MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Matteo Ward

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Matteo Ward. CEO of WRAD, CEO of Inside Out Fashion Textiles Home.

Portrait Matteo Ward ® by Adriano Russo
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MODEM:
You've been exposed to the global fashion industry from an early stage in your career and have seen the field from different perspectives over time. Looking back, how have your views on creativity, production, and responsibility within fashion evolved?

MATTEO WARD:
I grew up in a household where textiles, fashion, art, and innovation were part of everyday life. From a very young age I understood fashion not as something superficial, but as an incredibly sophisticated system connected to culture, technology, agriculture, politics, and human behavior. One of my earliest projects even involved the development of biosuits for future Mars expeditions, an experience that taught me design should always serve life - protecting and supporting it. Over time, I realized that such powerful creative and industrial mechanisms also require enormous responsibility. Creativity without accountability risks becoming meaningless extraction disguised as beauty. Design without a responsible understanding of the implications and consequences of our actions is not truly design. It is speculative styling with potentially dangerous consequences.

MODEM:
From the outside, the fashion industry is often associated with surface and aspiration, yet you experienced its mechanisms firsthand. Which realities revealed themselves to

you during that time, and how did they begin to reshape your thinking around sustainability?

MATTEO WARD:
What revealed itself to me was not superficiality, but complexity. Fashion is one of the most interconnected industries on Earth: it touches farming, chemistry, logistics, psychology, geopolitics, communication, identity... Although I wanted to be a politician as a kid (lol), that is precisely why it fascinated me. But while working inside the system, particularly during my years at Abercrombie & Fitch, I realized the industry was operating without fully acknowledging the consequences of its scale and power. We had incredibly advanced systems for creating desire and accelerating consumption, but far less awareness around the environmental, social and health impact those systems generated. That contradiction completely transformed my understanding of responsibility and sustainability.

MODEM:
A transition from participating in a system to actively questioning it rarely happens instantly. Through which internal process did you begin to distance yourself from the values you once operated within?

MATTEO WARD:
For me, it began with discomfort. I often say that growth starts when you leave the “house of mirrors”, the environment that constantly reflects your own, comfortable worldview back at you. At first, I genuinely believed change could happen from within existing structures. But events like the Rana Plaza collapse motivated me to confront the gap between the values brands communicated and the realities sustaining their business models. More deeply, to confront the gap between what I was doing for a living, and who I wanted to be in life. Once you truly see certain dynamics, you cannot unsee them anymore. The process was challenging because the system I was a part of had also given me belonging, identity, and opportunities. But eventually I understood that freedom and responsibility require the courage to question even the systems that once made you feel safe.

MODEM:
Imagining a future where your efforts have fully taken effect, which question would you hope the fashion industry continues to ask itself so it does not fall back into old patterns?

MATTEO WARD:
I hope the industry keeps asking itself: “What is fashion for?” And “What habits and habitats can we fashion through our brands?”. We spend enormous energy discussing how to produce more responsibly, but rarely question the scale, purpose, and cultural role of what we are producing in the first place. Fashion has extraordinary potential: it can generate beauty, identity, innovation, jobs, and even social transformation. But when growth becomes the only objective, the system loses balance and begins extracting more value from society and nature than it gives back. I believe the future depends on continuously questioning not only materials and technologies, but also the legitimacy, function, and impact of the industry itself.

MODEM:
With WRÅD, you chose to communicate sustainability not only through products but through knowledge and material research. How does this approach challenge more conventional ideas of what a fashion brand should represent?

MATTEO WARD:
We never wanted WRÅD to exist only as a product brand. To me, fashion brands are also educational and cultural infrastructures. They shape perception, aspiration, and behavior. Traditional fashion often isolates products from the systems that generated them, while WRÅD tried to reconnect those dimensions through storytelling, research, and education. Sometimes the most meaningful thing a brand can create is not another object, but greater awareness and critical thinking. That approach challenges the idea that brands should only stimulate consumption. I believe fashion should help people understand their relationship with the world around them, because clothing is never just material, it is cultural, psychological, and political.

MODEM:
Your involvement in Fashion Revolution Italia connects activism with public engagement. In your experience, what makes people truly listen rather than simply respond superficially?

MATTEO WARD:
People listen when they feel involved rather than accused. Sustainability communication often fails because it relies only on fear, guilt, or technical language. Or because it confuses information with communication. We have to remember that we connect through emotion, stories, and shared life experiences. Also, what I learned over the years is that vulnerability is powerful. Sharing that I was once part of the problem often creates more dialogue than presenting myself as someone who has all the answers (which, by the way, I don't have!). I also believe people respond when complexity is respected instead of oversimplified. The world is nuanced, and responsibility is not purity. It is the ongoing effort to better understand the consequences of our actions and take ownership for them.

MODEM:
Looking at the industry today, there is often a gap between declared intentions and actual transformation. Where does progress feel most tangible to you, and where does it still remain performative?

MATTEO WARD:
The most tangible progress is cultural. Fifteen years ago, many of these conversations barely existed within mainstream fashion. Today, topics like traceability, labor rights, circularity, and environmental impact are impossible to ignore. There is also a new generation of designers and consumers asking deeper questions about systems rather than simply aesthetics. At the same time, performativity still exists whenever sustainability becomes primarily a communication exercise. Many companies continue trying to reconcile infinite growth with finite planetary boundaries without truly confronting the contradiction. Real transformation requires more than responsible materials, technological innovation, recycling infrastructures, or communication campaigns. It requires rethinking value, scale, success, and our relationship with consumption itself. Ultimately, the environmental crisis cannot be separated from the social one. A system built on inequality, exploitation, and extreme wealth imbalance will always struggle to become truly sustainable. Without social justice, the environmental challenge will remain impossible to solve fully.

MODEM:
Instead of isolating design from its consequences, your work often links creativity with accountability. What evolves when designers begin to see themselves as part of a larger

system rather than individual authors?

MATTEO WARD:
When designers begin seeing themselves as part of a larger ecosystem, creativity becomes more meaningful and more intentional. Fashion is not created in isolation; every garment is connected to agriculture, labor, chemistry, communication, culture... But also to the human body itself. Clothing is our closest environment, our second skin. It affects not only identity and self-expression, but potentially comfort, wellbeing, health, and the way we physically experience the world. Once designers recognize those relationships, they stop designing only products and start designing systems, behaviors, and consequences. The questions evolve from “Is this beautiful?” to “What does this enable?” and “What kind of relationship between humans, industry, and nature does this create?” I think this shift restores dignity and legitimacy to fashion design. Creativity becomes less
about feeding endless novelty (who needs another t-shirt, right?) and more about improving the quality of life itself. New forms will flow from asking ourselves different questions at the beginning of the design process.

MODEM:
Constant acceleration defines much of fashion’s rhythm, leaving little room for reflection. Could slowing down processes change not only production outcomes but also the way individuals experience their work?

MATTEO WARD:
Absolutely. Acceleration affects not only products, but consciousness itself. Fashion has normalized a rhythm where speed is often mistaken for relevance and overproduction for success. But permanent acceleration disconnects people from meaning, from materials, from each other, and often from themselves. Slowing down is not about romanticizing the past or rejecting innovation. It is about restoring intentionality and creating space for reflection, craftsmanship, experimentation, and care. I think one of the great sustainability questions of our time is actually about our relationship with time. What kind of human experience are our industries creating? And at what psychological and environmental cost?

MODEM:
The emotional cost of maintaining relevance and purpose in this field is seldom addressed openly. In what ways might a more conscious industry also become a more humane one for those within it?

MATTEO WARD:
A more conscious industry would recognize that human wellbeing is inseparable from environmental and social wellbeing. Fashion often glorifies exhaustion, hyper-competitiveness, and constant reinvention, but an industry built on burnout cannot genuinely speak about care or wellbeing. We need to create cultures where vulnerability, collaboration, rest, and emotional health are not perceived as weaknesses. For me, this is also connected to redefining success itself. If value is measured only through growth, visibility, and productivity, both people and ecosystems will continue to suffer. A truly evolved fashion industry should not only create better products, but also healthier relationships with work, identity, time, and life itself. Fashion designers are architects of the body. We literally build habitats that impact our mental and physical systems. This comes with responsibility.