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THE TEXTURES OF TOUCH: A STUDY OF A SENSORY JOURNEY INTO CREATIVITY, FASHION, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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The article enquires into the entrepreneurial, creative, and more broadly semiological practices that underwrite the work of a 'critical fashion' producer in contemporary Slovenia. The detailed ethnography describes the entrepreneurial ambitions, values, and presumed virtues of a couturier, exploring how she conducts her life and business as an expression, in some form, of her sensory and tactile experiences. Nati, an activist for and promoter of 'responsible', 'conscious', and sustainable fashion, understands her work as sensitising her clients (and industry) to the dangers of (over)consumption. The study's analysis reflects on what happens when an artistic and commercial producer sensorially addresses her customers in ecologically uncertain and socially distanced times.

A central claim of the article is that an anthropological analysis of a set of business ethics and creative practices may become more textured and productive when an ethnographer refrains from immediate judgments of their authenticity or provenance. Instead, an analytic focus on how ethical and creative claims emerge and grow together and how they are spoken of, lived, and felt, may reveal more about a human situation. This gives us a chance to think about how sensory modes of address – when used by interlocutors and among anthropologists – enable (and disable) practices and experiences of mutuality and proximity in life, both in the field, and in analysing ethnographic material.

Keywords: *sensory mode of address, tactile experiences, relations through touch, ethnographic description, sustainable and green fashion, entrepreneurial and creative values, Slovenia*

Krakovo is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Ljubljana. Although it is located only a few hundred metres away from the centre of Slovenia's capital, its atmosphere is oddly low-key. Green trees run along the Gradaščica river, together with two-storey cottages, communal outdoor tables, and the allotment gardens known as *Krakovski vrtovi,* examples of urban agriculture that date back to the Middle Ages.[1] Most of the fieldwork for this research was conducted in an atelier attached to one of those peaceful Krakovo backyards and in the garden itself. The studio and garden belong to Nati, a woman in her mid-forties, founder of a Slovenian circular fashion brand.

I first met Nati in the late autumn of 2017. My research at the time engaged in themes of social entrepreneurship and creativity in southeast Europe (written up, for example, in Petrović-Šteger 2018, 2020). I mainly worked in Serbia, where I was tracing people and collectives publicly recognised as innovative in their rethinking of social, cultural, and environmental issues. But I was also interested in Slovenian makers, creators and thinkers who expressed hope, either individually or collectively, and who oriented themselves toward the future. The main research question was how to account for people wanting to summon the future – to mediate it, not in a technologically enhanced way, but through the implications of their actions and practice. During that time, I learned about a Slovenian fashion and interior designer who creates distinctive garments and installations, and is known as a fierce critic of over-consumption.[2]

Nati and I have been intensely and continuously in contact since. Over the past four years, I have met a number of her co-workers and customers, family and friends. I have observed her in her atelier, where she meets existing and potential clients and collaborators. I have spent time with some of Nati's recurring customers, as well as with those who have merely tried on some of her pieces. Mis-en-scèning some of our conversations and correspondence, and describing situations I have observed or participated in, this article is concerned in analysing a couturier's meaning-, creative-, and business-making practices in the broader context of Slovenian fashion and entrepreneurial culture. The detailed ethnography, illuminating Nati's tactile modes of work and address, frames a theoretical reading of what she hopes to achieve in dressing people and places. The work comprises, in effect, an analytical account of a set of claims and stances about entrepreneurial decisions and life ethics set out by my main interlocutor as responsible, conscious, and virtuous.

The way an anthropologist arranges and presents fieldwork material implies

[1] The inhabitants of Krakovo used to make a living with gardening and fishing. Even today many supply Ljubljana's central market with fresh vegetables. In 1986, the complex of allotment gardens was protected as cultural heritage.

[2] This research took place in parallel to my other research interests and fieldwork on imagination, anthropology of mind, future, and rivers in Serbia.

particular analytical and expository decisions about the relations (between people, concepts, places, etc.) she chooses to bring into focus. After all, the language of ethnography is the language of exposition (Strathern 2004, 2020). The material evoked in this piece is described in such a way as to seek to draw readers into not only a cognitive but also a sensory mode of understanding. The article is conceived so as to evoke, in heightened form, the sensory presence with which Nati operates in her life and business. Readers are invited to step closer, as it were, to her currents of thought, interpretations, and expectations of what is and should be involved in 'responsible' and 'circular' living, dressing, and working. At the start of this exposition, Nati and her work are presented through her own entrepreneurial self-presentation as a dressmaker and a seller. Later, the account exposes her more intimate life experiences, gesturing towards some of the possible reasons she might choose, combine, or refuse particular creative and entrepreneurial practices. My ethnographic description and analysis are deliberately cast in a narrative mode, in their conventions, pacing, and resistance to (too quickly) buttressing the presentation with the scaffolding of a scholarly apparatus. Moreover, the article withholds immediate critical contextualisation, bracketing judgement of the authenticity of the eco-fashion values my interlocutor identifies with. This is intentional. My aim is not to determine the truth of my interlocutor's speech, convictions, and sensibility, so much as to grasp the dynamics that have allowed these convictions and this sensibility to form. Some anthropological contextualization and analytical relations, then, should be sought in the study's footnotes, which, along with the text in the main body, form an equal part of the analysis.

Although the exchange of ideas will not always be made explicit, the article is in dialogue with, and can be read in the context of, evocative anthropology (Tsing 2005; Stoller 2005, 2008), anthropological work on the senses, and a growing body of sensory anthropology (see Taussig 1993; Howes 2004, 2005; Pink 2009; Porcello et al. 2010; Ingold 2011; Spencer 2014; Hillewaert 2016). On the whole, the aim of this body of critical literature is to articulate and conceptualize what is only felt and sensed. It engages, in divergent and sometimes even mutually exclusive ways, with the significance of often overlooked or unarticulated senses, affects, and perceptions as embodied forms of knowing, with the aim of offering another frame for examination of subjective and intersubjective states (see Skoggard and Waterston 2015). As Sarah Pink points out, sensory anthropology should be understood less as a sub-discipline exclusively concerned with the subject-matter of 'the senses', and more as a comprehensively 're-thought' anthropology informed by interdisciplinary theories of perception and experience (Pink and Howes 2010). Even so, it is important to note that my decision to follow the lead of the senses while writing up this study's ethnography emerged from my observations of Nati's ways of being and working, and

not from a desire to rehearse the arguments of sensory anthropology. Theoretically, the article contributes to anthropological work that examines the social, psychological, communicative, and identity needs satisfied by dress and bodily adornment (see Turner 2012 [1980]) by looking at contemporary sustainable and green fashion, in particular *atelier* dresses, through the lens of a designer-maker practice. It investigates the implications of sensory and haptic modes of address – as used both by an interlocutor and an observer – in forging (or disabling) proximity, mutuality, and sustainable relationships in business, life, and in the field. The analysis equally hopes to enter other anthropological conversations concerning practices that invoke mutuality and proximity as social values.

'LONGEVITY IS A GAMECHANGER'

One of the things that struck me most when I met Nati was how she expressed herself, and especially how she addressed me. Most of the entrepreneurs I had worked with previously were somewhat formal in their introductions. They would, at least in the beginning, describe their job following linguistic etiquette and speaking in business jargon. Nati, meanwhile, though cordial and professional, made ready with words like "kneading", "sculpting", and "interweaving" as early as our first email exchange. In hindsight, I think she used these words to allude to the form she anticipated, even hoped, our exchange would take. When I met her in person, the combination of her gentle demeanour, almost hesitant walk, and her clearly punctuated, authoritative voice intrigued me further.

I thought I was meeting a successful fashion designer and businesswoman. But Nati made clear from the outset that she understands herself not as a designer, but as "an intuitive storyteller who uses clothing as a platform for communication". The clothes, she claimed, are only one of many channels through which people express themselves, through which they circulate as human beings. "I am interested in the full circle of sensory experience. In creating a full sensory experience," she said. Her creations, she insists, centrally aim to convey that over-consumption as a way of living, and of producing clothes, has severe consequences: "My brand is all about provoking people into thinking about how they could make their relationship to their bodies, and their clothes, more rounded, ethical, and sustainable... Fast fashion and constant consumerism are corrosive. They are corrosive both to the global environment and to an individual's sense of themselves. The waste that the fashion industry produces is enormous. As creators and customers, we need to rethink our relationship to what we make and wear." She further explained: "Regardless of whether they have financial means or not, many relate

to clothes only through their functionality. Others are compulsively caught up in a cycle of buying new pieces and throwing away their old stuff. But most people simply don't care, they take clothes for granted... they don't *feel* what they wear... Yet clothes are, or could be, something altogether different. They could be a means through which one could develop a conscious relationship with oneself. Through which one could sense one's environment and become acutely aware of it."

Describing her work, Nati refers repeatedly to "ethical" and "eco" fashion, terms widely regarded as part of a set of responses to the fashion and textile industries' notorious exploitation of natural resources, animals, plants, and human labour. "Now, I am perfectly aware that the concepts of eco- and green-fashion have become super-voguish and are sort of their own marketing nowadays. But I am truly committed to the values of conscious and considerate clothing. I have been doing serious research for a while now, thinking long and hard about how to translate these aspirations towards sustainability into real-life products... From day to day and in my business plan, this means that I am equally invested in the clothes I make being recyclable and in the manner and values with which people wear them. I'm not only creating and selling new pieces, but also repairing, redesigning new pieces from old ones. The clothes we wear ought to be on an endless circular journey."

Nati's notion that clothes should be on an endless circular journey suggests, among other things, her identification with the premises of the so-called circular fashion industry. Circular fashion is a mode of the 'circular economy', in which, as postulated by macroeconomic theory, all forms of waste and unused material stand as a resource available for later production (in anthropology see Gregson et al. 2015; Zhang 2020). Promoted as optimising society and the environment, the circular economy operates within a capitalist logic in which waste becomes a commodity to be bought and sold in markets (see Hobson 2016).[3] Circular fashion aspires to practices in which products and materials are kept in use for as long as possible, consistent with how many times a physical material can be reused and recycled before inevitably becoming 'waste'.

During our many encounters, Nati often insisted on the connection she saw between circularity, responsibility, and creativity and the sensory values that underlie her creative processes: "Creating something is like going on a long, thoughtful, and responsible journey. I think all the time about where the material that I am using comes from, in what conditions it was produced in the first place, and what effect it will have on those who will wear it." This is the reason, she claims, why she decided early on that her brand would not offer seasonally presented and promoted collections, but only

[3] For a critique of the logic of the circular economy in the context of rural North America, see Berry and Issenhour 2019.

editions: "I do not want to find myself in a position where all I can do is respond to business demands, by producing ever more collections. My goal is the opposite. I want to subvert people's expectations, tease the customer, change her or his buying and wearing habits... So, for example, I decided not to offer fall/winter and spring/summer collections, but pieces that can be worn throughout the year... I make usable clothes that can be worn inside out, and can be put together modularly. They can be layered or transformed into another type of garment.[4] All of them are truly long-lasting. Now, in today's world of fast fashion, that aspect of longevity is a gamechanger. It allows for entirely different ethics, different relationships between the garment and the wearer."

Creating, she says, starts with research about available sustainable fabrics. "Material always comes first. I need to find the right, healthy fabric. I need to touch it, to recognise its story... The clothes then take form on their own, through my experiencing textures." For clothes, home textiles, and accessories, Nati uses natural and organic cotton, bamboo, wool, linen, and hemp. She regularly uses raw canvas and textile made out of food industry leftovers, like fish skin, pineapple tree leaves, rhubarb leather, and nylon yarn from discarded fishing nets or carpet fluff. Yet the fabric that has made her brand particularly recognisable is raw, organic cotton gauze. "Gauze is this exquisite, ethereally light, totally uneven, and very challenging material. It constantly misbehaves... And I like that unpredictability, the unruliness of it. You can see that it behaves that way in every garment made out of it. Most of all, I love gauze because it is a true membrane. It breathes, it is translucent, it sheathes."

It was at the time when Nati started using gauze, that she began likening clothes to both skin and houses. "Our skin and brain react to the texture of a material, and are stimulated by our clothing as if it were a *second skin*… Clothes made out of gauze are particularly sensuous. They offer a shelter, a person's own cocoon. They also create this feeling of extra space around the body, which invites air to come and rest within a dress."

I wondered why she chose gauze in the first place. "Gauze was the very fabric that I, and many generations before me, first experienced. You know, babies used to be wrapped in diapers made of gauze cloth... Well, they still are. And besides that, gauze has this clean, healing connotation of being a medical dressing. When I think of gauze, I think of purity, of bookbinding, of upholstery, of theatre scrim. All these are soothing references. They work on us unconsciously."

Nati uses gauze in homeware furnishings, for comfortable loungewear, more ascetic custom wear, and commissioned haute couture pieces. She has also used gauze as a

[4] Indeed, the imagining of how circular fashion can be achieved goes very well with the notions of "transformable" and "modular fashion", which serve as umbrella terms for clothing items that have detachable pieces, so that wearers can easily alter them to suit their changing needs and tastes over time (see Jess 2018).

building element in numerous exhibitions, installations, and multimedia, events she has put on with visual artists, composers, pianists, dancers, singers, and cooks. In 2019, for example, she joined a team of architects in renewing a part of Edvard Ravnikar's famous residential complex, *Ferantov vrt.* The architects intervened in the space by stripping away all secondary construction elements, aiming to uncover the building's spatial logic. Nati, on the other hand, clothed the space by attaching 650 metres of raw gauze to the ceiling, generating a counterpoint to the bareness of the concrete. The strips of hanging gauze created an illusion of something soft and vertical moving with the air. "We wanted to make the space more comfortable, to pull the boundaries of the building closer to the occupant, to intertwine its original logic with softer elements that were there before, but were still unexpected."

Observing Nati's work over a length time and in different contexts often makes me think how consistently she intertwines different design principles, collapsing forms' boundaries in order to pull everything she creates closer to the body, to the senses. She folds cloth and clothing across people and spaces in a way that evokes architectural volumes. At the same time, the clothes she makes do not recall monumental constructions, but may appear as tissues of the sheerest wisps. Sometimes achromatic, at other times threaded with a red seam resembling a lifeline, they appear as evanescent objects. Nati's creations seem to aspire to communicate something elementary. Something that exudes silence, calmness, a sense of reclamation. When I look at them hanging on a rack, I am sometimes reminded of Korai, the statues from Ancient Greece, chiselled in white and draped in black or coloured marble. Similar to these figures' *peplos*, Nati's dresses, tunics, trousers, coats, aprons, bathrobes, and scarves, though sensuous, can come across as nothing more than envelopes, covering rather than defining or accentuating the body of their wearer. Viewed from afar, these multi-layered and often asymmetrical structures seem raw, baggy, patched up, shapeless. With their fluid form, creased edges, and exposed seams, they seem to poke fun at and deconstruct more conventional methods of making clothes. Yet they are works of high sartorial craftsmanship, though that can only be seen up close.[5] To me, her garments communicate self-sufficiency. Their very material, the gauze, simultaneously invites an observer to come closer and touch, to experience the cloth. Nati's are intimate clothes.

This intimacy created by both the dresses' form and material often seems to be experienced as attractive. I have interviewed a number of women and some men who claim that they regularly resort to Nati's naturally pigmented or screen-printed creations when looking for comfort, closeness, and calm. Some potential buyers I spoke to, though,

[5] To my eye, Nati's creations are close to the sartorial sensibility of Issey Miyake, Biek Verstappen, Roggykei, Demmy Dongyk Kyoung, Ziggy Chen, Decoster, and Tsolo Munkh.

found her clothes off-putting in carrying a too strong an energetic charge. “The clothes looked amazing but were anything but neutral. Completely contrary to what I thought, they were actually hard to wear.” I remember how physically affected I felt myself the first time I tried on one of her garments. The dress Nati suggested that day was an exquisite creation, although not something that I would personally choose in terms of shape. Robing myself, it felt as if I were putting on less a dress than a theatre costume. The shape, the feel, the colours – dark charcoal, bruise-like patches on dove grey cloth – immediately evoked a performance of *Les Misérables* I saw many years ago. It felt not just like I was wearing a costume, but like its theatrical character was seeping into me. To me, the dress was communicating something ancient, archetypal. It conjured both a feeling of protection and exposure. These were clothes, I thought, in which I would feel good while resting, or menstruating. The dress certainly felt like skin. Not necessarily the skin I would choose, but nevertheless a skin that enveloped mine. Although I admire many of Nati’s gauze creations, that particular dress had something in it that was too demanding for me. Donning it, I felt as if I were not wearing a dress, but another woman’s experience in an undiluted form. I thanked her and took it off.

SUSTAINABLE AND ETHICAL FASHION IN SLOVENIA

Fashion first made an appearance in anthropological writing around 1919, when Alfred L. Kroeber turned his gaze (somewhat apologetically) to the volumes of a Parisian style journal. Comparing the hem lengths of women’s silk evening dresses over time, Kroeber contended that fashion can serve as a basis for an analysis of structural change in society (Kroeber 1919). Soon after, Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, Ernest Crawley, and many others began offering their views on the social and psychological objectives that fashion, and, in particular, dresses meet (see their texts, collected in the 2019 *Fashion Reader* edited by Luvaas and Eicher). Ever since, cloth, clothes, and clothing have been a theme for anthropology. Dress and fashion have been taken to generate and express social, ideological, gender, political, ethnic, and religious distinctions and differences, to instantiate material cultures and cultures of consumption, to constitute (or shore up) national economies, and represent systems, industries, and networks of situated social actors. The dressed body, analysed through its agency, practice, and performance, has been construed as both a subject in, and the object of, dress practice (see Sahlins 1976; Eicher 2000; Hansen 2004; Schneider 2006). Cloth and clothing have been seen as surfaces that have powerfully precipitated new modes of thought and being (Küchler and Were 2005).

Sometime over the last 25 years of that history, the sustainability and ethics of

fashion have acquired greater salience. The fashion industry, as well as scholars of clothing and the wider "sartorial ecumene" (Hansen 2004), have realised they will have to address the impact the textile industry has on local and broader natural habitats, human livelihoods and well-being. This new consciousness saw the rise of *ethical fashion,* as garment design, production, and distribution strove to adopt socially and environmentally responsible practices.[6] Forms of certification were devised to show that textiles did not pollute water or soil, and that they were transported responsibly. Importantly, the proponents of ethical fashion and the circular economy became concerned not only with reducing harm and waste, and benefiting those working along the supply chains, but also in rectifying consumer behaviour.

Nati's use of organic material, care for animal welfare, and concern in minimising waste are pronounced, and she likes to underscore them. They are not, though, the features that distinguish her brand. Many designers in Slovenia take socially responsible and ethical fashion initiatives very seriously, meeting organic textile standards and buying, using, and selling fabric sustainably.[7] In their concern to also promote collective well-being through clothing, these designers understand eco-consciousness, fairness in fashion, as well as consumers' 'right to repair',[8] as elements of political activism, just as Nati does (see also Fajt 2014). They critique consumerist logic, advocating that every product should be based on good design, elementary construction techniques, and widely available materials, and that it should cultivate consumer awareness. Further, in the Slovenian fashion scene, Nati is not alone in her conceptual (regarding circular fashion) and transformable fashion journeys. There are many other fashion designers whose creations are marked by a comparable philosophy and similar style – declared by the clothes' unfinished appearance – which, one would say, likewise move ideas critical or deconstructive of mainstream design.[9] Moreover, Nati has guild colleagues who, like her, are committed to the use of manmade, natural fibres – like apple leather or eucalyptus – and recycled materials in their designs in order to lower their environmental

[6] The apparel and fashion industry is one of the largest polluters in the world, as about 25 percent of all synthetically manufactured chemicals are used in textile production.

[7] For a collection of articles on the culture of clothing in Slovenia, in which fashion is analysed as a set of material objects, images, and texts, and as cultural praxis and aesthetic expression, see Pušnik and Fajt 2014.

[8] The Right to Repair movement is closely linked to the philosophy and theoretical work of Italian designer Enzo Mari, his proposal for a 'Self-Design', and his 1973 exhibition, *Hammer and Sickle – Three Ways an Artist Can Contribute to Class Struggle*. The goal is to avoid the undue pervasiveness of industrial control. Examples of Right to Repair are Right to Repair Europe, the Restart project in the UK, and Center ponovne uporabe in Slovenia.

[9] Deconstruction as a method of reading that turns on the notion of destabilizing universal truths, deriving from Jacques Derrida's works from the second part of the 60s and 70s, has found its

impact.[10] They offer collections of garments whose components can be biodegraded or depolymerized, starting a 'new life' without ever being thrown away. Indeed, as Wolf and Schlachter wrote back in 2000: "The spheres of chemistry and high fashion are drawing ever closer… redefining the boundaries of what is wearable" (Schlachter 2000:26).

Nati seems to stand out, though, in the way she senses, thinks of, and conducts her fashion business. In many ways, she has elevated her personal sensibilities and values into an entrepreneurial method: "When I say that my aim is to make clothes that are honest, clean, durable, and authentic, then that same logic must apply as well to my business. It must apply to how I structure my creative processes. [...] I have amazing colleagues in Slovenia, whose work, craftsmanship, and ingenuity I admire greatly and whom I learn from. But too many of them, especially the younger ones, live from hand to mouth. In the fear that they will not sell or succeed, they set too low prices, barely covering their production costs. This means they have little if any chance to earn a normal wage. But doing so has serious consequences. In time, these people are forced to start compromising on the material they use, then on their working spaces, then their staff... In the end, they are forced, or they force themselves, to give up their initial ideals. [...] I do not want to do that. I believe that you have to be bold, set your own terms... even choose your own customers. I know that my [eco production] principles may appear rigid to some, and that many people think my clothes are overpriced [in the Slovenian context]. But for each of my creations, I've punched the clock to make it. I work with excellent tailors and use really good material. That comes at a cost. The quote I give my customers has to be realistic and reflect the real price. And the price must include not only a real calculation of the costs of time and making the garment, but also the costs of the vision, some way of accounting for the research that's been invested in moving the process forward... Luckily, I do not have to rent an atelier. I work from home. But I value my work and time. There is no big

place in non-literary forms of cultural practice, including architecture, music, and fashion, since the mid-70s. In fashion, couturiers such as Vivienne Westwood, Yohji Yamamoto, John Paul Gaultier, and Rei Kawakubo have not only challenged but also transformed the widely held perceptions that garments must be flawlessly finished if they are to be recognised as beautiful. During the last 30 years, however, elements of deconstructionist design have become widely accepted, even co-opted, as a part of fashion vocabulary, appearing on both haute couture runways and mass-marketed T-shirts.

[10] Both the global and local Slovenian textile industry is investing money into the innovation of materials. Some of these new materials include, lab-grown spider silk, a naturally derived fibre made from bits of crab shells; cellulosic fibre derived from sustainable forestry; and an alternative leather based on mycelium. Further, sculptural rubber elements (like in sandals or ornaments) are sometimes made from sugar cane or a combination of petroleum-based ethylene-vinyl acetate and algae-produced foam. For an anthropological analysis of new fibres, see O'Connor 2004, 2011. For the Slovenian context, see Rijavec 2014.

philosophy here, you have to know the maths, the numbers, and be hardworking and transparent. If you want high quality, it ain't gonna be cheap... My experience, though, is that when people know the respect and craftsmanship that goes into their clothes, they're prepared, to buy and wear them with respect."

Nati admits that it is challenging to stick to these principles, especially during the COVID-19 epidemic. "The lockdown hit me very hard, both emotionally and financially. Everything got abruptly reduced in no time. There was immediately less of everything. Less fabric, less energy, less possibility to create and sell. My customers also realised they needed less. But I value the fact that people are willing to rethink and change their lifestyles. More and more people are sharpening their senses. They are starting to pay attention to what they wear, eat, and think. They are more careful about whom they trust. [...] My work also needs to be based on trust, connection, and respect. I trust my intuition, I trust the people I work with, and in turn I expect to be trusted. I have around 50 faithful customers, experienced women, who want their wardrobe to be filled with meaningful and comfortable clothes... I am trying to understand what they really yearn for, in terms of clothes. To possibly create that one garment that could really serve them forever. [...] My problems have to do with distributing and selling the clothes, as shops normally take clothes on a commission basis only – they pay the designer only if they shift them. But then the sellers have no relationship to the clothes. They know nothing about the clothes' provenance or their stories... I do not like that. So, it's rare for me to send my creations to Slovenian boutiques. There is a boutique in Australia that sells what I make. I have done pop-up shops in London and Amsterdam. But otherwise, people can only buy from me if they come to me. Well, to my website, or to the atelier. They have to try the clothes on and get a feel of them first, anyway. My customers are not impulse buyers. And I, too, am not a fast producer. People who commission pieces from me know that they must be patient. I first need to meet them in order to be able to make something for them."

THE ATELIER

In order to reach Nati's atelier, visitors must go round her house, cross part of the garden and descend via a staircase into a half-sunken part of the building. After they leave their shoes outside, they are greeted by a mandala, a painting of a golden sun given to Nati by a Berlin friend. Next to the mandala are a number of other paintings, large and small, photographs of her mentors, journal cut-outs. These paraphernalia form groups of what seem to be her mood and vision boards. She adds new visual elements each time she feels the tug of inspiration. The room is adorned with such modular mosaics.

The space has a working corner, with a big tailoring table. There is a sewing machine, needles, a pincushion, scissors, scraps of textiles. Portable hanging racks lean against two of the walls. There are shelves with books, plants, a mirror. A door leads to another working area, the bathroom, where Nati paints and prints cloths by hand with water-based vegetable ink. Another door connects to her family home. In another area, next to the working space, Nati spends time with her seamstresses, clients, friends, and photographers, engaging them with stories, and comforting them with tulsi teas and homemade cookies. The architectural elements of gauze in the room, the occasional ringing of the Trnovo church bell, and the light seeping into the atelier from the garden, regardless of season, make for a sheltered atmosphere.

Each Friday morning Nati hosts a tea party. She opens the doors of her studio and invites different people to the gathering, aiming to introduce them to each other and set the stage for conversation and interpretations of clothes, texts, and poetry. From time to time, invitees invite other people unknown to Nati. When I was present at those meetings, I saw how attentively Nati listens to and observes the people gathered around her tailoring table, while methodically taking photographs of their fittings, and documenting the smallest details of her guests' and customers' gait and of how their own and her clothes move on them. On such occasions, the room seems to cease to be an atelier, a place where she creates, conducts business, and sells things, and for a few hours becomes a collective creative space, where women and men swap stories, images, songs, legal advice, and breathing techniques. There is a delicate air about Nati. She does not wear any make-up, and I never picked up a fragrance on her. Her frame, though draped with her clothes, seems fragile, and her presence unintrusive. But during such gatherings, in the event that she decides to talk, the strikingly visual, painterly, and palpable quality of her narratives really comes to the fore. She commands the space not only with her textiles but with her words that accompany the clothes.

A WAY WITH WORDS, A WAY WITH CLOTHES

Nati started her brand – although she finds 'brand' *(blagovna znamka)* a crude word, using the term 'conceptual venture' *(blagovni koncept)* instead – six months after giving birth to her daughter. "Something strong", she shared, "was coming out of me at that time, and I tried to greet it fully. [...] I was always good at visualising, structuring, reflecting, composing... I knew I had to set a system, to establish my own business, if I wanted to be able to express myself. The system [i.e., the business], if it is set up in a healthy way, allows one to be methodical. I think of this venture as my own system, my own laboratory... I build the clothes and the business like I would build a house. I am

not a fast builder. I am careful, patient... partly because creative and entrepreneurial principles sometimes get into each other's hair. But I must say that things are getting ever more healthy in this respect... Well, let's see. There is still so much to learn."

Nati is not a clothes maker by education. She says that she got into "beautiful things" through her grandfather. From the numerous conversations and meetings we had I reconstructed the following story: She was born in Trbovlje, a coal-mining town, and spent the first seven years of her life there. When her parents divorced, she went to live with her mother in Maribor, but went back every weekend and summer to Trbovlje. Ljubljana, where she now lives, came into her life later on, when she met her husband and, later got herself a job in the city. Between the ages of 14 and 30, Nati sang in a choir. "Singing was what gave my life balance for a number of years." The all-female choral group had a formidable reputation on the international vocal scene. Nati travelled with the choir to many countries across Europe, the Americas, and Asia, touring and giving performances. She stayed on even after she gave up singing, working as the choir's tour manager. She then moved on to be a producer in the fields of contemporary dance, classical music, and jazz. When the time came to start studying and choose an academic subject, she felt lost and could not decide. She had enrolled in macroeconomics only for the sake of her father, who thought that the subject would provide a solid education and set up a career for her. Later she enrolled in a master's in cultural management while working as a producer. "I am a very good organiser, a perfectionist, and can picture every detail of what should be done in my head. I enjoy executing the steps, solving problems, making a thing happen. I like the energy of producing, when, in the end, everything falls into place." In time, though, the job – despite having been secure and well-paid – began to exhaust her, and she eventually quit. "People in the arts like to celebrate, to drink, to stay out until the wee hours. I couldn't keep up with that on a constant basis... But what really got me, I think, was the realisation that I was organising and helping other people's creativity, while I no longer felt creative myself. I realised I had a need to create again. I had to get back to the stage, metaphorically speaking."

Even so, it took a little longer before she started the clothing venture. After quitting production, Nati worked as a cultural and classical music editor for various TV stations. This was the time when she returned to photography and the camera: "I always loved photography. My grandfather had many photograph and video cameras and was the big documentarist in our family... He was a connoisseur and a lover of everything beautiful. He used to work in Berlin as a merchant and adman, but he had the soul of an artist. When he retired, he returned to Trbovlje, and since that day he was alongside me and I alongside him. I learned everything from him. He loved to play, to have fun, to act out.... Well, he met his wife, my grandmother, whilst they were both

acting in a Partisan theatre... That period must have been really important for them both because, when my Nan got ill and began to suffer from dementia, all she could remember was the resistance movement and the roles she played in the theatre. [...] I adored my grandfather. He had his ways with words. People would pay him to write Abraham jubilee verses,[11] and he wrote texts for *Pavlihova pratika.* He was a seriously good storyteller, singer, a comedian, ... somebody who kept ritualising our lives in the most wonderful way. He also served as president of the godba, the brass band. I spent a lot of time with him, behind the scenes of the *Delavski dom Trbovlje,* observing the costumes, the stage, the masks, the instruments... All those memories came back when I took the job of a culture editor on TV. I was reminded of the power of narrated, voiced, performed stories. And I wanted to make my own."

A few months after that conversation, on a warm March morning, Nati and I were sitting under a sweetgum tree in her garden, otherwise full of magnolias and herbs. We returned to the topic of who influenced her when she first began studying fashion design. She spoke of other significant figures who "kneaded" her, or moulded her, as she put it, in such a way that she felt she needed to return to creative work. One was a Slovenian clinical psychologist, and the other, the head of the documentary and TV department at the National Film School of Denmark. Nati had met both of them at a series of workshops – on the topic of interviewing techniques, dialogue, and intuition – organised by her then employer. "Those workshops made me seriously reflect on myself. Later, when I was on maternity leave, I realised I needed a radical change. A line of work where I would work on my own terms. I started opening some old diaries, going back to how I thought and what I wanted. Then I started writing, putting together a business plan, crunching the numbers... My husband was really supportive, and that further encouraged me. In terms of learning how to run a business I owe him so much."

I asked whether she knew from the start that she would go into fashion and design. "As a matter of fact, no. I had another aim. I wanted to revive old-school tailoring *(krojaštvo)* of suit jackets. I wanted to find experienced Slovenian masters and clothes makers with whom I would restore old tailoring methods. I dreamt of starting a line of high-quality handmade and hand-embroidered suits, in interesting cuts and bold colours... But that was a hard task in every sense. In the beginning, my knowledge of fabric was limited. I did not understand the technical properties of textiles, didn't even know where to source materials .... Yet the biggest issue I had was finding the right tailors. Many old masters had given way to younger tailors... and even when

[11] Similar to other European cultures, when a person celebrates his or her 50th birthday, the Slovenes refer to this as 'meeting Abraham'. It is a tradition that honours a person gaining wisdom through experience. For an analysis of the celebration of 'Abraham' in Slovenia, see Pisk 2013.

they had the knowledge, they lacked a relationship to and a respect for what they were creating. I worked with two excellent tailors, a father and son. They really knew how to cut and sew, but were indifferent to the quality of the threads or buttons they used. Their workshop was never anything but a mess. The material, which I would carefully choose, buy, and bring to them, would lie there, in a heap, shoved into a corner, next to an old and dusty bicycle. I had a massive issue with that. They did not have any *relationship to what they were making*. I was so disappointed... In my mind, old-school tailors were noble people. I remember the tailor who sewed and repaired clothes for my grandparents. He was an elegant man with wonderful manners and a tiny, an impeccably tidy, salon."

"And why suits in the first place?", I asked. "Because a suit jacket is a garment personified */suknjič je poosebljena obleka/*. When it hangs on a stand, it looks like a person, doesn't it? It does not have legs, but nevertheless, it is poised, it has arms, and it conveys something unmistakably human."

RELATIONSHIPS TO AND THROUGH CLOTHES

Nati is a many-sided figure, and her multifariousness informs her visual and tactile narratives. She is a talented storyteller, both in putting together narrative backdrops to her clothes and in narrating her own creative and entrepreneurial experiences.[12] Moreover, her clothing – of other people and places – often sets itself up as a mode of tactile and sensory address. The tone of these addresses is usually comforting, but Nati is an activist who makes no bones about reaching people in their conscience and in their routines, challenging what she sees as their consumerist mindset and educating their sensibility – to change how they relate to, and through, clothes.

Studies have highlighted how entrepreneurs can depend on storytelling (Gabriel 2004; Byrne and Shepherd 2015). The use, especially, of crafted narratives and resonantly-phrased business goals is often understood not only as a way of capturing how entrepreneurs experience and enact sustainability in the context of their ventures but also as a calculated method by which they promote their businesses (see Muñoz and Cohen 2018). Contemporary storytelling practices, often participatory, hyperlinked, and immersive, are equally central for the constitution, management, and circulation of major political, economic, and environmental ideas, as they stitch their ethics into the fabric of everyday speech. In this sense, Nati's choices of words, metaphors, and

[12] For a sharp articulation of the connection between cutting, clothing, and speaking, see Elena Ferrante's collection *Frantumaglia* (Ferrante 2016).

examples in discussing her creativity and business ethos bear on her management of her green 'brand' as well as provide a metadiscursive commentary on how she sees (and experiences) the world.

Many anthropologists and other analysts have picked up on how problematic environmentally conscious fashion may be, and how 'complicated' its greenness is.[13] In the context of her work on clothing companies that commit to wilderness conservation, Sharon Hepburn, for example, describes how 'our times' are marked by a 'double greenness': a greenness of environmentally sustainable production processes, and greenness as a signifier of a more impalpable, aesthetic quality, evoking a post-Romantic natural sublime. Greenness in this latter sense promises to link eco clothes-wearers to nature (see Hepburn 2013:637–639). From this perspective, Nati's creative and entrepreneurial journeys are certainly stories of our times, as they join, with what may appear as naïve mythologising (or even a more sophisticated metaphysicalisation) of the sublime. We may similarly choose to understand many of her cultured and well-off customers as simply searching for a contact with their own conception and mythology of the 'natural' and 'green' through purchasing Nati's clothes. The beautiful gardens and atelier, where customers usually first touch the clothes, also enter into this sensory, thickly textured experience of learning about green clothes, buying them, and wearing them. Although, in some ways, Nati's approach to fashion and business leans toward a break with capital- and labour-intensive high-turnover models of textile production, it is clear that, in other ways, Nati has found her place in the consumer market.

Moreover, an anthropologist, or any observer for that matter, may immediately raise an eyebrow when these familiar and articulate narratives of eco and conscious fashion are employed in the privileged working environment of a manicured garden, by an interlocutor who presents herself as "hardworking", a "perfectionist", "honest", and an "intuitive storyteller" aware of how suggestive the textiles she uses are – for example, how strongly and subliminally wearing a garment made of gauze affects its wearer.

Yet, I argue, that such a reading would be facile in observing an overly simple bifurcation of critical intelligence belonging to the observer and knower, as it were; and vanity, even manipulativeness, in the observed or known. It is interesting how, when anthropologists describe the poor, the socially marginal, and the suffering, the anthropologist's empathy with their interlocutors and especially with their stories, is

[13] For an analysis of 'complicated greenness' and 'greenwash', a marketing ploy aimed at consumers that want greenness, or want to be seen to be wanting it, see, for example, Thomas 2008 and Hepburn 2013. What started as a critique of mainstream fashion was soon adopted by popular fashion brands and their marketing strategies. For studies of the ethics guiding contemporary purchasing decisions, analysis of eco-fashion customers, and 'ethical hard liners' see, for example, Niinimäki 2010; Annamma et al. 2012; Luthar 2014.

applauded, even *de rigeur.* In these ethnographic instances, narrative recountals of people's own stories and lives are understood as a discursive genre, or as a certain technology of the self, and are linked to processes of cultural reproduction (Young 1995; Davis 2002; Pollock 2016). Yet we are expected to make a show of our critical suspicion of the prosperous (the sellers, the entrepreneurs, and the self-proclaimed experts), and immediately establish a moral (that is, ironic) relationship to them, especially when these people have the articulacy to narrate their own story.[14] By paying attention to Nati's material and narrative attempts to have her clothes observe the "full circle of sensory experience", one of the goals of this article is precisely to situate the particularity of her practices within the context of eco-conscious fashion, without too blandly making her its exemplar. In other words, I attempt to situate the particular in the general, without delegitimizing and claiming the former as merely an instantiation of the latter (see also Rosenblatt 1997:290).

In any case, my anthropological interest lies not in determining the truth of Nati's claims, or the truth of the sensibility that underlies them, but in making out the dynamics that have allowed those sensibilities and convictions to emerge and to produce certain social effects. It is clear that Nati both forges and elevates connections between notions of 'creativity', 'authenticity', 'care', 'trust', 'mutuality', 'consideration', '(social) responsibility', 'well-being', 'choice', and 'greenness' into a set of presumed virtues and entrepreneurial values, values she is prepared to live and work by. However, observing her at her work and in her home makes me want to claim that she has embarked on making ecological clothes less as a proponent of a green ideology and more in response to something she felt almost as a personal affront. Remembering her experience with the suit makers, Nati recalled: "That experience, of seeing the real conditions in which clothes are made, had a big effect on me. I'd never before asked myself how these things that rub up against my skin are really made. Seeing what I saw, that carelessness, really pushed me into thinking." She claims she became more sensitive and, from then on, wanted to know, even to control, how what she was wearing was made. She moved from collaborating on suits made of wool, fustian, and velvet, and turned to her own creations made from gauze. Around the same time, Nati's father died. She was diagnosed with Hashimoto's syndrome, necessitating further changes in her lifestyle – a new diet, a different relationship with her immediate environment, and a modified regimen of daily habits.

In this respect, Nati's green principles might further indicate less environmental

[14] For an intriguing piece that dwells on the question of how we might include interlocutors as co-theorists, that discusses the divide between knower and known, the forms that we use to demarcate what counts as expert knowledge, and the links and distinctions between the politics of citation and that of acknowledgment, see Weiss 2021.

and more personal, sensory, and even temporal concerns. In my reading, Nati's commitment to greening supply chains is shaped by her continuous reference back, with respect and nostalgia, to memories of an older, greener past – of old-fashioned tailoring, of her grandfather's ethical and aesthetic standards, and of clients who expected strong and durable clothes and long-lasting relationships with clothes-makers. In that sense, she seems to take a stand against the quick turnover of what she perceives as fast fashion and a fast world. Understanding clothes as a second, protective skin, Nati resists creating only modish attires. She observes, cuts, moulds, and sews textiles to make coverings or symbolic homes. Moreover, she wants to create and hold the space for anyone interested in longevity and in repairing, reviving the old ways, and recreating things. In dress she appears to seek continuity, safety and possible familiarity.

INTIMACY AND MUTUALITY THROUGH TOUCH

In 2011, in a now famous two-part essay "What Kinship Is", Marshall Sahlins (2011a, 2011b) defined kinship as a "mutuality of being". The same year, Chris Gregory wrote about how, for the Halbi speakers of the Bastar Plateau in East-Central India, kinship is defined by touch. Tactile gestures of familial respect are reciprocated by tactile gestures of familial love. Non-kin, by contrast, only make obeisance – they gesture, but cannot touch. They are defined by non-tactile gestures of mutual respect. As Gregory writes, slightly twisting Sahlins's argument, analyses of kinship as "mutuality of sensible being" involve a move away from the study of kinship as the object of an abstract semantics or of terminologies of references (of who means what to whom, of who calls whom what), to a consideration of the pragmatics of face-to-face, or skin-to-skin, sensible relations between people (Gregory 2011:179). He goes on to explain the role of touchability in making familial relationships, inviting readers to consider 'skinship', a Japanese word that brings together the sense of touch with the concept of kinship.

Theoretical concepts are no more than descriptions of how scientists come to know something (Bateson 1958:281). Yet I borrow the term skinship as, in my view, it gets close to the marrow of what Nati's creative and entrepreneurial clothing ventures intend. The textural intimacy and bonding that her customers sense and seek in her creations are experienced and narrativized as a product of the extreme care she takes in their making. The wearers of Nati's clothes seem to recognise a continuity in her atelier methods, between the work of her hand in measuring the gauze, cutting and making the garments, and the experience of their clothes-wearing. Many that I spoke

to admit that they cannot imagine that such care could be taken in the piecework of capital-intensive manufacture. Through wearing Nati's clothes some feel that they become even more explorative and newly sensitised to the boundaries of their bodies. Both in their visual projections and in their sensual effects, Nati's garments intimate her understanding of clothes as the body's *second skin.*[15] In resisting, or in disavowing or undoing, their alienation from the maker and from the body of the wearer, her clothes, for many, cease to be inanimate garments. Instead, they are experienced, or in some sense taken as able to "address" their wearers, as some kind of a spirited thing, a thing with agency. Her garments have their own *stories*. As we have seen, some customers report that they welcome being addressed and further sensibilized in such a way. Others are left cold or they reject Nati's clothes on account of their being 'too burdensome'.

Interpreting the circulation of materials and her metamorphoses of textiles as underwriting a natural sustainability, Nati further, through her philosophy, through its narration and embodiment, imbues clothes with an expression of social value and moral attitude. The 'second skins' she creates are offered as a token of a possible relationship, of mutuality and familiarity. Both – relationships and mutuality – figure as ethical values for Nati. She is explicit in stating that people have to have *a relationship to*, that is *a respect for* what they are creating, selling, and wearing. Through clothes and associated narratives (of greenness, circularity, truth-to-materials, etc.), a community of people who delight in how these stories address their senses is brought together – a community of people who, in Nati's clothes, feel sensually aware and engaged, and for whom such clothes articulate a moral attitude towards the circular economy, the regeneration of material, and ecologically sustainable production and consumption.[16] As we have seen, Nati is extremely protective of her ways of making and even selling her clothes. However, she seems more protective of the relationships established through clothes – with their wearers, her customers, staff, friends, and family – than of the clothes themselves. She is protective of this community of likeminded or like-feeling people, to whom she feels knitted and in whom she recognises elective kin. This is skinship, and intimacy by proxy, through touch and fabric. It is a social relationship of contiguity (Gregory 2011:186) through which Nati and her likeminded customers, people who consciously choose her clothes, establish proximity and mutuality. In her nonintrusive yet methodical ways, Nati's attention to the haptic (taking measurements, observing people's gait, hosting them at her tea parties) makes possible a familiarity

[15] For Nati's understanding of what second skin means, revisit the ethnography above. For a classical anthropological analysis of clothes (or their symbolic equivalents) as a 'social skin', see Terence S. Turner 2012. For an analysis of "cloth as the centre of livelihood", see Moon 2017.

[16] For an analysis of sustainable fashion and a utopian vision of *a garment for life*, see Burcikova 2019.

assumed by the other senses – seeing, smelling, and hearing. She touches and feels touched, through an exchange of materials, garments, words, and images.

Those who gather in her atelier, especially now during Covid-19, seem to me equally open to exploring their potential for bonding by opening themselves to unpredictable haptic experiences and conversations about them. Some, who feel desensitized, even numbed by commercial and fast fashion, are attracted by Nati's clothes and understand their experiences of wearing them as returning to, even pushing toward, a rich sensory awareness. Others find her clothes too demanding in their insistence on intimacy. For Nati, clothes – any item of clothing – are an expression, and not just a covering, of the personal; suit jackets in particular remind her of "persons, poised and conveying something unmistakably human". I would argue that in many ways, through *atelier* fashion, sewing clothes, stitching them together, piecing together her stories into a desired form, Nati believes her compositions facilitate her own and other people's (customers' and guild's) thoughts about ethical fashion and socially responsible, sustainable ways of living. Whether this storytelling allows or prevents her from reflecting upon her own compositional and business practices as a version, or development, of capitalist consumerism, and not as industry's corrective or critique, is beside the point. As Keane put it, people do not just construct or cultivate themselves; they can also make discoveries about themselves (Keane 2015:155).

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Concern with what constitutes anthropology or differentiates it from other academic fields has led many to conclude that anthropologists foremost study social relations and how they provide perspective on other relations (see Gell 1998; Strathern 2020:64). Yet anthropology does not only study relations. As a mode of inquiring and knowledge production, it is in itself a relation. It is an attempt to understand, that is, to step into a relation with the people, processes, and phenomena it observes and describes. I tried to write this analysis, to set its ethnography, and sequence its arguments, in a way that gave some weight to the theoretical value of the tactile knowledge Nati enacts in her work. As Paul Stoller writes, there may be a place in the discipline for a "sensuous ethnography" and for an ethnographer who conceives of fieldwork as lending one's body to the world, as opposed to consuming the world in learning about it (Stoller 1997). There may be a place for exploring and putting into words that which we do not entirely comprehend, nor necessarily agree with, yet still feel deeply touched and affected by. While attending anthropologically to one entrepreneur and designer's intuitive, inspired, and experimental crafting of the world and her community (through an attempt to clothe it), the analysis explored a set of claims to do with what a virtuous entrepreneurial and creative life may look like in

contemporary Slovenia. It exposed some sensory modes of address and registers of intimacy as these were found to be viable in times of deliberate social distancing and ecological uncertainty.

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Teksture dodira: Istraživanje osjetilnoga putovanja u kreativnost, modu i poduzetništvo

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Članak istražuje prakse osmišljavanja kreativnosti i poslovanja kritične modistice u suvremenoj Sloveniji. Etnografija evocira životne, stvaralačke i poduzetničke ambicije, vrijednosti i pretpostavljene vrline dizajnerice odjeće, istražujući kako ona vodi svoj posao kao izraz svojih osjetilnih i taktilnih iskustava. Nati, glavna protagonistica članka, zalaže se za održivu, 'svjesnu' i 'odgovornu' modu. Svoj rad shvaća kao senzibilizirajući s ciljem utjecanja na određene individualne, društvene, ali i cehovske stavove prema modi i potrošnji te njihova mijenjanja. Analiza osvjetljava iskustva koja nastanu kada se umjetnički i komercijalni producent osjetilno obrati svojim klijentima u ekološko nesigurnim i društveno distanciranim vremenima. Središnji argument članka jest da antropološka analiza niza tvrdnji o poslovnoj etici i kreativnoj praksi može postati potencijalno teksturiranija i znakovitija ako se etnograf suzdrži od neposrednih prosudbi o njihovoj autentičnosti ili podrijetlu. Umjesto toga, autorica predlaže analitičko usredotočivanje na pitanja kako se poslovne, etičke i stvaralačke tvrdnje uopće pojavljuju i srastaju te kako se o njima govori, s njima živi i osjeća. To nas dalje poziva na općenitije razmišljanje o tome na kakve načine osjetilno obraćanje, kako sugovornika tako i antropologa, o(ne)mogućuje prakse i iskustva potencirane blizine i uzajamnosti u životu, na terenu i u analizi etnografskog materijala.

Keywords: *osjetilni način obraćanja, taktilna iskustva, odnos kroz dodir, etnografski opis, održiva i zelena moda, poduzetničke i kreativne vrijednosti, Slovenija*