

Toxic Waste on Your Back



Caption

This image is a photograph of a women's black puffer jacket from the online retailer Everlane in the plastic bag in which it was shipped. The viewer is immediately confronted with text printed on the polybag that reads "This is a poly bag. Almost every manufactured good that ships from a factory comes in one. This one is made from recycled plastic. Please recycle it again." Within the polybag, the Everlane jacket itself is advertised to have been produced from 15 "renewed" (recycled) plastic bottles. This image at once comments on the potential of transforming industrial or post-consumer waste (especially waste that is not biodegradable) into objects of beauty or utility while also demonstrating (paradoxically) continual use and implications of virgin plastic even by supposedly sustainability-oriented fashion providers. Ethnographically, the image points to the paradoxes and double-speak in the fashion arena that I study. It also plays with multiple, contradictory meanings of transparency, especially in sustainability initiatives. Here, the transparency of the plastic delivery bag mimes the promise of transparency by the company and in sustainability initiatives more generally -- though what the transparency reveals is not what was promised (sustainable practices).

Design Statement

This image conveys how people in the domain I study are themselves representing their (best) practices, in process exposing double-speak. It also works figuratively, pointing to the contradictory ways "transparency" works as a core category in sustainability-promising enterprises.

Project Statement

As an anthropologist focused on sustainable fashion, my research is broadly focused on the study of language and materiality through the intersection of design, economics, and law. In an industry that relies on transnational production processes, visualization is a key strategy used by advocates to document the social and environmental impacts of (fast) fashion. However, it is also an increasingly important tool by which self-declared "conscious" companies distinguish their work. To this end, I am drawn to the paradoxical role of visualization as a key means by which the challenges (and progress) in establishing a more sustainable fashion industry are made transparent. In this essay I include images from branding campaigns of fashion companies that comment on the sustainability of their work in juxtaposition with my own photographs of garments that challenge how we think about the permeation of toxicity in fashion. My goal is to query why visualization is privileged as the medium by which sustainability is made transparent.



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