

100% fabulous

by Silvia Bombardini



Eileen Fisher

“Why is our goal 0% bad? Why can’t our goal be 100% fabulous?”. William – Bill – McDonough, one of the world’s leading advocates for a circular economy and co-author of the movement’s bible *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, introduced the fifth edition of the Copenhagen Fashion Summit with a call for more wholesome and ambitious reforms. A nine-hour programme replete with purpose and numbers would follow, driven by the overarching theme of a *commitment to change* – seeking to redefine sustainability in terms of data and quantifiable intervention, instead of symbolic gestures and good intentions. Hosted by Amber Valletta and Tyler Brûlé, the Summit saw over fifty high-level speakers taking stage, lawyers and analysts, politicians and entrepreneurs. But to reimagine a system from the bottom up it’s its foundation that first needs to be questioned, and Bill’s rhetorical exercises set out to do just this: asking why we call consumer *goods* what may well be consumer *bads*, and how to go about changing the question of commerce from ‘how much can I get for how little I give?’ to ‘how much can I give for all that I get?’. Indeed,

from a closed-loop philosophy to its execution will still be a long way. *“It’s going to take forever”* McDonough conceded, *“that’s the point”*.

To ease brands’ first steps on the circular path, the Global Fashion Agenda issued this month an online pledge. Those who sign it commit to implement design strategies for cyclability, increase the volume of used garments collected and resold, as well as the share of garments made from recycled textile fibres. But it’s more than just promises, for once: the signatories – Adidas, Lacoste, H&M and more are already on board – will set their own targets for 2020, receive a toolbox with expert advice on how to achieve them, and be asked to report regularly on their progress. Together with The Boston Consulting Group, the GFA also just launched the inaugural edition of the *Pulse of the Fashion Industry*, a 139-page sobering report that vows to rate annually from now on the sustainability performance of fashion as a whole, drawing on the Sustainable Apparel Coalition’s Higg Index. *“In order for something to be alive it needs to have growth”* Bill McDonough had said, *“fashion is a living thing”*. According to these data, just barely: fashion’s pulse beats at a weak 32 out of 100 points, a score that will threaten the industry’s growth if it doesn’t improve in the near future. Indeed, the *Pulse* makes a persuasive, if worrisome, case for profitability. As the world’s population swells, apparel consumption is projected to rise by 63% to 102 million tons by 2030. As a result, our planet’s limited natural resources will be spread ever thinner, and the costs of materials and energy both will rise. It’s time to prepare for a future when we’ll have to choose carefully what to use clean water for. Once that’s the case, indigo dyeing is unlikely to be high on our list of priorities.

Let’s not sugarcoat it, the prognosis is bad, but not quite hopeless yet. In fact, this state of emergency may even turn out to be the catalyst we needed to bring change forth. *“Designers have to be optimistic about the future. That’s what design is.”* agreed Zowie Broach, Head of Fashion at London’s Royal College of Arts, who was a guest at the Summit. Talking about her students, designers in the making, she added: *“interestingly the very negative, uncertain times we’re in, are really steering them to understand their own power”*. *“What they really need to see is the big brands leading. Otherwise it’s like having a parent who’s waiting for the child to get it right”* she argued. The notion of big brands providing guidance, even mentorship to young companies, was a prevalent line of thought throughout the day. Big brands are the ones that score higher pulse-wise, and that’s because most of the environmental impact happens deep in the supply chain, at sheep-level. The great mass of small to midsize firms, representing around half of the market, have no control over it at all. Only through collective efforts will brands of all sizes be able to change the way the system works. Otherwise, even the most impressive achievements of conscious green giants will be for nought. *“A few years ago someone asked me: Eileen, so you have this ambitious vision of becoming a 100% sustainable company by 2020, but what happens when you get there?”* recalled Eileen Fisher, who announced this formidable goal for her eponymous brand back in 2015. *“Well, it’s not gonna be good enough. If we get there, we’re just a drop in a bucket. We have to all get there. We must share, we must partner and be inspired by one another, that’s why we’re all here”* she urged.

Even so, the complexity of fashion's supply chain might be discouraging, and attempts toward its redemption in the name of transparency could be perceived as something of a Sisyphean task. But it's been done, successfully, at least once before – with jewellery. *“Ten years ago I might have said conflict diamonds, or blood diamonds, were an existential threat to the industry”* remembered Tiffany's CEO Michael J. Kowalski, who joined the Summit for a conversation with *The New York Times'* Fashion Director Vanessa Friedman, *“but through a lot of good work on the behalf of governments and the strong participation of the NGO community, I think that problem is largely behind us. Probably 99% of the world's diamonds are now mined in a responsible way”*. On its part, Tiffany doesn't use new corals in any of its jewels, because corals aren't sustainable, nor rubies, because it's difficult to assure rubies' origins. It also sources most of its gold from a sustainable mine in Utah where employers are unionised and the environmental impact is measured. The reason why we don't immediately associate Tiffany with the green movement is that the company used to prefer keeping its good deeds under wraps. Clearly, this is no longer the case. Yet again, urgency prompted a change of direction. *“We realised that we really needed to use the moral power of the brand as a persuasive tool, and we began to advocate strongly for greater responsibility at mine-level, against climate change, for the protection of US public land from mine exploitation. We've simply began to speak more boldly about all this”* said Kowalski.

Of course, it helps that jewellery doesn't have an end life – as Friedman put it, *“diamonds don't end up in landfills!”*. If the apparel industry really aims for 100% fabulous, brands on their best behaviour won't be enough. 8.5 billion people will require clothing by 2030: to move beyond damage control, collaboration must go hand in hand with innovation. New environmental solutions will have to be pursued, new fibres and new production techniques to replace the old ones. Luckily, all of these are forthcoming. *“When we started to dive into the world of material science, biotech and smart textiles, we realised that there's a revolution actually happening in that world, and what seemed science fiction before it's becoming science fact nowadays”* promised Miroslava Duma, who earlier this year founded Fashion Tech Labs Venture Inc., a venture capital fund that helps new technologies and sustainable innovators connect and collaborate to reduce the social and environmental footprint of the industry. Among them there's an Italian company that produces textiles made of 100% recycled orange peels, and labs in San Francisco where leather and fur, even diamonds are grown by scientists. A technology is being developed to produce 100% compostable plastic bags, as well as another that would embed all kinds of fabric with peppermint, which has very strong antimicrobial properties and will keep clothing clean for longer – machine washing being a major cause of microplastic pollution in the oceans. *“The process of running the industry on 100% renewable and alternative energy and resources is inevitable, it will happen”* said Duma, *“it's just a matter of time”*. Soon, fashion will also be able to harness the transformative powers of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, from artificial intelligence to robotics and nanotechnology. *“3D printing will probably really explode about 20 years from now, but it will change the entire supply chain”* noted David Roberts, one of the world's top experts on disruptive innovation and exponentially advancing technology. He believes that each of us will have our own printer at home, and there'll be no need for factories anymore. Meanwhile, *“one of the winners of H&M's Global Change Award this year is looking to make a device that goes*

into textiles and gives any piece of fabric a unique ID number in the world. That may seem like a small capability but something like that essentially digitises an industry that it's completely un-digitised today" he explained, somehow enthusiastically "when you digitise an industry you'll then be able to digitalise it, and then you'll end up with big data. And when you have big data, you can then use AI to make very useful decisions. None of that happens today. Today we're really working in an industry that's not all that different than it was 1500 years ago".

But for any invention, or resolution, to really change the course of history it needs to be scaled. It needs to be shared universally, and adopted unconditionally by brands big and small all around the world. Should businesses fail to come together, to act spontaneously on a harmonized global level, regulations will be necessary – this is, admittedly, a likely scenario. For instance, clothing companies might be required to take back products at their end of life as it's already done in many countries for electronics, to pay a water tax, to respect minimum targets for durability and longevity and report the environmental impact of each product on their label. *"The slave trade wasn't abolished with customer choice and transparency, but by law"* observed Jessica Simor, a human rights lawyer who was recently working on another substantive report, into wages in the international fashion industry, launched at the Summit by women's rights organization The Circle. It showed that for all of this new awareness the fast fashion sector remains synonymous with poverty wages, directly affecting the 75 million garment workers in the supply chain, 85% of whom are women. It's nice to trust that legislations won't be needed – the *Pulse* writes down the intervention of regulators as a *fallback case*, the last resort. Personally though, I shall find some solace in the knowledge that we won't have to rely exclusively on businesses' capability for a concerted and comprehensive reform, on their good conscience and consciousness. That lawyers already are keeping an eye on it. After all, a massive transformation is needed, and fashion will be expected to take huge leaps of faith – in circular prosperity, in visionary innovations. To lay down a safety net, just in case, can only be wise.