MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Orsola de Castro

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Orsola de Castro, author, designer and fashion heretic.
Portrait Orsola de Castro - Photo Credit ® Tamzin Haughton.
Questions conceived and hosted by Florian Müller

MODEM:
With the hashtag #WhoMadeMyClothes, you challenged the fashion industry to be more transparent. But who or what inside you has shaped the person you have become?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
Oh! I have never been asked this before!
I very much improvised. Of course I was influenced by my family of origin, equally I left home when I was still a teenager, so a lot of my life has been self-taught. My children have shaped me, reading shaped me, curiosity shaped me, history shaped me, women drive me. But my main thing is buried deep inside: an overwhelming sense of justice. I can’t remember, ever, not feeling this burn.

MODEM:
You launched Estethica as a new space for sustainable fashion, consciously drawing on your pioneering work from the past. What motivates you today to develop a platform again, and how does your approach differ from before?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:

When we started Fashion Revolution in 2013 the activists' buzzword was to 'disrupt'. I don't believe this industry will ever be disrupted, which is why I am motivated to construct instead. To build the alternative somewhere in between creativity, rage and rigour. This is what the Estethica team strives to achieve, to support the ones who aren't just surviving this industry, but committed to shaping it. The difference is the fashion bit: we speak fashion, we understand it, we teach it, breathe it, are committed to it. Great fashion, great wardrobes, great techniques, great skills, vision, artistry, originality ….. that doesn't necessarily come with a degree or an investment - and that's what we connect with.

MODEM:
As a co-founder of Fashion Revolution, you built a global movement, yet you have since taken new paths. How has your perspective on activism and change in fashion evolved through this transition?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
Things feel even bigger now than they did back then, and fashion is a manifestation of our cultures. What is happening presently is beyond, - beyond clothes, it's culture defining, it's a question of right and wrong, life or death: we are on the brink. So I have retreated into a world where clothes are metaphors, and women are my priority. Women workers, clothes wearers, our bodies, our freedom, our emancipation. For the supply chain, for the future, as designers of objects and systems, Fashion Revolution has led me to my very first starting point: feminism. Stringent, rampant, vigorous feminism. I was born with a burning outrage that needs to be historically redefined: parity between men and women.
Sadly, frighteningly, we are going backwards.

MODEM:
Your career has been defined by working with textile waste and the principle of upcycling. What fascinates you most about the idea of creating value from what is often overlooked?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
Recuperating textiles and recuperating common sense. At the same time. Both are being wasted in a system that venerates speed and generates excess; excess fabrics, excess clothing, excess profits going into the wrong hands, the undeserving ones.

MODEM:
You often speak about the power of community and listening. How do you experience the role of community in the context of sustainable fashion, and where do you see the limits of collective action?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
I see no limits in collective actions, only the one that has been imposed as its nemesis: ego. The ego of the very very few over the power of many.
That is a design fault. Community is where you make it, your street, your cohort, your online acquaintances who often feel like close friends even though you never met irl. I will never stop believing that the masses matter less than the billionarses ruling the roost.

MODEM:
Caught between idealism and reality: Have there been moments when you doubted the effectiveness of fashion as a tool for social change? How do you cope with such

phases?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
All the time. I can't cope with it at all actually. I myself have been navigating idealism and reality and it's such a difficult and at times humiliating thing to do. However, when reality becomes dystopian, idealism is only another element of that spectrum.
Plus, I am old. Many of my utopias, my idealisms from over 20 years ago, things that seemed improbable, are now happening.
Take mending. Or bulk buying second hand. Nobody, absolutely nobody took me seriously when I was predicting it becoming huge, yet, I've been saying it since 2006.
I have been designing resistance since before it was a trend - so you see, I can trust myself even when I sound off the scale. But it is a lonely place at times, one where I regularly risk looking ridiculous in the eyes of many, so it takes strong legs to stand my ground.

MODEM:
Estethica stands for an aesthetic and ethical standard. What does good fashion mean to you, if certificates and marketing are set aside?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
In my opinion, the only good fashion is something you are prepared to mend, cheap or expensive, old or new.
Certificates mean little. Passion rules.

MODEM:
Between commitment and exhaustion, many people in the fashion industry reach their limits. What strategies help you avoid losing yourself or being harmed despite high expectations and constant challenges?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
I am fortunate. I am surrounded with love. I have a crazy non-traditional family unit comprising of many people: my husband / partner of 27 years whom I adore, and our children; my ex husbands and their families, our children and grandchildren; some very close colleagues and even closer friends.
I feel very forgiven and very protected at all times.
And, of course, I crochet.

MODEM:
For emerging designers, dealing with uncertainty and self-doubt is often a central issue. What perspectives or experiences can particularly support them in such situations?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
A hug, real or virtual. And the core belief that others matter just as much as they do. Again, it's back to that cohort, that unity, which is essential for mental health and business prosperity alike.

MODEM:
Looking back on your journey, what is the one principle you would like to pass on to the next generation regarding fashion, responsibility, and mental health?

ORSOLA DE CASTRO:
There is never one thing, one way, one person: never stop looking for the multitude. Never stop asking for help, relying on others, find as many people and as many paths to follow as you can.

Accompany others on their journeys even if it means abandoning yours for a little while, take detours, get lost, do it all wrong, start over.