

# WHO ARE YOU WEARING?



Images of animals can be found everywhere; in logos, advertising and on a broad variety of products. But what do you know about the actual puma on your shirt and what do these representations say about our relationships to them? In other words; “Who are you wearing?”

*Who Are You Wearing?* is a collection of one-of-a-kind, locally sourced, second-hand garments featuring illustrations, brand names and logos that represent various animals. Printed over these existing animal representations is an artwork developed for *Who Are You Wearing?*, a research project by Femke de Vries that explores the relationship between humans and non-human animals in fashion. This specific artwork—designed in collaboration with Alice Alloggio—was produced as part of her residency at LAB: Here//Too//For by Material Matters (Emily Carr University of Art + Design) and features images and texts about local animals from animal/nature advocates such as Alexandra Morton, David Suzuki, Dawn Dudek, Jackie Hildering, The Marine Detective and the Marine Education & Research Society.

Femke de Vries is an artist, researcher and teacher. Her practice mainly addresses the dominant industrial and commercial workings of fashion and the exploration of alternatives. She is the Co-Founder of Warehouse, an Amsterdam-based fashion platform, and is a Senior Lecturer at the MA Critical Fashion Practices at the ArtEZ University of Arts in the Netherlands.

During the month of August, Femke held a residency in LAB: Here//Too//For situated inside the Vancouver Art Gallery’s Fashion Fictions exhibition, an initiative that was created in partnership with Material Matters at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Much like the other artists who took residence in the lab, Femke spent her time in the space experimenting and developing an existing research project. During her time in the Lab, we had the opportunity to chat with Femke about her work and the *Who Are You Wearing?* collection that emerged from her research.



Photos: Lucie Mink

**Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG):** Could you tell me about the work you're currently conducting in the Lab?

**Femke de Vries (FdV):** What I'm working on in the Lab is part of a larger research project called *Who Are You Wearing?*. This question is typically asked to celebrities on the red carpet to inquire about the brand or designer they're wearing. However, I'm using this phrase to ask what kind of animal you're wearing, as the discussion around ethics in fashion often overlooks the treatment of animals. I have a strong personal interest in animals, and I want to address this gap in the conversation.

What I'm displaying here is a translation of a work that is part of my research called *Which Animal Is Present in Your Garment?*. Its original form is a cloakroom intervention that focuses on identifying the specific animal materials—such as hair/wool, leather, fur, down or silk—in the clothing that visitors of an event or location are wearing. In my installation here, which is a collection of visual and textual information about animals in the fashion industry and its media, as well as the social and cultural lives of these animals, I invite people to look at the animal present in the garment that they're wearing.

The original cloakroom intervention worked as follows: during a fashion conference *Ways of Caring – Practicing Solidarity* organized by State of Fashion in July 2022, I asked attendees to hang their coats or bags on racks assigned to specific animal materials. They would then fill out a questionnaire, which aimed to identify the type of animal in their garments. Often, people don't realize what kind of animal their

clothing is made from, even if the label says "leather," for example. The questionnaire also delves into their knowledge of the social and cultural lives of these animals. This approach encourages people to think more deeply about animals and their role in fashion.

I would add labels with unique information about these animals while the attendees were away. For instance, I would share facts like how geese have dialects or how parrots fall in love, which is called "thunderbolt." This unexpected information often sparked meaningful conversations when people picked up their garments.

**VAG:** So, the goal of this project is to raise awareness about the ethical treatment of animals in fashion and to educate people about the animal themselves?

**FdV:** Yes, exactly. The primary goal is to create awareness because there's generally more awareness about animal products in food, but not as much in fashion or other industries like furniture. The project aims to educate people about animals. Even if they know something is made from a cow, they might not understand what a cow's social and cultural life is like. This project is all about increasing awareness and turning people into ambassadors who can initiate conversations with others about animals through their clothes.



# Who Are You Wearing?



3. Vision doesn't penetrate most surfaces, but sounds bounce. Echolocation is the hunting tool that helps you see your way in the dark. Although you can't see the details, your sense of touch lets you feel the gaps. But whales can not only "see" in the dark, certain species can actually see inside other whales' echolocation fields, even how they use. Jani Lilly once suggested that, among whales and dolphins, echolocation on a friend might be considered rude. —Researcher Unknown



4. Culture is defined as information or behavior that is shared within a community and transmitted across generations. Generations through social learning. Culture has always been considered the unique hallmark of human societies. Until recently, the concept had never been studied to animals. —This YouTube channel



5. On a full day we work on an expedition up to 12 miles to collect samples. The water is very shallow. Catches, birds, seals, and crabs come from the water. There's a lot of things that we don't know about. We're still learning. There are no doubt uncertainties. I had seen no doubt uncertainties. I had seen no doubt uncertainties. I had seen no doubt uncertainties. —Researcher Unknown



6. Whales are no longer harmed by our direct actions. But in the last 100 years we have become more aware of the indirect actions that in a long run may pose as a big threat to the whales' existence. Instead of killing them with harpoons and rifles, we are slowly poisoning their habitat and their food supply. —Researcher Unknown



7. When killer whales swim together, they reveal their family tree with nearly every breath. In general, juveniles surface closest to their adult males are the next daughters and their offspring. As the young whales mature, the females form satellite groupings with their own babies, but their mothers continue to tank center of the pod, never abandoned or alone. —Alexandra Morton



8. While not all octopuses are "shy," octopuses are among the ocean's most intelligent animals. A sign of intelligence is the ability to learn from experience. Octopuses can learn to solve problems and use tools. They can also learn to recognize individual humans. —Researcher Unknown



9. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



10. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



11. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



12. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



13. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



14. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



15. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



16. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



17. Starfish see with the tips of their arms and sea urchins with their entire bodies. —Ed Yong



Photo: Ian Lefebvre

**VAG:** It's interesting how you use intriguing facts to engage people and make them more conscious of animals in fashion.

**FdV:** Yes, providing interesting facts can be a great way to start conversations and change perspectives. It's similar to what happened with the documentary *The Octopus Teacher* (2020), and what that did for aquaculture—you give insight into the lives of animals and the affective relations humans and animals can have and people become more aware, and ideally, start caring. I know this is a simplification, but it's a start.

**VAG:** Fashion plays a significant role in shaping our perception of animals and their place in our lives. Could you tell us more about your personal journey in this research?

**FdV:** My interest in animals has always been strong from a young age, but my interest in fashion developed over the years because of its creativity. I wanted to create things and fashion became the medium. The connection between these two interests wasn't immediately obvious to me, but over time, especially during visits to places like Malcolm Island, where I encountered various wildlife, the idea of combining these passions became clear.

I realized that I could address ethical issues within the fashion industry, which I had been aware of throughout my career. So, it's a combination of my deep interest in animals and my growing awareness of the ethical challenges in fashion that led me to this research. Doing this work is incredibly meaningful to me, and I believe it can make a positive impact.

**VAG:** I'm curious about your observations regarding animal welfare and sustainability in different regions, especially considering the integration of the various cultures you encounter. How do these factors vary between the Netherlands and Canada?

**FdV:** In the Netherlands, the relationship with animals is largely defined by industrial practices, particularly in the meat and dairy industries. The focus is on productivity, control and ownership. In contrast, when I came to Canada, I encountered different perspectives. Here, there's a stronger connection to local ecology and wildlife. There's a more holistic understanding of how everything in nature is interconnected. Indigenous knowledge systems also play a significant role in this understanding.

**VAG:** It's fascinating how perspectives on animals and nature can vary across regions. Being in the Lab must provide unique opportunities for your research. How does being in the Lab environment enhance your research compared to conducting it elsewhere?

**FdV:** It might seem unusual that I'm conducting this research in a lab, considering it's often associated with outdoor fieldwork. However, being in this Lab offers valuable interactions and insights. It allows me to connect with people from different backgrounds and cultures, which is already enriching.

Keith and H el ene from Material Matters also provided me with the support and space to create. I've developed questionnaires that spark interactions among visitors, which allows me to gather data and engage in conversations about the project. I'm not necessarily using lab equipment or materials, but the Lab facilitates a crucial aspect of my research—raising awareness and engaging with people.

**VAG:** It's clear that the lab environment provides a unique platform for your work. Also, your approach seems adaptable to different locations. Have you considered taking this project to other places around the world?

**FdV:** Absolutely. This project has the potential to be customized for various locations. I can tap into the local ecology and connect it to animals to create a tailored experience. The response and outcomes will differ depending on the region and its unique characteristics. And it can support local animal welfare and advocacy.

**VAG:** That's a very interesting aspect of your work—how it can adapt to different contexts and bring attention to local ecosystems and animals. Thank you for sharing your work and insights with us!

The *Who Are You Wearing?* collection and a set of limited edition risograph prints (11"x17") will be available for purchase at the Gallery Store beginning October 4, 2023. Profits will be donated to Alexandra Morton and the Marine Education & Research Society.

Be sure to stop by the Gallery Store to shop the *Who Are You Wearing?* collection in person and explore a world of experimental design practices at Fashion Fictions on view until October 9, 2023.

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Femke de Vries and H el ne Day Fraser  
Photo: Lucie Mink