

# Laura Sansone

is a textile designer, activist, and consultant. She is the creator of *Textile Lab* and is currently an Assistant Professor of Textiles at *Parsons The New School For Design*. She has developed initiatives that bring NY designers and farmers together with the goal of creating products that have social and environmental value.

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interdependencies, community, local food movement, added value, fiber, textile, Hudson Valley, New York City, New York State, farm, clothes, Greenmarket, Grow NYC, dye, plant dye, single use plastic, reusable, supply chain, market system, Rana Plaza, watershed, climate beneficial, carbon, soil, efficiany of scale ,rethinking economy, creativity, sustainability, locale textiles, deeper value, eco friendly, sheep, wool, thrifting

## Preliminary talk

Laura tells me, that she worked as a textile designer in home furnishings. She sees her expertise in textile, but what she does also as clearly relatable to fashion and even more since she teaches at Parsons. I wanted to talk to Laura, because Otto von Busch told me, that she was dyeing textiles with students in the streets of New York...

**Laura Sansone:** So my journey about ethical textile production kind of started with this social engagement project, which is ongoing. I use it as part of my teaching practices at Parsons. I run a class called *Community Supported Textiles*. We integrate a mobile kitchen and workstation called *Textile Lab* into the curriculum and we bring it to the *Greenmarkets* in New York City. It was a part of my professional practice and it started maybe 10 years ago. I was at the time living on a farm in the Hudson Valley, which is north of New York City. It's a valley, that was formed by the Hudson River. There are a lot of farms and my neighbor was farming the property that I was living on. I was producing textile products in my studio and I was looking at soil-to-soil production methods and started thinking about using natural dyes, you know, so that things could go back into the earth. My neighbor was also selling at the *Greenmarket* here at Union Square, which is in the neighborhood of Parsons, where I was teaching, so I became really aware of the materials that were from Upstate, that were carted down to the city and how important economically New York City is to the livelihood of farmers in the Upstate area. I started having focus on the *Greenmarket* system and thinking about interdependencies that exist in that kind of a small market setting, as opposed to global markets, which is what we are more familiar with now.

**Johanna Schwab:** *Greenmarket*, does that mean a weekly market?

**LS:** Yes, so the *Greenmarket* was established by an organization called *Grow NYC* in the 70s and it's a network of markets all over New York City, including the five boroughs. *Grow NYC* produces a lot of programs for the the public, you know, around healthy environments, healthy eating, (..) the *Greenmarket* is one program and it was a way to create a forum for these farmers, to sell their products. It is so important.

It has grown over the decades, especially as the local food movement has exploded over the past 20/30 years, well more than 20 years I think. There's a movement in clothing and textiles, it's following the same trajectory as local food. About 10 years ago, I became really aware of this link between textiles and farming and food production. I used the market as a place to conduct this kind of social engagement with people, to get them to understand where their clothing comes from. My classes and me, we still go there and engage with the public. It's now a lot of people that are thinking about where their T-shirt comes from, that it comes from a farm, it's grown on a farm. About 10 years ago, people weren't really thinking about that as much. So we (she and her students) would use the added value products that like the meat producers would sell, they would sell yarn, fleece... we would also gather materials to make natural dyes like flowers and food materials and we would dye at the market. We would spin, handcraft and knit. These activities in public started to raise awareness and stimulate conversation around where our clothing comes from, what it's made out of.

That really started the work that I'm doing now, which is consultation with designers and growing supply chains regionally within 300 miles from New York City, working with local mills and developing yarns and textiles. But it really started in this small market system, because I recognized that there was this forum for interdependencies. You'd have the textile recycling in the market, the clothing drop, you'd have the composting collectors, you could buy the food there and you could make dyes from the food, textile dyes. You could buy fiber as an added value material from the meat producers. Everything was sort of right there. And there's also interesting alternative economies that developed between producers, I noticed, like bartering. Things like that happen in a small market system as with other smaller market systems too. If you do trade shows, as a designer sometimes you make trades with other participants, who are selling their products - in these small systems, you can have this mutual trust that can develop. We don't have that in big market systems, we have centralized entities that oversee trust, right? So all of these ideas got stimulated in this setting of a *Greenmarket* for me...

So physically I have a mobile kitchen and workstation. I built two of them. One of them is out of commission. Years ago I got funding from an organization called *City Atlas*. They gave me some funding to build a micro *Textile Lab*. The one that we have at school is about the size of this table, it's about five feet long. It's pretty big, but it's on wheels and we wheel it over there (to the Greenmarket). It's always a real joy to be there, just because of the social engagement aspect, and we work on other projects now. Last semester, in tandem with Earth Day, we did a project where we collected muslin from the school. A lot of the fashion students, make their sampling from just cotton muslin. We collected it and we cut it into squares and we brought thickened dyes to the market, plant dyes and we got wax from the honey producers of the market. So this is what I mean about interdependencies that can develop. People came and we waxed the muslin and made wax food wraps, because that's something that replaces single use plastic. So it was a really great way to celebrate Earth Day and to talk about single use plastic with people and to keep things out of the waste stream. So yeah, I do projects like that. I did many over the years I've been collaborating with the *Greenmarket* now since 2010, I think, it's been a while, it's been almost 10 years. So we made reusable foodbags, you know, they have a plastic bag issue at the market. It's hard for them to overcome it, because plastic bags are so much cheaper and although more farmers I think are using

paper bags now, but anyway, we made reusable bags out of old T-shirts...

JS: In Germany they will be forbidden soon, the plastic bags...

LS: Yeah, I think we have some legislation in the city now, that they're going to ban them as well.

JS: Did I hear it right, you are dyeing with meat products?

LS: No, the meat producers make wool, so there is yarn and wool that is accessible, which is really exciting. They also make other added value products like soaps.

JS: I read about this mobile kitchen, but that there is also this bigger roof which is called *New York Textile Lab*?

LS: So yeah, the *Textile Lab* is here at the school and that's what we wheel over. It has burners, it has equipment for dyeing, carders, and we bring over spindles, so things are stored in it. It's a cabinet and there's a butcher block on top of it, and we can chop vegetables and make dyes. But *New York Textile Lab* is my business as well. It kind of has flourished into something larger at this point.

JS: How would you describe that? It's what you said with the consulting... designers contact you, because they need a special fabric and you connect them with the farmers?

LS: There's been an explosion since 2013, when the Rana Plaza collapse happened in Bangladesh. There was this awareness in the fashion industry, that the industry was problematic as well as practices of fashion. So there's been a growing interest with designers to source more ethically, to show transparency with their products and to understand where their fibers are coming from; their materials. So my focus has been on stimulating regional economies in New York State and actually in the North East. I kind of use New York City as the central point and circle 300 miles around that, to capture whatever infrastructures are left of spinning mills, weaving mills and knitting factories, and also to capture farms and use their materials. So we are making yarns and textiles that are sourced locally. And I've partnered with the *Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC)*. They were organized in the 1980s because there was recognition that some of the practices that the farmers were doing on their farms were actually polluting the watershed and the reservoirs. All of our city's water comes from Upstate, from the Catskills and the Hudson Valley... So, the farmers: their fertilizing practices, their phosphates and other things we're getting into the watershed. Rather than a mandate coming from the government, the farmers decided to just kind of self organize. It was a really beautiful decentralized moment of the farmers, to take on this idea of stewardship to the environment. And the *WAC* was developed as a way to help facilitate better farm management. They do soil testing to see the water holding capacity of the soil and other things, and it's a way to create healthier soil and to use protocols on the farm that are safer for water health. The same test that they are doing for the water health and the soil is conducive for carbon sequestration. Because as you know, our carbon cycle is all out of whack. This is why we have climate change happening. The soil is one of the biggest mitigators or can be potentially one of the biggest mitigators of greenhouse gas emission, like we can be sequestering carbon and we can be creating climate beneficial products.

I as a designer, I'm really interested in making textiles that are climate beneficial. If I'm going to make stuff, I want it to be good for the environment and good for economies, like building local economies. This idea of sequestering carbon in the yarns and textiles that I'm using, it's super exciting, and I'm trying to get other designers to be excited about it as well. So partnering with the *WAC* has enabled us to develop carbon farm plans and I developed something called the *New York State Regional Yarn Source Book*, which is a library of materials that I share with designers. It's sort of a catalog that designers can go to, to source materials. Some of the farms that we're putting into the book now, sign on to this carbon farm plan. That means, that they are practicing soil health and regenerative farming practices that can help sequester carbon. It's really exciting... I just bought a bunch of alpaca. One of the farms that is signed on to this program, is one of our big alpaca farms and I'm blending it with the wool and making some new yarn for the season, so 50% of it is farmed with climate beneficial farming practices.

**JS:** But that's what you do in Hudson Valley, this process, and that's where you have the sheep, like you have a farm there?

**LS:** I actually have goats. My life is very small. I have a very small living space and I have a garden and a backyard and some miniature goats, that are my pets, because I love goats. I love being around farm animals. I work with lots of farms in Upstate New York, sheep farms, alpaca farms. I have someone in Pennsylvania that I work with, who's an amazing angorra goat farmer. He makes exquisite mohair. And I know some cashmere producers, so there's a variety of fibers that we have. I really see New York City and the larger State of New York as being connected. I'm always thinking about those entities, like having a link to one another. Creating this transparency is so important.

**JS:** I read about your initiative, that it's *recognized internationally as a significant economic revitalization effort on the East Coast*. It sounds like that there was something before and it got lost?

**LS:** Well, in the US, in the 70s, we started outsourcing our production. There have been trade policies, that have been implemented, that have helped facilitate this idea of outsourcing to find cheaper labor, of course, to produce our textile goods. So this has been decades going on in this direction of disconnecting from how we make things and who makes things. And now it's a global issue because this isn't only the US, but in this country in particular, it's been going for decades. Since I was little, this has been happening. So with food, because I am always making this link between food and textiles, with food, we started realizing that our food systems were not healthy, right? Because things were remote and centralized. So for the past few decades we've had this local food movement happening, which is really exciting, especially in the region where I live, in the Hudson Valley, you know it's very upfront there. A lot of people are aware of the farms and the local food. And of course *Grow NYC* helps to raise awareness around that as well. So textiles is now following this trajectory, this same kind of path, because since Rana Plaza collapsed, there's been a recognition that we need to bring clothing and textile production closer to home again, so we understand the source of our materials and who's making things and that we know that the money's going

back into communities, rather than, going somewhere remotely where we don't know, even if people are getting paid properly living wages. So this are the ideas around these revitalization.

**JS:** Yeah, that's interesting. And I was wondering, when you teach, do you feel like there's a shift? I was an art student and I wanted to be a fashion student before. It was always about expression for me. Some years ago, I wasn't so far. I felt like I want to express myself, but I don't want to think too much about sustainability. Do you think there is a shift happening in the students ?

**LS:** I think there is, I think with the younger generation, there's definitely a shift in terms of importance. I think it has become a big priority, not just environmental issues but socio economic issues. Also, I think, younger students are aware of what's going on; this income disparity that has been going on for a long time in the US and in other places around. I mean it's a global issue, so I'm seeing, all of this is related, you know, and the students know this and they're very receptive to making a change and using design to elicit change in one way or another and to be responsible. We ask them to put things out there, in the world, but they have to put things out there in the world with responsibility. So we're responsible that they understand where things are coming from and what happens to things when their useful life is over. So they are looking at the life cycle and everything involved in production. So it's not just about making cool stuff anymore (laughs).

When I was a student, it was more about that. We didn't think about any of these things, really not too much. Especially when it came to industrial materials. I mean with handcrafted items it was different, you know, you kind of understood the community where things came from. When it came to industrial textiles and clothing, we didn't think at all about the communities behind them - cotton growing or the wool, where things came from geographically.

**JS:** How did this start? Where does your love for textile come from? And when was the shift, like when did you feel I want to go in this direction?

**LS:** Yeah, so I studied textiles my whole adult life, in college, and then went on in graduate school. I've always studied textiles, it's been a love of mine. The biggest person who influenced me was my grandmother. My father's mother was a seamstress. She worked professionally as a seamstress. My grandfather was, they were from Italy and they worked in the garment industry. Here in New York they lived on Staten Island. They were really involved in the manufacturing process and my grandmother was really skilled and she sewed. She taught me how to sew and crochet. I was very young when I learned all these things. So that's where the love originally started, you know, but then, I decided to study it in college. I like to make things, as many people do. Honestly, what has kept the manufacturing alive in this country has been the handcrafting community. And I always explain to people really what's happening with manufacturing is sort of this figure eight, you know, because we started off in America, with this putting out system which was a very small cottage industry, pre industrial, so this is in the 19th century. People were weaving in their homes

and spinning; they had little farms. This is before people started moving to the cities, to work in factories. There were merchants who would go around and collect items to sell at the market, so there was always a middleman, who was usually a man, would go around and collect and sell yarns and textiles. And then mechanization happened, invention, the Industrial Revolution and things moved to the city and people left the farms to live in the city and make potentially more money. They were seeking a better life, of course. And then we started outsourcing, as I mentioned, and so we went back to this handcrafting. A lot of the mills that still exist have existed through selling handcrafting yarns, basically. They do custom spinning but they also sell handcrafting yarns. So the handcrafting community has just kept getting things going. And now we're going back. And I'm very engaged in this whole concept of going back to commercial textile development, but doing it in a different way, doing it in a way that's decentralized, where we don't have middleman, because that's where you find things get inflated (pricing) or things get obscured, when there's a middle person buying something and selling it to somebody else. So my ethos is about teaching other designers how to navigate the supply chain as difficult as it is. Right now, because we have so little left cutting out the middle market piece and really addressing decentralization, that's where I see this issue with monopolies and economic centralization. And we have a lack of diversity with materials as well, because of centralization in the industry.

**JS:** I wrote exactly that down, *help grow an economically diverse textile supply ecosystem*, because that's what you strive for, that farms are specialized in different things; to have this variety?

**LS:** Now there are challenges around that though, I won't lie. There's something about that thing called efficiency of scale, which is very real. And capitalism works very well with efficiency of scale, those two things go together. I really consider what I'm doing as rethinking our economic system as well. So when we're talking about decentralization, we really need tools to figure out how to produce in smaller systems and it's not easy, it really is not easy. And of course, the price goes up, as you mentioned earlier, I mean, that's a given. Because efficiency of scale brings prices down, right?! But it also does other things: it destroys the environment, it centralizes economic power.

I don't have answers to everything at all, not even proposing that. I'm in it as a designer, and I'm working to make change. I'm trying to be a game changer in the system. And how am I doing that? By, like I said, decentralizing, connecting designers directly to farmers cutting out this idea of the middle market so that the designers can see where the farm is, go there, collect their fiber. (...)

So, you know, it is more expensive, just as the local food movement has been pricier and still continues to be. I mean, it's come down somewhat, but it still continues to have that issue. But I think as consumers in general, we have to really change our purchasing behaviors. We follow this fast fashion paradigm of buying lots of clothing and not creating meaningful bonds between objects in general, so this is really looking at the whole picture and the whole supply network. I don't think of supply chains as necessarily linear chains, I think of them as networks, like ecosystems. We have to rethink our relationship to what we buy and how we can embed deeper value into our clothing and textiles. And for me deeper value means that it was sourced on a farm that is practicing regenerative farming and it's maybe spun in

a factory with a mill owner who is transparent and ethical, and pays a living wage to their workers. Or it's sewn in a factory that has a regenerative energy practice, has solar energy or generates energy. We need to start rewarding for these practices, better practices. We can't keep moving forward the way we're moving forward.

**JS:** Totally, but I was wondering, because being at the university, this bubble thing you know.., when are moments, when you feel you are actually interacting with consumers, of course everybody is one, but I mean the people who are still into fast fashion maybe?

**LS:** It is really super challenging. I have moments of being elated and feeling like, oh, there's so many people who are getting it and doing things differently in there and then I recognize that there are still so many people that are just blindly buying at Target and Walmart. I mean, it's not like these changes can happen overnight either, but the more that people understand the implications of their consumer practices, the effects of what they're doing to the environment, and to even the people who are behind making clothing, the more awareness that revolves around that, the more change will happen. We have a president now who doesn't believe in (climate change), he's messaging the opposite, he's giving people the opposite. I, of course, surround myself with people who have the same understanding, but I mean our policy makers are important. So we have to put people in office who are fighting for the right thing.

**JS:** I don't know if you want to talk about that, but in this textile chapter of the university, is it all about sustainability or are there conflicts around that; different approaches?

**LS:** Oh, yeah, I mean, so when I teach textile design, I don't use synthetic dyes. I just don't. I mean, in the industry we've developed low impact dyes that are appropriate for dyeing clothing, but if I'm going to teach students to work with their hands and to make things I'm not going to teach them how to use synthetic dyes. This is just my personal boundary, but plenty of other faculty do. I'm very serious about the waste that I generate and this is what I teach. I practice it and I teach it.

Joel Towers, our former Executive Dean, was very aligned with sustainability. So we have courses that are mandatory that students take, that introduce them to sustainable thinking and systems; thinking around sustainability and understanding interdependencies and interconnections like some of the ideas that I've been talking about. I think Parsons is really progressive, in that way for sure, which is a good thing.

**JS:** Maybe this question is not so easy, but where do you think, creativity comes into sustainability? How would you connect those words?

**LS:** Yeah, I think that's a beautiful way to present it, because we have to be creative in order to be (sustainable). I mean it is about solving problems, you have to do that in a creative way. For example there's a big movement happening right now around localism and developing regional fiber systems, like working with farms... It started out on the West Coast with an organization called *Fiber Shed* of which I've been affiliated and my company is. And out West they have giant ranches and that's what they call their strategic geography.

They're taking advantage of the fact, that they have thousands of pounds of wool and fiber that they're generating, and they can make lots of, so they have that efficiency of scale that we don't have here in New York. New York has never been a giant wool producer that way. I mean, there was a blip in in the turn of the century, in the 19th century, where we had a lot of fiber production going on, but I don't think New York has ever really been considered a big wool producing state, because we don't have the expanse of land, so we have smaller farms. I personally am working around that by blending fibers together to create volume, to be able to scale. And when I say scale, I'm not talking about scaling. I mean, we're still working in hundreds of pounds production systems, not thousands. It would be difficult for us to do that, at this moment. I don't even think the mills in our region could manage it. So I'm trying to work within what we consider our strategic geography, activating the middle center here, working to decentralize to get lots of people involved, lots of different mills ...some mills scour (washing wool & fiber) for me, some do the spinning, so, we're working with what we have. But what's really beautiful in terms of creativity, we can respond to the diversity that is present in our strategic geography, and also start to really look at how we can make a truly local textile, local to this region, because we do have certain breeds of sheep that grow here that can be raised here much more easily than other sheep, like the fine wools don't do so well in our region. The industry knows the fine wools all come from Australia, that they are the producer of merino.

JS: Oh, that's were I heard how cruel they treat these sheep...

LS: Yeah, I mean, that's what happens when you have these these centralized systems, that's where you see breakdown. That's where things fall apart and we see animal abuses, human rights abuses, economic abuses, environmental abuses. It all happens because things get too big, frankly, to have control. So we're faced with this overgrowth of capitalism and how do we reel it in and address it. It really has to do with restructuring. We're already starting to see ways to restructure our economic system. Blockchain technology is one such way, not the most sustainable way... Technology will definitely offer us tools for being able to start to assign this idea of deeper value and trust that I spoke about earlier. This wonderful trust that you can have, when you know your community, like the *Greenmarket* community or your small village, where mutual trust is easier to attain. We're going to be able to scale that through technology in the future. I mean, we have it all, everyone's carrying it in their pocket. The thing is, Google and Facebook, they own everything right now. So how do we take it back and own it collectively? So, it's so funny, because textiles lead to all these other ideas.

JS: That must be overwhelming from time to time or ?

LS: Sometimes.

JS: It's a good lense, but...

LS: I hope, I love to see it, I am middle aged and I'm like, okay, it takes decades for things to happen. I hope it happens in my lifetime...I mean, the path, we're going, it's going to get to a point where our survival will depend on it, you know? I mean it's the reality, we know what's going on with our climate.

**JS:** That's super naive, but I heard, that there is so much textile already in this world, that one could also ask, why do you produce more textile?

**LS:** I agree, I completely agree. That's why I refuse to produce anything, unless it's going to be doing something good for the environment and for communities but, yeah, I'm in complete agreement with that. And I do a lot of repurposing projects with people, like Indigo dipping and there's a lot that can happen on that end and I try to either buy from independent, very small producer designers, or I buy second hand clothes.

**JS:** Me too.

**LS:** Yeah, I do it. I mean, yeah, there's an economic component to that... I mean there's some things like underwear and shoes that you must buy new. But there's so many good products out there that are still viable so why shouldn't we just be reselling them?

**JS:** And you know, I like going to a thrift shop, I think it's more interesting. Because I'm so bored by this color topics for the season...

**LS:** This has to do with what we were speaking about before: efficiency of scale and lack of diversity in the industry, and you're right, you see the same things and it's boring. I think people are beginning to kind of feel that way, (too). They're starting to mix. There's this homemakers movement that's been going on for a while now. DIY and making and all of this ties into the conversation we're having.

Since Laura was so amazing to give me an Interview during Lunchbreak, we had to wrap up our talk at this point. While we were packing our things together she invited me to visit her in the Valley and told me about the *Sheep and Wool Festival* in Rhinebeck near New York City, where they e.g. do sheep herding demonstrations. Thank you Laura for this awesome conversation!