

Slowear

by Silvia Bombardini



Christopher Raeburn REMADE, FW15 – via highsnobiety.com

This, that we live and browse, may just be the golden age of the instant. Forget *carpe diem*, never mind that minutes as we know them didn't occur till the middle ages – now every second counts, and we exist, online, in a perpetual state of stock market euphoria. Every real-life moment left unframed is perceived as a moment we've lost, irretrievable and soon forgotten by ourselves and others. Sunk in the darkened pits of digital amnesia, as if it never happened. Our memories have weakened, hence we rush to catalogue, to update, to retweet the first. Information that once gently flowed or streamed now wells up, floods in. We strive to stay afloat, to ride the wave, and breathe a little easier when we succeed. We've trained our minds, and hearts, to process content quicker than the pinwheel wait cursor spins when our page reloads, and we feel more intensely and more fleetingly at once. We live easy and fast, but anxious and pressured by constant reminders of our own temporality. We're younger adults, our workweeks stretch. We reschedule for earlier in an endless haste to save time, and our productivity appears limitless.

It's not. For an industry known to typecast sensitive, fastidious people at its core, fashion's tragic failure to look after its finest talents has brought the issue to the spotlight now and again over the past few months,

as top designers unhappy with the status quo went and removed themselves from the race. We've felt Raf Simons' pain – in passing of course, but keenly. After the Dior show that we hadn't yet known was to be his last, he spoke with [Tim Blanks](#) about an impossible wish to “*reject immediacy*”. The relentless pace of the industry, after all, already was said to be the reason why Azzedine Alaïa had turned down the offer of the same position, when asked to replace Galliano back in the day. Jonathan Saunders' *personal reasons* to step down have been left more private, but according to Vogue's [Sarah Mower](#), they “*can only really be viewed in the light of all the designer departures we've seen in 2015*”. Chief perhaps among them, was Alber Elbaz' after fourteen years at Lanvin. At a gala less than a week before his exit, the Moroccan Israeli designer had claimed that he needed more time, that everyone in the industry could use some: one may say that nobody listened, though even if they had, time is admittedly not the easiest of gifts to give. That's why it's so precious, that even high as it gets on the luxury scale, there's none to spare. Bowing to consumerism by way of pre-collections, high fashion labels are more or less bitterly, more or less smoothly, adopting the rhythms of high street turnover, catering to the spontaneous cravings of customers not keen on waiting those traditional six months after the runway pics hit their news feed. By the time a campaign is cast, shot and printed on billboards, the look already feels passé, and creatives are squeezed like lemons as the seasons blur. Though reform has been invoked by esteemed designers, the likes of [Christophe Lemaire](#) for example, no concrete step so far was taken to revolutionize, because nothing short of a revolution it would be, a well-oiled system that's profitable and satisfies many, if for shorter and shorter bouts. It's not entirely by negligence either: on an intellectual ground, its defenders reason that fashion is by definition not only a manifestation of continuous change, but hopeful expression of our immediate present. If society has evolved to live at the speed of the internet, then it's fashion's obligation to dress us by it.

Interestingly, it might be easier for younger brands, or labels that have long simmered outside the canonical fashion circus of established hierarchies and calendars, to commit from the beginning to a slower pace and focus rather on long-term growth. And the niche they were catering to has grown transversally, because speed loses its futurist appeal when urgency becomes the norm, and the adrenaline rush tones down to exhaustion. The Slow Movement, three years older in itself than the World Wide Web, spreads to more fields and gathers new disciples as digital natives are intrigued by the foreign idea of idleness, and find themselves willing to question and resist their own itch to hurry, for the chance to discover, and relish, the lasting joys of slowness. Possibly due to their distaste for impalpable web-like tempos, slow-makers and enthusiasts tend to share a heightened regard for a product's *thingness*, its physicality, its tactility as a not entirely figurative grounding weight. It's arguably the reason why, in spite of its announced demise, print media never actually died. On the contrary, a horde of new magazines with generous formats and mindful papers pile up on the shelf with all intention to stay, bound by a general disregard for regular publishing schedules that would have them obsolete in a matter of weeks. The finest achievement of what's been

called *slow journalism*, however, has undoubtedly been one of content: precise, rewarding and long-form, publications such as Kinfolk or Delayed Gratification set to re-educate the 140-character reader.



Honest by, Handwoven Harris Tweed

In fashion terms, such pursuit of thingness gives way to a keen awareness and renewed sensibility for textures and textiles, experienced and appreciated in the Barthesian sense, as *vital signifiers* of meaning. Take Bruno Pieters' "totally transparent" Honest by label, and their recently unveiled Handwoven Harris Tweed series. It might have been sketched by a renowned designer, who was once a critics' favourite at Delvaux and HUGO by Hugo Boss in the late noughties before he, too, felt the need to leave and take a break – but the capsule collection and its promotion almost exclusively call attention to the cloth. With good reason: the tweed is a rare gem, certified as "handwoven by the islanders at their homes in the Outer Hebrides, finished in the Outer Hebrides, and made from pure virgin wool dyed and spun in the Outer Hebrides". At a time when we've traded the changing room for a swipe, and even Honest by sells only online to cut the retail margin, slowear is texture-led, revalues the material intimacy of putting clothes on. The ideal fabric has the rustic weave of a rich and lengthy heritage, and is comfortable enough to make you purr. The cut of a sleeve, length of a hemline, begin to matter less, and design calms and softens on a broader scale. There's capes and ponchos on the catwalk, oversize blankets and floor-swiping throws to be worn as shawls. Fashion simplifies in pricey, square swatches of premium fabric for a cocooning effect, on the wake of lifestyle or media brands which have done something similar, like the ESK + Cereal cashmere blend scarf, or Eleanor Pritchard x Monocle throw, both still on sale at their respective webstores. London's The School of Life, that less than a month before Fashion Week had organized a Slow Fashion class teaching attendees how to "break away from trends" and "use your clothes to practice mindfulness on-the-go", sells

a Comfort Blanket that's maybe the best example of this – sourced in Inner Mongolia from the downy warm wool of local goats, it's said to provide *reassurance, consolation* and *retreat*. Endearingly mundane, blankets and throws remind us of another pastime, once taken for granted, that's become more and more of a luxury and is sorely missed in our speedy modern lives: sleep.

But just like in slow journalism, it's the story before the format that in slowear makes all the difference. As a whole, there's something almost therapeutic in the process of making things slowly, in the indulgence and cultivation of our own patience – it's said to encourage lucidity and relaxation, a healthy reconnection with both our minds and our rusty body clocks. It's why Marina Abramović had all those people counting grains of rice in London and Miami last year. Hand weavers and diehard knitters will tell you, as does Bernadette Murphy in Carl Honoré's *In Praise of Slowness*, that working on something and knowing that it won't be finished for a very long time will even help them to "*make peace with the unresolved nature of life*". One wonders if Faustine Steinmetz feels anything like it, when on a less amateurish, but still gloriously artisanal scale, a hand-loomed polo-shirt from her spring 2016 collection takes the Paris-born designer at least a week to make. In a similar vein, contemporary practices of slowear production look at the unhurried, spontaneous cycles of nature rather than the deliberate rounds imposed by the market. Pieters, but also Rad Hourani are well-known designers who work independently from such expectations, as do a slowly growing number of auspicious startups. *Slow Made* as per its tagline, London-based label Story mfg. vows not to work seasonally, and to never force people to work any faster. "*We're the pickiest people we know*" the founders state on their LinkedIn profile, "*and we won't pick unripe fruits*". Then there's Tara St James of Study NY who follows her own patented *Anti-[fashion]-Calendar*. Built, not the least bit cheekily, on the same model of a typical fast fashion timeline, it envisions monthly releases, but of no more than two or three styles at a time. The aim is to create by the end of the year a complete wardrobe "*void of frivolity or excess*", while each capsule collection on its own focuses on a different sustainable production method, like her zero-waste or natural dyes series. A case in point, natural dyeing is a beloved slow-process that is gaining momentum: ethical, compostable and backyard-friendly, the technique has been adapted to our modern sensibilities in a vegan key, meaning mostly no crushed insects or sea snails, but still dates back to the Neolithic. It's ridiculously slow, and for many of its fans, that's what makes it exciting. Forgotten in large parts of the developed world until not so long ago, its experimental practitioners already are looking for ways to widen their palette, introducing locally sourced dyestuffs like almond shells, hazelnuts and walnuts, coffee and wine, rosemary leaves, orange peel or potato starch, even mushrooms and onions to their vats. The Japanese Buaisou collective, that now offers indigo-dyeing workshops at their Brooklyn outpost, is a team of four artisan growing indigo leaves at a farm in the Tokushima Prefecture, which are harvested during the summer and watered once a week for 120 days as they compost through the winter. Combined with wheat bran, calcium hydroxide and ash lye, they're then left to ferment for some three to six months more, while taken care for daily. The resulting culture of living bacteria gives a luminous blue hue that's

murmured to increase fabrics' strength, be insect repellent, and with the aid of traditional aftertreatment, even allow for dyed garments to be washed together with white clothes without risk of colour migration or transfer. Another outspoken supporter of the use of slow-working bacteria for fashion purposes is Biocouture's Suzanne Lee, whose research focuses on the potential of microbial cellulose as an organic, bio-based alternative to traditional textiles. Lee shares her recipe online: vinegar, green tea, sugar and a symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeasts in an empty bathtub would take up to two to four weeks to grow into a leather-like, waxy material 2cm thick. It soaks up beetroot or blueberry dyes, and for it to last longer, she coats the finished garment with kakishibu – a fermented juice of unripe persimmons that was used in traditional Japan to protect firemen's paper overcoats from flames. Be it traditionally handspun or a highly innovative, seamless bacterial production, it's always the awareness of this amount of time, and care, taken by the artisans in its creation that loads a slowear garment with value to the eyes of its future wearer, in our fast-paced present more than ever before.



indigo-dyeing at the Buaisou workshop – via gearpatrol.com

Time and care, however, are not sole responsibility of the designer. A perhaps unique quality of slowear is how much of its identity is left for the end user to live up to. Wearing it slow, over and over and carefully, is a great part of what makes it so, sometimes independently from its provenance or original value. Slowear evokes experiences, holds on to memories, gives us a chance to grow attached to what we wear and thus becomes *well-loved*. It thrives in an experiential economy: items that don't come already imbued with an extraordinary story will do well if they're receptive of the wearer's own. The best way to be, naturally, is if they're built to last – strong rather than delicate, but not so much that they would live on immune to the passing of time. Denim, for example, is universally recognised as the textbook slowear textile: a casual

classic to be worn daily, through the years and weathers, it adapts to our bodies and movements and becomes still better with age, as it fades, crinkles and frays. Indeed, most new pairs of jeans we can buy today would already come battered, variously bruised or rumpled with mock worn-in finishes, resin-baked creases or whiskers. A more authentic approach is that of Christopher Raeburn, who taps into the storytelling potential of pre-worn fabrics but manages to do so while still producing and selling new garments within the confines of a traditional fashion week timeframe. For his seasonal limited edition REMADE series, the brand reclaims and upcycles military surplus, the likes of decommissioned life rafts, naval blankets and uniforms, deadstock sleeping bags and bivouac canopies, along with his trademark parachute silks. Lauded and awarded for the inherently sustainable nature of his process, Raeburn continues to insist that the high quality of the product and its history are what his work is really all about. Praiseworthy, large-scale examples of mass production companies attempting to extend the life of clothes, thus offering an alternative to the evil chain retailer stereotype, are H&M's *Close the Loop* collection of recycled garments or Uniqlo's "*not disposable*" LifeWear. In particular, the Japanese brand's commitment to salvage used garments has been topical as of late with a new goal of collecting ten million pieces of clothing by early 2016 in order to distribute them to refugees worldwide. Then there's Patagonia's Worn Wear programme: the label, that on Black Friday 2011 had famously ran a full-page *Don't Buy This Jacket* ad in The New York Times to encourage shoppers to think twice about before they purchase, now invites its customers to share online the story of any favourite piece of Patagonia clothing they own – from *the grandfather of all fleeces* to a 15-year-old fanny pack. In an article for Quartz published just a few weeks ago as an early New Year's resolution, CEO Rose Marcario asks readers to consider repair, an activity that the programme strongly promotes, as a *radical act* against "*a society of product-consumers, not owners*".