

JOIN: A Collective Overhaul

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JOIN workshop at Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, NL (2022). JOIN pieces made by: Dorka Morvai and Emmanuelle Martinez. Photography by Anouk Beckers.

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Introduction

JOIN Collective Clothes, started by Anouk Beckers in late 2018, is a modular system for people across the world to make clothes together.¹ With a simple set of patterns and instructions, and with the occasional aid of workshops, anyone can take part. The *JOIN* pattern pieces are essentially the lowest denominators of what makes up a garment, such as a sleeve, a back and a front to make a top. As a *JOIN* participant you transform these patterns into flat pieces of textile that can be tied to other pieces, made by friends and strangers, to produce wearable garments.



JOIN workshop at de Appel, Amsterdam, NL (2019). Photography by Anouk Beckers.

Beyond its simple concept, *JOIN* brings a radical suggestion for an overhaul of the fashion industry's supply and demand systems. The production processes of clothes today are so opaque that even most designers at a typical large fashion corporation do not know who manufactures the garments they design. Under supply chain capitalism, a distanced and fragmented manufacturing structure has developed. Anna Tsing characterizes 'supply chain capitalism', by the use of independent contractors who accept low wages, instead of wage laborers that have rights, can unionize and hold employers accountable. Such additional subcontractors and a geographical distance between designers and manufacturers keep alienation an integral part of the current system of supply and demand.² In direct opposition to this, the fashion

initiative *JOIN* collapses the apparatuses of manufacture and consumption, of supply and demand. Instead of outsourcing and subcontracting it is structured as a collaboration with its participants: a hybrid producer-consumer model emerges that expands the idea of what, who and how a fashion practice is; it addresses what happens if we open up the fashion system for everyone to join in and produce fashion together.³ Questions of utopian world-building are not far away: How should we live, produce, consume in a best possible way in the futures, starting now?

Exploring *JOIN* as a suggestion for system change, in this text I frame it as an upside-down production model that replaces speed and profit with qualities like connection and transparency. To do this I patch together references, mirroring *JOIN*'s own exquisite-corpse-like model of production based on assembling and collaboration: through a *Vogue* article about slow fashion (which I believe is too "inefficient" as sabotage strategy) and with a look at the hobby approach as alternative production model; by way of gift economy and sharing. In addition, I sidestep to the Radical Architecture movement to finally explain *JOIN* as alternative fashion system model, upside-down-inside-out.

How slow can you go? Inefficiency as tool to end accelerated now-ness

In *British Vogue* (online, March 2020) Harriet Quick asks "How does fashion, the poster child of guilt free consumption and built-in obsolescence, move forward in 2020?"⁴ In the article she looks at how creatives respond to the climate crisis and find that "to connect to our yearning for slowness and tranquillity in a hyper functioning world, (they) move their practice towards sustainability." Quick says "we are all taking stock of what drives fashion and desire today" as part of the "slo-mo movement, the anti-hype trend." Quick ironically seizes the moment to build desire for more "long-lasting" fashion items, leaving me to conclude that I should discard the old, "so-so items from earlier seasons" and start again now with new, better, more long-lasting clothes. I mean now... wait, no, now! *Vogue*'s answer to the question of how to move forward with fashion today, is for designers to present 'anti statement looks' with silhouettes that are more perennial and less disposable and items that look less like "useless stuff." Quick says "grand architects of 21st-century fashion are calling for a breather." In fashion talk: slowing down is having a moment.

Although material composition, design, and the production of the singular products is not unimportant in regards to sustainability, the design of the fashion industry as a system is in fact more urgent. To commence such an overwhelming job, it could be helpful to look at a few elements at a time, such as those suggested in the *Vogue* article, like speed and volume of output.

Unhurried, relaxed, unrushed, drawn-out – or even uneventful, sedate, slack, dull, and sluggish? Let's talk about slowness. If we want to meaningfully decrease the speed in the fashion industry, how do we start? I would like to elaborate on the idea of operationalized inefficiency, and qualities that I believe are related to it, such as incapability and amateurism. In the 19th century, as a response to the implementation of mechanized jacquard looms in a rapidly changing textile industry, weavers in France threw their slippers (sabots) into the looms rendering them temporarily useless. This protest, against workers being replaced by superiorly efficient machines, lead to the word sabotage.⁵ Damaging or destroying machines/tools can be seen as a powerful act of resistance as it is a way to make production impossible, incapable, and inefficient. During the second World War, the American Office

of Strategic Services, the forerunner of CIA, published a sabotage manual with tips for workers in occupied Europe to stealthily resist their Nazi occupiers.⁶ Aside from more evident sabotage actions, like starting fires or cutting phone lines, workers were told to work slowly, find ways to increase the number of physical movements and actions needed to do their job – some kind of reversed Taylorism.⁷

In short, inefficiency and incapability can become powerful tools of sabotage, of resistance, and change. To work slow is not just the result of a lack of training.⁸ And doesn't *JOIN* in some way tap into this? Slowness is brought about by *JOIN*'s activation of a network of people sewing from home, substituting the fashion industry's professional supply chain with hobbyists. Because of *JOIN*'s decision to open up to a variety of fashion makers, including 'amateur' or non-experienced makers, the job gets done, now slower than ever! *JOIN* subtracts from a current standard of over-efficiency by adding other actors and sites to the production line of fashion: at-home novices, finding pleasure in their tasks, like voluntary devotion to a process that references half-way products found in hobby shops.



JOIN workshop with modedoen, Amsterdam, NL (2019). Photography by Anouk Beckers.

Hobby-fied production models

The term 'hobby' is not often found in the toolbox of radical resistance and sabotage and there is no reason to think that the multibillion-dollar industry that sells hobby gear and materials is a poster child for sustainability. Historians have even criticized the phenomenon of hobbies as a capitalist

reproduction of work at home and as a way to pacify workers on their spare time.⁹ Keeping in mind that it is a highly commodified and commodifying business, with its templates and kit-systems: they sell what are essentially unfinished, un-made half-way products at higher sums than an equivalent final product is sold for in the next shop down the street. Hobby enthusiasts willingly pay more for doing the work themselves, than what it takes for a professional to do it. And herein lies a potential: the main product of the hobby industry is not the final result, but the process of learning and getting one's hands dirty. You could say the hobby twists the producer-consumer relation, and that *JOIN*'s model puts it upside down, inside out altogether.

To understand the potential of *JOIN*, we need to start using a new vocabulary and ditch the dichotomies. No more customer here and sales reps there, no more consumer, no more producer. Perhaps we can understand *JOIN* as a shared experiment of dependency and reciprocity, akin to gift economy theories, as developed by anthropologists in the early 20th century.

Sharing, gift economy and dependency

In a gift economy, the objects are never completely separated from the people who exchange them. While commodity exchange is a price forming process, gift exchange is described as an alternative system that revolves around giving and returning of gifts. Instead of relationships between objects, this establishes a relationship between the subjects involved.¹⁰ Anthropologist Anna Tsing describes capitalist commodities as disengaged from their makers and at the mercy of market transactions.¹¹ Gifts in contrast, are akin to persons: they bring something personal with them, drawing the receiver into a social field, serving as a continual reminder of the need for reciprocation. Thinking with Tsing, *JOIN* pieces cannot be read as commodities; as capitalist goods. After a participant finishes a *JOIN* piece, they hand it over to Anouk. The pieces have been made, gathered, and archived, but not for the market. They do bring something personal – parts of the maker – with them wherever they end up, and in this way extend social relations beyond a transaction.

Whether you choose to see *JOIN* as a gift economy or a sharing platform, it opens a broader practice of connecting production and consumption, consumption-as-production, and vice versa. By granting access to patterns and activities normally held within a brand headquarters, *JOIN* builds a community on reciprocity and social obligation that manifests in the archived contributions from its members, as well as an immaterial bond and sense of belonging that emerges through embodied experience of making clothing partially, together with others.

As described in gift theory, the Maori term *hau* describes how embedded in the gift there is a spirit that demands its return to the giver.¹² *JOIN* pieces seem to be under the influence of such a spirit. Like a gravitational field, the archive of collected *JOIN* pieces in Amsterdam seems to pull on the decentralized garment limbs as they are produced across various locations in the world. The pieces seem to have a will of joining others like them, to be part of a bigger whole. The *JOIN*-er in this power field is not a consumer, but a producer that sends off their product for the sake of belonging through reciprocity. The autonomous individual creation in *JOIN* is of use only when operating as nodes in a mesh, pointing out the inherent dependency to experience as a *JOIN* participant. Although it is possible to make a whole *JOIN* outfit on your own, there is an overall collaborative, non-committal, fun, and dependent approach in effect.



JOIN workshop at ArtEZ MA Critical Fashion Practices, Arnhem, NL (2021).
Photography by Anouk Beckers.

Are idealism and pragmatism binary?

JOIN operates in a time where we, in the Western Global North, encounter few political strikes at textile and fashion factories. As I am writing this from Northern Europe, issues like pollution and workers' rights are, due to outsourcing to geographically distant places, invisible to me. Despite this, they certainly still exist. I believe that where factory workers and local citizen's voices are unable to bridge geographical distances, alternative fashion practices can.

Historical examples, like the Radical Architects movement in Italy in the 1960-70s, show how designers can work in unexpected ways. Refusing to create 'beautiful' and 'practical' objects and instead, in line with the 'slowdown' approach, "exorcize indifference," the Radical Architects created rather impractical, cumbersome objects and furniture that are impossible to ignore, as a powerful mode of protest.¹³ These architects formed collectives that proposed impossible building structures, made impractical furniture, engaged in philosophy, performance and art: all to reject becoming complicit in a capitalist building industry, insisting all the while that they maintain their professional titles as architects.

JOIN similarly refuses the creation of 'beautiful' and 'practical' objects. Its contribution today is critique manifested as craft in a time where bastions of the fashion industry like *Vogue* do not follow their own trend reports that calls for change and disruption, and instead simply *perform* doing so.

One might criticize Radical Architects, or even *JOIN*, by asking what revolutionary design programs could have been created if they had only been willing to channel their subversive energies into making practical solutions to everyday problems.¹⁴ But one might instead cherish their perseverance as outsiders, and value their positions as deeply critical and caring contributions to their fields without compromising with capitalist ideology and pragmatism.

Since the age of Radical Architects, the neoliberal ideal of personhood as individual and independent has developed and entrenched in our society. Although *JOIN* focuses on the collective, it also incorporates a logic of individuality in that participants are invited to design as if they were islands, so to speak. When making garment pieces that are individual and seemingly independent, participants are not to concern themselves with aligning with the pieces made by others, or consider an overall design of a whole, joined garment, and let alone a collection. But when *JOIN* gathers and attaches these individual contributions to create a whole, it shows us that nothing is ever made in disconnection after all. We experience that we are not alone, but joyfully dependent on others.

Where individual independence has increasingly been the ideal under neoliberalist capitalism of the Global North, dependency in other places and cultures is perceived as enmeshed with a sense of belonging and reciprocity of other economic systems and traditions, such as gift economies. That dependency is not a hindrance for a sense of individual freedom of expression, but perhaps instead opens up another form of freedom through relational personhood,¹⁵ which can be experienced first-hand through participating in the *JOIN* collective work.



JOIN workshop at Museum Arnhem - De Kerk, Arnhem, NL (2019). Photography by Valerie Spanjers.

Upside down you turn me

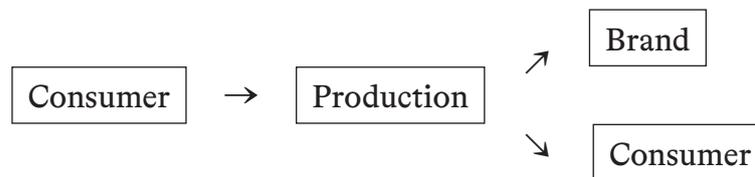
JOIN taps into the hobby world by engaging production at home, activating decentralized and unskilled labour. *JOIN* participants are not like regular customers who buy a product for use: they are participants in a collective learning and making experience. They could perhaps better be described as unpaid, decentralized production units, voluntarily making and sending off the result of their efforts to a central and shared *JOIN* archive.

The existing model for chain of supply and demand



In the existing model for supply and demand chain, the brand sends their designs to production, and they are then distributed on to the consumers, where they are put to use.

JOIN Collective new model for chain of supply and demand



In Join Collective’s version of the supply and demand chain, the consumer is the first stop. They produce garment pieces that either end up with JOIN collective and go on to be united with other participants’ pieces, or they are kept and put to use at the place they were produced.

JOIN disturbs the regular dramaturgy of the fashion production-to-distribution model, and suddenly it works back to front, upside down. Here, we have at-home decentralized production by the people who would be the target segment for the design garments that *JOIN* stands for. These are most likely not people who would take a job in a regular factory, but act like islands in the archipelago of creatives and novices.

In a regular supply- and demand-chain, the final stage is the consumer using the garment. The final stage in the *JOIN* system often involves the garment parts gathered at the ‘brand headquarters’ forming a dynamic archive. Although the *JOIN* instructions do not ask participants (consumer-turned-producers) to donate their self-produced *JOIN* garment-parts, there is a substantial amount of those who send them in spontaneously. Based on the inherent logic of the singular garment parts is the need for it to meet the other parts to form full garments. Sending off a piece to this archive might achieve a higher level of participation and belonging for the participants.

JOIN is related to a tradition of art and design activism that aims for human and material sustainability and harmony. Such initiatives often stem from and thrive on the fringes of the fashion world, and risk losing their power once absorbed by the larger system. There are limitations to the efficiency of this outsider position, but there are also potentials, such as

purity of concept over pragmatism. *JOIN*'s collaborative model presents a radical alternative for sartorial accumulation, in a time where the mainstream fashion industry has turned the idea of change into an ever-emptier lingo. Companies claim disruption and seasonal newness, but the current, dominant fashion production-and-distribution model is the same as before. The industry buys and sells clothing commodities within a market that separates the items from their makers and maintains value based on abstract rates of exchange, instead of the true cost.

In order to keep the status quo, the fashion industry performs change instead of enacting it. Innovation beyond the seasonal styles and stories though would be uncomfortable, as this would require a shift in the basic logic of production, distribution, marketing, and communication. In turn, this would affect economic mechanisms, and demand adjustments throughout the multiple levels that make up the fashion establishment.



JOIN Collective Livestream Walk, Kalverstraat, Amsterdam, NL (2020). JOIN pieces made by: Charlie Winkel, Daniël, Denise Bernts, Hanna van der Meer, Morta Jonynaitė and Vanessa Duque. Photography by Anouk Beekers.

Conclusion

There is a need for actual change in fashion that we are more likely to find in alternative systems, instead of new products and taglines. The fashion industry cannot patch itself up with a couple of seasons of, so to say, 'slowness'. History also tells us that any revolt against the fashion system as we know it, is gobbled up and integrated, rather like fuel. But might a model like *JOIN* be impractical enough to be inedible for the voracious

fashion industry, while at the same time powerful enough to remain a lasting alternative to think and act outside of the regular fashion marketplace?

JOIN's system is akin to gift economy and sharing practices instead of industrial capitalist production, which provides an alternative model for the system of distribution and manufacturing in the contemporary fashion industry. Instead of targeting *JOIN* for a certain lack of realism, its exploration of industrial practices with idealistic and radical suggestions has a huge potential when we look for answers to the question *Vogue* posed: "How does fashion, the poster child of guilt free consumption and built-in obsolescence, move forward in 2020?"

JOIN does two things simultaneously and importantly: it enables connection; and suggests an overhaul of the accustomed supply and demand system. It shows how 'inefficiency' of 'amateur' making can be productive in new ways. Far from the trend-forecasted and sales-efficient design methods, *JOIN* serves something messy, shaped by the indeterminacy of an indefinite number of makers, all dependent on each other.

How should critique be practiced to achieve the most impact? Critiquing from within is one way, but there is a fruitful outsider position that *JOIN* holds which offers an ability to speculate and uncompromisingly play outside of the marketplace. In a scenario where *JOIN* would be taken into the mainstream commercial fashion marketplace, practical issues such as payment structures, copyright issues, and compensation agreements would arise. Although these essential capitalist elements are already negated in the credo of *JOIN*, staying with the trouble of imagining *JOIN* entering the mainstream, opens alternative potentialities for a reinvention of the fashion system, which is clearly ripe for an overhaul.

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Taylorism derives from Frederick Taylor (1856-1915), a steel engineer who developed what was at the time called Scientific Management, proclaiming efficiency above all, even on the cost of human dignity and happiness. Known for his time-and-motions studies, he applied scientific methods to control labor, starting from a purely capitalist centered point of view, with disregard for the worker and the aim to extract as much labor as humanly possible.

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