wants and needs. I have seen these clashes several times in different sustainable textile workers and they have become part of their everyday life and activities.

The aforementioned responses show that the sustainable textile workers form affective relationships with the triggers in their environment and that, together with knowledge about the climate and beliefs about value, these relationships evoke eco-anxious responses. These responses have a negative undertone and exist in the form of powerlessness, worry, sadness, frustration and inner conflict. Psychological struggles that are induced by eco-anxiety (Clayton et al. 2017) can thus take the shape of one of these responses and are hindering their daily life. The negative responses tell us that what is happening to the climate is overwhelming for the sustainable textile workers and that it leaves its marks in their everyday lives. To them it is very important that changes are made and that we treat our environment with respect. This paragraph has shown the different eco-anxious responses and struggles that eco-anxiety can elicit. In the next paragraph I uncover how the sustainable textile workers deal with these eco-anxious responses.

### **Dealing with eco-anxiety**

Eco-anxious responses like frustration, sadness and inner conflict are the result of being affected by different triggers in the surroundings of the sustainable textile workers. These responses can hinder their everyday lives and are dealt with in several ways. Massumi (2015) argued that affect is not only about being affected, but also about affecting in return. The sustainable textile workers are thus not only affected by the triggers around them, but also

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<sup>54</sup> Interview Mikkie, 19.3.21



respond to these triggers. Most of the people working in the sustainable textile industry explain that they do this, and cope with eco-anxious feelings, by ‘doing what they can do’. They are aware that the textile industry is very complicated and needs structural changes, but they know that they cannot change everything themselves. This decision to do what they can starts with self-forgiveness: ‘You can’t be perfect in every single way. That is just not possible. I think we should constantly forgive ourselves for it and think: where can I make a difference?’<sup>55</sup> Forgiving oneself creates space for positive self-talk and getting active.

Next, the sustainable textile workers start to get active: ‘Get out of your head and do something with it!’<sup>56</sup> Olivia explained in our online focus group. She kind of looked frustrated but also determined: ‘You know I get it when people think “it does not matter what I do” but I am not a fan of it. It does not help one bit! So yeah, I am one of those people who thinks: If I don’t believe in it, it won’t happen so I better believe in it and just try to do whatever I can do.’<sup>57</sup> Mirthe, a woman in her sixties who recently joined an activist fashion group, also shares that you can better get active than dwell in negative feelings about the state of the environment: ‘I have suffered from several depressions in my lifetime and I can tell you that it does not fix anything. You can rather do whatever is in your circle of influence.’<sup>58</sup>

Active resistance against the status quo in the textile industry plays out in several areas: firstly, they make changes in their personal life like becoming vegan or vegetarian<sup>59</sup>, taking shorter showers<sup>60</sup>, buying clothes second-hand or making them themselves<sup>61</sup>, joining activist groups<sup>62</sup>, using bamboo toothbrushes<sup>63</sup> and deciding not to fly<sup>64</sup>. Secondly, they ease their eco-anxiety by ‘spreading the message’<sup>65</sup> to others. Mirthe, who has been studying textiles since she was nine years old is really passionate about this:

‘For me, the solution to these feelings is to teach people how to sew and repair their clothes and spread awareness about the fashion industry. Last Saturday I gave a workshop to people to weave caps from recycled textile. What I do is a combination

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<sup>55</sup> Interview Eva, 19.3.21

<sup>56</sup> Focus group 1, 20.4.21

<sup>57</sup> Interview Olivia, 11.3.21

<sup>58</sup> Interview Mirthe, 22.4.21

<sup>59</sup> Interview Jule, 13.4.21

<sup>60</sup> Interview Jelte, 12.3.21

<sup>61</sup> Interview Charlie, 17.2.21

<sup>62</sup> Interview Mirthe, 22.4.21

<sup>63</sup> Field notes Charlie, 1.5.21

<sup>64</sup> Field notes Tilly, 23.2.21

<sup>65</sup> Interview Olivia, 11.3.21

of what makes me happy: I make things while I teach people about the industry. I provide these workshops to the people who want to learn it, and they can teach it to others and spread the knowledge. A friend told me that I might not notice it, but I do plant seeds in other people's minds. What I do does matter. People share what they learn from me with each other. So I must not think that what I do is not significant. Keep it manageable, do things that you love and that suit you, and share it with others.'<sup>66</sup>

Mirthe feels better when she can share her knowledge with other people. This eases her anxiety because she feels like she can contribute to creating a better future. She also mentions that one should focus on what they love to do. This third way of coping with eco-anxiety is shared by Irene, Kaylee, Olivia, Tilly and Victoria: 'I try to make an impact in an area that I am passionate about, it shouldn't all be heavy and sad. Joy is also important.'<sup>67</sup> Tilly does the same: 'by showing people what they can make themselves, I make it fun. I need that to be able to deal with it.'<sup>68</sup> Victoria tries to re-connect people to the material that they wear and use:

'I want to make people feel a connection to their clothes again by spicing up old clothes. I like to do this through embroidering for them or teaching them how to embroider. Using that creativity is what makes it fun for me. I do not need to hear or tell only poignant stories. Embroidery is fun and it is almost therapeutic for me as well. I just sit there, solely focusing on the act of embroidery and fixing that clothing piece. There is no time to think about other things. That is so nice and comfortable. It is meditative and therapeutic and I love that about it.'<sup>69</sup>

Victoria mentions that embroidery is a way for her to ease her anxiety. It is an example of the fourth thing that several people do to cope with their eco-anxiety: they use working with textiles as a way to ease eco-anxious feelings.

As has been laid out above, the sustainable textile workers 'do what they can do' to deal with their eco-anxious feelings. By doing this, they affect their surroundings as a response to their own eco-anxious feelings. Often this starts with self-forgiveness and continues by

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<sup>66</sup> Interview Mirthe, 22.4.21

<sup>67</sup> Focus group 1, 20.1.21

<sup>68</sup> Field notes Tilly, 23.2.21

<sup>69</sup> Interview Victoria, 18.2.21

investing their energy into creating or working with sustainable textiles. It is in this sense that we can see that eco-anxiety can increase their will to make the textile industry more sustainable and it can thus also function as a motivator to work with sustainable textiles.

## **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has illustrated how eco-anxiety is a thread of life that influences the lives and work of the sustainable textile workers. Clayton et al. (2017) have argued that eco-anxiety is about a ‘fear of environmental doom’ that is often future related and induces psychological struggles (Pihkala 2020). Through the concept of affect (Massumi 2015), I have shown how the sustainable textile workers develop these psychological struggles about the environment and how they experience it. They respond to triggers, such as ‘people who are shopping’ with which they form an affective relationship. These affective relationships are not only influenced by a trigger, but also by knowledge about the state of the environment and what that might mean in the future, and it is guided by their values. The combination of these elements elicits eco-anxious responses in the sustainable textile workers which entail feelings of powerlessness, worry, sadness, frustration and inner conflict. These affective responses are examples of the psychological struggles that eco-anxiety can elicit. As a response to these eco-anxious feelings, the sustainable textile workers sooth themselves by ‘doing what they can do’. They start with forgiving themselves for not being able to fix it all and invest their energy into making the textile industry sustainable. Through sewing, working and teaching others about sustainable textiles, they feel like they can make a positive contribution to preventing or minimizing ‘environmental doom’ (Clayton et al. 2017) and having a positive impact on the future. This shows that eco-anxiety can also serve as an incentive for working in the sustainable textile industry.

The eco-anxious responses of the sustainable textile workers are triggered by ideas about what ‘might happen in the future’ and through their actions they try to influence that future. In the next chapter I therefore focus on how the sustainable textile workers imagine the future and how that relates to their actions.

## Interlude 2 – Sewing the future

‘It’s a beautiful piece of fabric that you picked’ Tilly says to me. I look at the fabric in my hands, it’s pretty sturdy and colourful. The colours are light blue and yellow and they remind me of summer. The print has a Scandinavian feel to it and at the same time it almost looks African. Tilly found the fabric at the thrift store and brought it to the sewing workshop that she is giving to me and my roommate. We are sitting in my room, at my small table which is covered in sewing material and two sewing machines. Normally Tilly hosts sewing workshops for bigger groups, but because of the pandemic this is not possible. Instead, she has come to my house to teach me and my roommate the beginnings of sewing. I am working on a simple bag and Tilly is helping me make it. The workshop started by explaining us how sewing machines work, apparently, all sewing machines are pretty similar, except for that the buttons are often in different places. The needles we need to use depend on the thickness of the fabric and before you start to sew, there is actually a lot of thinking and planning work involved. You need to create and cut out a pattern, include seam allowance and correctly measure everything. Then you have to cut out the patterns in the fabric and after that, the ‘sewing’ starts. There are two stitches that are important for us to know: the plain stitch. This one is a straight line with intervals, it is the most used stitch to attach to pieces of textile together. And the zig-zag stitch: this one hops from one side to the other while creating a straight line, it is mostly used to prevent fabric from fraying (see figure three).

As we get further along in the process of making our own bags, Tilly tells us why she teaches these lessons: ‘I do it because I love to sew, I really enjoy the fact that I can make things myself from second-hand materials. And also, I want to teach people sewing skills because it is incredibly important that changes are made within the textile industry. When I see all these people buying fast fashion, I think that they do not know what goes into the making of a clothing piece and how messed up the industry is. Through my lessons I want to teach people sewing skills and also tell them about the industry. It is my way of trying to make a positive change.’ ‘There are a lot of cool initiatives working on this change, that always makes me very excited’ I respond to her. ‘Yes yes, there are’ Tilly says. She stays silent for a few seconds. ‘But you know in a way I am afraid that we (sustainable workers) stay twisting and turning in our own corners and that in the end we will never reach the larger audience. But the world is in desperate need that we do because otherwise it is too late. That is what I am at least trying to do with these sewing courses, reach a larger audience.’ As Tilly is telling her story, I am trying to hem the edges of the bag to prevent them from fraying. Tilly tells me to use the

zig-zag stitch, the one where the thread hops from one side to the other. As I am trying to use the technique, I feel like it corresponds to what Tilly is telling me: she is constantly balancing her hopes with what she fears. Hopping from one to the other, while trying to carve out a stable future.<sup>70</sup>



*Figure 1 - Upper: basic stitch. Lower: zig-zag stitch.<sup>71</sup>*

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<sup>70</sup> Field notes Tilly, 14.4.21

<sup>71</sup> Field notes sewing class, 14.4.21

## Chapter 4 - Imaginaries of the future

Jelte sits in front of me, she is a young woman in her twenties who started her sustainable textile business about a year earlier. We are sitting in her living room, it is filled with plants and out of the kitchen comes a smell of Asian food. The t-shirts that she makes for her sustainable fashion label scream 'progress'. She puts slogans on them that are meant as conversation starters such as: 'keep the earth wild' and 'feeling hot hot hot'. Not only the slogans, but the entire way that the shirts are made are in line with her goal: to make the fashion industry more sustainable. She uses all natural fibres, works with refugees who sew the shirts together, uses water-based colouring to prevent microplastics from ending up in the oceans and only customizes a shirt once the order has been placed. She does this to prevent wasting ink or having leftover t-shirts. 'I am constantly looking for that bit cleaner, a little more sustainable, but it is a learning process. And I am trying my best but when I think about the future, that makes me feel stressed,' she says. 'If we continue treating the earth like we do now, in 50 years a pandemic might be happening every five years. Especially with the melting ice caps, no-one knows what is in there, we might not be prepared for that. The future is really uncertain, but I think that nature could 'win' from us, humans. Winning sounds a bit weird but we will probably have much less control over our lives because it is becoming too much for our natural system. For example, if it starts raining a lot more here, our infrastructure won't be able to hold it because it is not made for that much rain. Flooded roads are in the news way more often already and you know that could be our future here. That makes me feel uneasy. So I am trying the best that I can to get the conversation started and to make my shirts as sustainable as possible.'<sup>72</sup>

As becomes clear from Jelte's story, ideas and imaginations about the future are at the core of sustainable practices and eco-anxiety. Jelte shows that she worries about the future on this planet because she thinks that we will possibly have 'much less control over our lives', and she also shows her desire to do something about that future through the textile products that she produces. This dualistic relationship with the future, in which Jelte tries to influence the future

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<sup>72</sup> Field notes Jelte, 12.3.21

that is influencing her in return, is shared by all the sustainable textile workers. They do the work that they do to have an impact on the future and some of them feel eco-anxiety because of fear of what might happen in the future. How does the future influence our lives? With his theory on the affective fact Massumi (2010) argues that possible future events can affect our wellbeing in the present moment. In the case of Jelte this becomes clear in how thinking about possible scenarios, such as flooded roads and recurring pandemics, are stressful for her. According to Massumi (2010), no real threat is necessary for us to experience panic or stress, just a sign is enough. This sign can influence our mental wellbeing and our ideas about the future (Massumi 2010). For Jelte, reading about melting ice-caps or excessive rain makes her think of a possible ominous future in which we ‘have much less control over our lives’.

For a long time, the future has been understudied in anthropology. There has been some focus on past-present relationships, but it was only in the beginning of the 2000’s that the future became a field in anthropological study. This happened in the aftermath of the financial crisis and the war on terrorism, since these crises left people unable to anticipate the future (Bryant & Knight 2019, 9). According to Bryant and Knight (2019), it is ingrained in us to think about the future. The future orients and structures our present through our imaginations and thoughts (Bryant & Knight 2019, 2). We are pulled towards the future on a daily basis and this happens through so-called orientations: ‘open ended teleologies that are concerned with the practices of everyday life’ (Bryant & Knight 2019, 201). Examples of these orientations are ‘hope, expectations, anticipation, speculation and acts of faith’ (Bryant & Knight 2019, 201). Focussing on these orientations allows us to better understand the relationship between our lives, our imaginations and the future. In addition, scholar such as Crapanzano (2003) and Appadurai (2013) argue that the imaginations that people have about the future have an effect on our everyday lives. Crapanzano (2003) introduces the ‘imaginative horizon’ to understand how the future influences our lives today. The ‘imaginative horizon’ can be understood as the ‘blurry boundaries that separate the here and now from what lies beyond’ and these imaginations impact how we experience and interpret our lives. Appadurai (2013, 285-286) goes as far to say that human beings are ‘future-makers’ and we can uncover that future by looking at their expectations, aspirations and the human imagination.

Several scholars have written about the relationship between imaginations and action (Khasnabish 2019; Taylor 2002; Bryant & Knight 2019). Taylor (2002) introduces the ‘social imaginary’ as helpful in understanding the role of the imagination in practices. According to him the social imaginary is ‘the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that

are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (Taylor 2002, 106-107). He states that the understanding, and thus imagination of something, makes the practice possible and at the same time it is the practice that carries our understanding of something. For instance, Jelte's imagination of an ominous future influenced her to start making sustainable textiles, while at the same time it is in the t-shirts that she makes in which one can find imaginations about how she understands the world. Khasnabish (2019, 1) talks about the radical imagination, which he considers the 'capacity to conceive the world as it might be otherwise'. It is this imagination that creates space and movement for social change. Bryant and Knight (2019) state that especially hope is a powerful orientation and imagination that can inspire activity and bring the not-yet into the present. According to them, hope encourages potentiality to be made a reality.

This chapter shows that the sustainable textile workers imagine the future through speculating what might happen and through being hopeful about what could happen in the future. Through a dialogue between the orientations 'speculation' and 'hope', the sustainable textile workers are inspired to become active and commit themselves to making the industry more sustainable. I start off by exploring the orientations 'speculation' and 'hope' in the first two sections. Then I move on to explaining how these imaginations inspire action.

## **Speculation**

After a long silence, Charlie lifted up her head and looked at me quite seriously: 'I honestly do not know if we are going to make it. I am 54, so in 50 years I will not be around anymore. But I do have a daughter, she is fifteen. In what world will she spend her future? That is a lot to take in.' She looked away from me, stumbling on her words. 'Do you know the film Wall-E? In that movie, a small group of people lives in a spaceship because the world is not habitable anymore. Every once in a while, they send Wall-E to the world to figure out if life on earth is possible again. I know it is a doomsday scenario, but if we continue on living like we do now, with governments and multinationals who do not take any responsibility, it might not be a weird scenario at all.'<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Focus group 1, 20.4.21



The age of speculation is truly upon us. From a period of relative stability, economic prosperity and political union, we have now entered a period with much more turbulence: a financial crisis, a health pandemic, a political turn to the right and a pressing climate crisis (see also Bryant & Knight 2019). This sparks discussion on how we understand our place in the future and in what direction we are heading. Knight (2016) calls this search for direction that people experience in times of crisis ‘temporal vertigo’. Central to ‘temporal vertigo’ is the question: if we are not going in a stable and predictable direction, then where are we headed? (Bryant & Knight 2019, 79). It is in this gap, where our expectations have been shattered and where there is a lack of historical anchors to trust upon, that we start to speculate. Bear et al. (2015, 387) argue that speculations are the ‘making present and materializing of uncertain futures’, meaning that speculations can give grip to our lives in the present. Speculations are ideas and thoughts about the not-yet and they change how we understand and perceive the future of our life on earth (Messerli 2016).

In the fragment above for example, Charlie speculates about what the future might be like. These speculations have been triggered by her knowledge of the environmental crisis, her eco-anxious feelings and the minimal available information that she can hold on to. She uses the example of a select group of people having to live on a spaceship to describe her speculation that the world is headed in a destructive direction. When Eva told me that she thinks that her grandkids will probably have a rough lifetime on this earth, she started to cry.<sup>74</sup> Her speculation about the future of her grandkids expressed that she thinks that in the future life on this planet will become difficult. This is shared by Olivia who also mentioned kids: ‘When I think about the future, I think about if I want to have kids. That is though question because I do not think that I will leave my kids in a good world. Do I want to have kids just to leave them in these gigantic ruins that we are creating? That is terrible!’<sup>75</sup> Tilly clearly speculated that the efforts to make the world more sustainable will not be effective or fast enough: ‘I am afraid that we (sustainable workers) stay twisting and turning in our own corners and that in the end we will never reach the larger audience. But the world is in desperate need that we do because otherwise it is too late.’<sup>76</sup>

Eva, Olivia, Tilly and Charlie’s idea of life on earth has changed: where they once thought that life on earth could continue endlessly and the generations to come would only live

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<sup>74</sup> Interview Eva, 19.3.21

<sup>75</sup> Interview Olivia, 11.3.21

<sup>76</sup> Field notes Tilly, 23.2.21

better lives<sup>77</sup>, their expectations have now been shattered. It leaves them looking for a new understanding of where human life on this planet is headed. Eva's tears and Charlie's uneasiness are not odd, Bryant & Knight (2019, 79) emphasize that speculation is built upon uncertainty and often goes together with feelings of dizziness, nauseousness and uneasiness.

The aforementioned speculations show that the sustainable textile workers experience discomfort with the future because they fear what might happen to the environment and what that means for human life. Bear et al. (2015, 387) have argued that speculations give grip to our lives in the present, because they help us understand our lives today in relation to what might be coming next. The speculations show that the sustainable textile workers prefer life in the present over the possible negative future. They adhere more value to how our lives are now than to what they think that they might become and they realise that our lives will probably change as we head forward. This lurking negative change sets in motion processes of mourning and eco-anxiety about what might be lost, and also increases pressure to work on creating sustainable solutions in the present. In the next section, I show how the orientation 'hope', as opposed to negative speculation, plays a role in the lives of the sustainable textile workers.

## Hope

People working in the sustainable textile industry do not only have negative speculations about the future, rather, for a lot of them, being hopeful and pessimistic about the future happens simultaneously. Their work in the sustainable textile industry is motivated out of a fear of what might happen to the world in the future, but also represents their effort and belief to make a change in this industry. Even though they have worries and imaginations of the world going into irreversible decay, they are also hopeful that things might change for the better. Bryant and Knight (2019, 134) argue that hope 'emerges in the gap between the potential and the actual' and it can encourage potentiality to be made a reality. A striking example of where hope worked as a catalyst for change are Martin Luther King's words: 'I have a dream that one day [...]'. Through his use of the words 'a dream that one day' he used 'hope' to give direction to action that would make the 'not-yet' a reality (Bryant & Knight 2019, 156).

Most of the people working in the sustainable textile industry express hopeful imaginations about the future. When Olivia heard Charlie speak about the world being a disaster like in the movie *Wall-E*, she nodded her head and said: 'There are days indeed when I think: I don't know, maybe we will only react once the damage has been done. But for my

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<sup>77</sup> Interview Eva, 19.3.21; Focus group 1, 20.4.21

own drive, I do believe that most people are good and are open to cooperate. I notice that awareness is growing and I imagine that it will grow even further in the upcoming years. I choose to trust in that. I rather trust the good guys than the bad guys.’<sup>78</sup> Olivia expressed that she needs hope in order to feel okay and to feel motivated. Hopeful imaginations of the sustainable textile workers are mostly focussed on education and raising awareness, it is in these areas that they see opportunities for a fertile future.

‘You know what I hope?’ Victoria said while we were walking our third round through the park. Rain was starting to fall from the sky so we started speeding up our pace. ‘I hope that we have an entire culture change, that we look at clothes differently. We must stop thinking “I want something nice for this particular party”, but rather think about the long-term effects. I hope that we buy less and learn skills so that we can repair and brighten up textiles.’<sup>79</sup>

Hopeful expressions from the people working in the sustainable textile industry are often about an increase in awareness among the larger audience. These hopeful ideas are similar to the process that they themselves went through when they learned about the fashion industry. In the quote above, Victoria argues that we should look at clothes differently, and think about long term effects. This corresponds with how the workers in the sustainable textile industry understand textile themselves: they value it for its transformative capacity and its ability to bring about effects (see also chapter two). Leah and I were sitting on a bench in a park in Utrecht when we were discussing the future. We had a coffee in our hands and looked out over the lake. Leah expressed that she hopes that there will be a ‘revaluation of textile’ and that for that revaluation to happen she hopes that the younger generations will pick up on it:

‘Start thinking about where textile is made! Question if what you read is true and how sure you are of this information. Do not just believe marketing stories but be critical. Use textiles that were created with care for the people that made them and with materials that are of high quality so that you can use them for a long period of time. We all know that clothing stores can give a 70% discount. It starts by

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<sup>78</sup> Focus group 1, 20.4.21

<sup>79</sup> Interview Victoria, 18.2.21

questioning these things and re-evaluating how we value our stuff!’<sup>80</sup>

Hoping for a shift in mindset is based on the belief that people can change and are open to learning. Several people, among which Kaylee and Irene are very positive about the role that education can have on people’s awareness: ‘It all starts with education, when we learn entire generations about the climate and how things are made, we can make a shift!’<sup>81</sup> Irene told me enthusiastically. Kaylee often participates in the guerrilla repairs of Extinction Rebellion, through making and mending clothes on the street she gets in touch with people who are curious about what she is doing. ‘I just try to let people know that we can do things differently. When you know more, I believe that you will not buy your clothes at Zara any longer. Because then you know that what you buy there will break quickly and is actually just plastic. You are literally wearing a plastic bag. That knowledge is important. You can always get informed, that creates perspective for change.’<sup>82</sup>

These hopeful imaginations show that the sustainable textile workers also trust in a fertile future, if we invest in education and raising awareness. This encourages them to feel okay and stay motivated in their work and it also gives direction to their actions. In the following paragraph I show how the dialogue between speculation and hope, inspires activity among the sustainable textile workers.

### **Inspiring activity**

Bryant & Knight (2019) point out that the human imagination can lay the groundwork for action. In the sections above, I explored the orientations ‘speculation’ and ‘hope’ among the people working in the sustainable textile industry. Bryant & Knight (2019) proposed that especially hope is a powerful orientation that can inspire activity and bring the not-yet into the present. However, I suggest that it is not just hope that inspires the sustainable textile workers to do the work that they do, rather it is the dialogue between hope and speculation, the tension between the possibility of a safe and fertile future and the unlikelihood of it. Most of the sustainable textile workers have expressed negative speculations about the future and also shown signs of hope. For example, in this situation with Tilly:

Tilly and I are standing in the middle of a mountain of clothes in the stockroom of

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<sup>80</sup> Interview Leah, 26.3.21

<sup>81</sup> Interview Irene, 24.3.21

<sup>82</sup> Interview Kaylee, 28.4.21

the thrift shop. I am organising different women's clothes into categories and Tilly is closing the boxes in which I put them. 'It really depends on my mood how I feel about the future. Look around, there are so many clothes here, you can literally see how much is brought in here every week, you can see that this is a huge problem. If we continue like this that is detrimental for our earth! But you know it also offers chances: a chance for entrepreneurs to do something with it, a chance to become creative, a chance to exist as a sustainable developer. Most of the time I feel hopeful and inspired by this. I get excited that we can do something about this problem, fixing a problem can be fun. And other times, it feels overwhelming. Then I realise that there are so many people that do not think about these things and own like eight bikinis and at those moments I just feel a little bit lost. And my answer to those feelings that I just start to do something, doesn't matter how small.'<sup>83</sup>

Tilly shows how she feels a tension between her hopeful ideas about the future and negative speculations. It is this tension that inspires her to do the work that she does: working at the thrift shop, teaching people how to sew and telling people about the impact of the textile industry. All the sustainable textile workers are hopeful enough about the future to not become paralyzed, yet aware of its urgency and need for change to get active. This results in their attempts to change the industry through their actions: raising awareness and educating others, using technology to develop new kinds of textile, starting a sustainable fashion brand and making and mending clothes.

Speculation and hope are thus both essential imaginations to inspire activity among the sustainable textile workers. Speculating the worst, like having to live on a different planet, invites them to see possibilities to change that scenario, for example through educating others. These possibilities make them feel hopeful. Subsequently, they invest their energy into activities that try to actualise their hopeful imaginations as opposed to the speculative imaginations that they fear. It is in this way that their imaginations of the future also help the sustainable textile workers to structure their present, because they give shape to their actions by relating them to their imaginations of the future.

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<sup>83</sup> Field notes Tilly, 23.2.21

## **Concluding remarks**

This chapter started by showing that the sustainable textile workers experience a dualistic relationship with the future. Through their imaginations and eco-anxious feelings, they are influenced by the future and through their actions they try to influence the future in return. Bryant & Knight (2019) have argued that we are constantly pulled towards the future, imaginations of the future orient and structure our present and can also inspire activity. Building on their concept of orientations, this chapter has shown that the sustainable textile workers engage with the future through negative speculations and hopeful imaginations. Negative speculations are related to feelings of eco-anxiety and mostly concern the lives of future generations and the possible uninhabitability of the planet. Hopeful tendencies are focussed on the human ability to become more aware of the impact of the textile industry. Through education they hope that people will start to value textile the same way that they do. In the literature on imaginations, ‘hope’ is regarded as more powerful than ‘negative orientations’ in inspiring activity (Bryant & Knight 2019). However, in the lives of the sustainable textile workers, it is not despite the negative speculations about the future, but because of it that they get active and take part in sustainable practices. Through a dialogue between hopeful imaginations and negative speculations, they get active and engage in sustainable textile practices. It is in this way that their imaginations of the future give structure to their lives in the present.

## Conclusion

Due to anthropogenic meddling with the environment, life on earth is changing. It is uncertain whether human life, as we know it, will be able to continue on this planet (Tsing 2015). In order to protect the future of life on earth, there is a high urgency that the most polluting industries, such as the textile industry (Niinimäki et al. 2020) make a change. Sustainable textile workers invest their energy into sustainable textile practices to make this change happen. Through a triangulation of ethnographic methods, this thesis has traced sustainable textile in order to explore the processes of valuing textile, eco-anxiety and imaginaries of the future that underpin these sustainable textile practices. Doing so, the research has aimed to answer the following research question:

*How do people working in the sustainable textile industry in The Netherlands value textiles, experience eco-anxiety and imagine the future as they engage in making the textile industry more sustainable?*

Through tracing sustainable textiles, this research gained insight into the dynamics of these processes and has shown that they are, in certain places, interwoven and entangled with each other. The three processes have been unpacked and presented as ‘threads of life’ that are part of a larger open-ended assemblage.

The first ethnographic chapter illustrated that the sustainable textile workers attach value to textile through investing their energy in working with textiles (Graeber 2001). These values differ depending on their social and personal context, which makes that textile shifts in value. The ethnographic data has shown that in the social context of high levels of consumerism and waste, and their personal context of experiencing eco-anxiety and having negative imaginations about the future, textile is valued for its transformative character and its ability to bring about effects. Furthermore, the chapter highlighted that how the sustainable textile workers believe that textile should be valued is not in line with how it is often valued in society, namely based on monetary price. This difference in value makes that the sustainable textile workers experience a tension which has been laid out by the use of Graeber’s (2018) ‘value versus values’. This tension fosters eco-anxious responses, such as frustration, which has been shown in the second ethnographic chapter. Through their work, the sustainable textile workers aim to put the focus back on the values that they believe textile should be appreciated for.

The second ethnographic chapter has contributed to much needed knowledge about the dynamics of eco-anxiety (Pihkala 2020) by analysing feelings of doom and stress about the state of the environment. Using the concept of affect, it has displayed how eco-anxiety manifests itself, is experienced and is dealt with. The chapter has shown that the sustainable textile workers form affective relationships with a trigger, such as plastic in the supermarket. This research has argued that these relationships are not only given in by a trigger but are also guided by their values and their knowledge about the state of the environment. This knowledge is in turn related to ideas about what might happen in the future. These affective relationships express themselves in different experiences of eco-anxiety: feelings of powerlessness, worry, sadness, frustration and inner conflict. These feelings are examples of the psychological struggles that eco-anxiety can induce. To deal with these feelings, the sustainable textile workers invest their energy into developing and working with sustainable textiles and therefore affect their surroundings in return. This is done as way to soothe themselves and to try to have a positive impact on the future. Eco-anxiety can thus also serve as an incentive for working in the sustainable textile industry.

The last ethnographic chapter has shown that the sustainable textile workers experience a dualistic relationship with the future: they try to influence the future while simultaneously being influenced by the future through their imaginations and eco-anxious feelings. The imaginations of the sustainable textile workers have been laid out using the concept of 'orientations' by Bryant and Knight (2019). This research has shown that the sustainable textile workers have negative speculations and hopeful imaginations about the time ahead. The negative speculations are focused on the uninhabitability of the planet and the possible rough lives for future generations and are also given in by eco-anxiety. They express hope when thinking about raising awareness and education about the textile industry. Bryant and Knight (2019) say that hope as an orientation is the most powerful in guiding action for change. However, as this thesis has shown, it is not so much hope in itself, but the dialogue between negative speculations and the hopeful imaginations that sparks activity in the sustainable textile workers. Through the tension between the possibility of a safe and fertile future and the unlikelihood of it, the sustainable textile workers get active and structure their present.

Lastly, laying out the dynamics of these three processes, I have shown that the processes that underpin working in the sustainable textile industry constantly inform and overlap each other. Just how cloth exists out of an interwovenness of thread, working in the sustainable textile industry is underpinned by interwoven and entangled processes of value, eco-anxiety and imaginaries of the future. This matches Ingold's notion on entanglements, who argued that



everything is made up out of interwoven lines of growth and movement, flows and fluxes (Ingold 2008) or ‘threads of life’. In this case, how the sustainable textile workers value textile is, among others, informed by eco-anxiety and their ideas about the future. Eco-anxiety is in turn given in by their values, knowledge about the state of the environment and imaginations of the future that are related to that knowledge. Lastly, imaginations of the future are given in by eco-anxiety and also influence eco-anxiety in return. It is the relatedness and entanglements between these different processes, or ‘threads of life’, that gives shape to the sustainable textile practices that the sustainable textile workers engage in. Therefore, sustainable textiles are not just made up out of material but come to exist because of the entangled ‘pathways of life’ of its makers.

### *On a final note*

Reflecting on this research, this thesis has broadened the academic knowledge on the subjects of value, eco-anxiety and imaginaries of the future. But mostly it has attempted to show that the three processes and their debates are inherently connected to each other. This has put a step in the direction of understanding what underpins action for sustainable change, which is highly relevant because of the need for sustainable change in the unprecedented times in which we now live. Understanding the lives of the people who work on sustainable change in the textile industry and the entangled processes that are the root of their actions, allows us to understand what is needed and necessary to motivate action for a sustainable future.

This thesis has tried to paint an accurate picture of the lives of the sustainable textile workers, however there are some limitations to the research. The COVID-19 pandemic and the limited time for fieldwork, have obstructed a lot of opportunities for participant observation. This forced my research to be mostly based on interviews and thus has only partially given me the opportunity to get to know the tacit parts of the life experience of the sustainable textile workers. Also, it has limited the opportunities to see how feelings and ideas are formed in interaction with others (O’Reilly 2012, 135). I have tried to compensate this by organising focus groups.

Also, I have argued that the different threads of life are part of an open-ended assemblage, which means that the three processes that have been laid out in this thesis are not covering all the processes that underpin sustainable textile practices. The scope of this thesis forced me to skip certain ‘threads of life’ such as human-nature relationships. To create a more complete image of the sustainable textile workers, I would recommend to delve into other ‘threads of life’, such as the relationship between human and nature, that influence working in

the sustainable textile industry. Next to that, based on the fast growth of people who experience eco-anxiety (Usher 2019), I recommend to broaden the knowledge on eco-anxiety by using the concept of affect in a different social setting.

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