

REBEL: 30 Years of London Fashion

This exhibition explores London as a hub of emerging fashion talent, focusing on NEWGEN, a British Fashion Council initiative set up in 1993 and first known as the New Generation scheme. NEWGEN offers promising new fashion designers funding, mentoring, and publicity to help build their brand.

Several designers featured in REBEL have since become household names, such as the first recipient of the award in 1993, Alexander McQueen. However, items on display are from designers' early careers and graduate shows (except where this is not possible e.g. McQueen's lost 'Taxi Driver' collection). Emphasis is on emerging design over the last three decades of huge global shifts in and beyond the fashion industry.

Bricolage

Potential focus for KS2-5

In French, "*bricolage*" refers to DIY or improvisation and derives from the verb "*bricoler*", "to tinker". Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss coined the term in 1962 to describe how groups of people draw on cultural repertoires and recombine components to solve problems, assert evolving identities, and build whole mythologies. It essentially just means drawing on an array of existing material to fill a gap or solve a problem. Putting something where it 'doesn't belong' or layering disparate ideas or pieces together can create something entirely new.

Examples of bricolage can be found in just about any human activity. Archaeologists and anthropologists refer to "syncretism", for instance the cross-pollination of ancient religions and their associated material culture. This is often a natural consequence of diffusion of materials and craftspeople through trade routes, but sometimes it can be a deliberate technology of active control or of 'soft power' while expanding diverse empires. In literature there is 'intertextuality', where a text's meaning or impact is shaped by reference to other texts. Musicians sample one another in unexpected ways or create 'chopped and screwed' reimaginings of existing tracks.

The modern visual arts are full of examples, from literal collage to more symbolic bricolage such as Marcel Duchamp's 'ready-mades', which cut practical objects out of their original context and pasted them into a new field of taste and aesthetics. Many artists knowingly evoke the concept: Max Ernst often conveyed the impression of physical collage using only one medium such as oil paint or pencil (*frottage*). Bricolage can be a potent critical tool due to the way it allows the 'bricoleur' to isolate, eradicate, or relate aspects of contemporary society to one another in revealing ways, as seen in Richard Hamilton's re-appropriation of magazine adverts to critique consumerism.



Illustration made with 'frottage' technique, perhaps an imaginary animal. Max Ernst, *Histoire Naturelle*, 1926.



Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?, Richard Hamilton, 1956 (has since been re-collaged several times).

Fashion designers as bricoleurs

Virtually every person on the planet practices bricolage in the way we dress. We all pick out some kind of clothing at some point in the day, and we move between different contexts with these clothes on our bodies. Globalisation and technological advances are constantly transforming not only the way we move but the manufacture and even retail of what we wear at an ever-increasing speed. Fashion designers are constantly exploring new avenues of experimentation while dipping back into the past or into new culture contexts to draw together completely disparate ideas, materials, and symbols.



[Ensemble with hand-embroidered sequins, Ashish Gupta / ASHISH.](#)



Sublimation printing in a Design Museum workshop, 2023.

On top of this, the rise of modern consumer culture and its trappings – advertising, brand empires, unethical chains of production, and a vast increase in waste – has prompted many to use fashion as a mode of resistance, and the irreverence and (re)clamation inherent to bricolage is perfect for this. The 1970s punk movement is a famous example: cut-and-pasted album covers, subversive appropriation of the domestic safety pin as piercing jewellery.

Punk exemplifies what often happens when a specific field of bricolage accumulates such mass that it becomes typified and may crystallise into a new signifier of taste or culture rather than a ‘subculture’: consider the influence of punk on ‘high fashion’ today as seen in the work of designers like Vivienne Westwood. Today’s bricoleurs become tomorrow’s teachers, fashion students learn an expanded set of motifs on which they can draw strands together to create their own designs, and the cycle continues.

Alongside and in contrast to the homogenising influence of global fast fashion, the 21st century has brought about a sharpened understanding of the need for inclusivity and both social and environmental sustainability in the fashion industry. Many designers are combining and reusing materials in new ways, reimagining manufacturing methods or production chains. They draw on increasingly diverse backgrounds and local networks of production. Recycling, reusing, and updating, all increasingly common tactics for a more sustainable fashion industry, are also acts of bricolage.



[Nicholas Daley](#) – recreation of outfit worn by musician Shabaka Hutchings. Includes a knitted vest made by Daley’s mother’s knitting group.

[Matty Bovan](#). Background quotes from various NEWGEN designers about their start-up experiences.

Provocations

- Can you think of another example of cultural production that can be understood as bricolage? Can you think of an example that is definitely not? Is it useful to think of things in this way, or does it present any difficulties or biases?
- Try to meet a basic brief drawing *only* on styles, shapes, etc. that you can trace back to different sources. Can you come up with something 'new' (how do you define this)?
- Try to design an outfit from entirely reused materials, on paper or digitally. Then try to make an outfit from entirely reused materials straight onto a mannequin or as a flat-lay. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.
- Plan a design using only tracing/rubbings/collage and annotation.

Sustainability

Potential focus for KS3-5

Something that is sustainable is “capable of being maintained or continued at a certain rate or level” (OED). We tend to define this ‘capability’ from an isolated environmental perspective, but the UN Sustainable Development Goals have a strong emphasis on social sustainability, hand-in-hand with the environmental. The modern-day ‘fast fashion’ industry fails most metrics of environmental and social sustainability; on the other hand, emerging and grassroots designers often work in inherently sustainable ways.



Ruth Ossai x Bethany Williams x Magpie look from 'All Our Children' collection, SS21. The Magpie Project is a Newham-based organisation which works with children and mothers close to or living with homelessness. [Read more at Williams' website here.](#)

In a smaller or 'grassroots' operation, materials and labour will be largely local, feeding back into the immediate economy and meaning transportation takes place over shorter distances via means less likely to use heavy carbon emitters (e.g. trucks rather than airplanes). Batches will be smaller, possibly made-to-order, and local designers are likely to have a stronger understanding of their market's needs, all of which reduces waste.

However, such operations tend not to be as wildly profitable. Global brands have the advantage of huge economies of scale. They are also able to break up production and source materials from all over the world according to where materials and labour are cheapest: this often translates to taking advantage of lack of legislation around safe working environments, fair and non-discriminatory wages, toxic pesticides and manufacturing processes, and so on. Such brands tend to rely on lowering costs for continuous growth, rather than improving their product from a user perspective. If their workforce or materials became more expensive or unavailable (e.g. due to leaving their employment for a living wage) they would no longer be able to operate at their established level.

This is part of the reason why initiatives like NEWGEN continue to exist, because there is a clear value in encouraging emerging, local talent not only from a cultural and ethical perspective but an entirely practical one. Looking at past NEWGEN winners, we can see material and aesthetic innovations alongside investment in local communities and greater inclusion of marginalised bodies and identities.



Sinéad O'Dwyer, 2023 collection. O'Dwyer always uses sample sizes women's 12 and 22 (as opposed to an industry standard of 6 and the UK average of 16). This collection included models who use wheelchairs or were pregnant.

Provocations

- Try to imagine a product or a whole line of products sourced only from your country, your town, or your high street. Can you do it? How might a realistic pricing model compare to existing global brands?
 - Collaboratively brainstorm how you might measure how 'sustainable' something is. Compare to the official [UN SDGs](#) – have you come up with a broader understanding of 'sustainability'? A narrower one?
 - We often only measure sustainability by one linear metric, rather than considering a variety of impacts on both environment and people. Why might this be? (e.g. more quantifiable, more profitable, simply easier to do?)
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References

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- The UN Sustainable Development Goals – resources for educators
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