Textile industry searches for solutions to prevent it becoming planet's biggest polluter at Copenhagen Fashion Summit

By Olivier Guyot - 18 May 2018

What place better than an auditorium for bringing the fashion sector's biggest players together and getting them singing from the same hymn sheet? Over two days, the sixth edition of the Copenhagen Fashion Summit, which drew to a close on Wednesday evening, discussed a slate of innovative industry solutions and threw out ecological and social challenges to the assembled representatives of the sector. Not that the tone was in any way extremist: the event, which is organized by the Global Fashion Agenda team led by Eva Kruse, is particular in that it has the support of a number of important companies operating in the fashion industry. Panels taking place at the event in the Danish capital were therefore able to bring together managers from H&M, Nice, C&A and Li&Fung with representatives from unions, associations and other institutions, as well as the founders of much smaller brands.

Many of the speeches and discussions allowed audiences to gain valuable perspective and insight on the issues discussed. Eco-pioneer Stella McCartney – who received perhaps the most applause out of all the speakers –, spoke about her own journey developing her eco-friendly approach, emphasising the lack of support she felt from the rest of the industry when she set out to change her ecological and ethical practises. Now that she is in a position to buy back the shares that Kering owns in her company, she says that she is proud: "the separation is an agreement. But in our industry, there are very few independent companies headed by women. I want to be one of them," she stated.

In his presentation, entrepreneur and academic David Roberts chose the metaphor of a spaceship to describe the planet. "Water and air are not infinite on Earth. We only have one ship," said the Californian, before going on to make a particularly effective point: "Oil is the most polluting industry on the planet. The textile industry takes second place."

Making reference to a series of historical examples, he explained that technologies do not disappear, but are replaced. "For decades, the traffic of horse-drawn carriages, and therefore the level of horse excrement, continued to rise despite the initiatives of cities like New York. As soon as the car was democratized, it only took four years..."
to rise despite the initiatives of cities like New York. As soon as the car was democratized, it only took four years for horses to be replaced. Just because we're no longer in the stone age, doesn't mean that there are no more stones." In the case of oil, competition from solar and wind power could well herald a decline in the usage of this resource. "It's good news. But what's less good news for you is that the textile industry will soon be the most polluting industry in the world, because at the moment you don't have solar power. And you'll soon see what it feels like to win a first prize that nobody wants."

Indeed, if we consider the fact that only 1% of textiles that are produced are reused to make another item of clothing, or that almost a third of the industry's companies still haven't developed any initiatives in order to improve their environmental and social practises, the overall image that we get of the fashion sector is alarming. While still not exactly painting a pretty picture, some of the other panels generated more positive vibes.

Ellen MacArthur's "Make Fashion Circular" initiative, which aims to establish practises that would develop a truly circular economy in the fashion industry, is attracting an increasing number of brands and manufacturers. The retired sailor's fame and determination have helped her get more than fifty brands on board, including a number of important labels such as Burberry, Nike and H&M.

"The biggest players in the plastic industry have worked together to find a solution for packaging. That helped with regulation," explained the British activist, who is convinced of the need for cooperation in the sector. "We need to collaborate on a single vision. We have to work together so that it can happen on a global level".

Progress in automatization and IT systems have allowed the industry to develop faster solutions which better meet the expectations of final consumers, while also reducing unsold merchandise. As for Pete Santora of Softwear Automation, who has developed a machine which optimizes the processes of cutting, sewing and assembling apparel and footwear, he dreams of local distribution circuits with factories that are geographically close to their customers.

An interesting and persuasive example of the development of a responsible business strategy came from China, where consumers are increasingly confronted with problems linked to pollution in their country. For Robby Gu, vice president for innovation at JNBY Group, developing responsible collections is not only about social engagement: "it's about a lot more than that," explained the executive. "It's an economic benefit for us. We came up against the problem of other companies copying our products. But by developing responsible sourcing and the using quality materials, we ensure that customers can tell the difference because of the feel and smell of our products. For us.
For us, it's a really convincing argument and we will continue to develop collections with recycled textiles and other materials."

This is one of the central ideas of the summit. All the speakers admitted that adopting a responsible approach can imply costs and that it is often complicated for small or medium-sized businesses to know how to get started. But in the mid to long term, these commitments pay off, with 1-2% growth in EBIT margin predicted for companies that make them.

Needless to say though, to make real progress, the industry must turn over a new leaf. A number of initiatives already exist, covering ideas from the circular economy to innovative labor practices and new materials. Some were presented at an innovation forum where emerging companies were on the look out for established partners to help them bring their solutions to life.

"The problem facing these companies is how to move on from a first phase of development to the global application of these innovations or better practises," explains Rick Darling, managing director of Li&Fung Trading. "We need decisive actions."

And these decisive actions have to involve everyone, from brands to vendors, to national and international authorities, with whom new regulations must be thrashed out. It's clear that a collective push forward would be a real game changer.

"When I think about the road we've travelled since last September in terms of protecting models during Fashion Weeks, it's impressive," remarked Marie-Claire Daveu, chief sustainability officer at Kering, during a panel discussing the #MeToo movement and its impact on the industry. "There are very few issues to which LVMH and Kering will both put their names to. But when it's about a subject of that scale, the change is radical." Now it's up to the industry to show that this kind of drastic change can also happen in environmental and social issues.

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