

The Future We Want

by Silvia Bombardini



Nike Flyknit Technology

It's in the city that by 2025 vows to become the first carbon neutral capital of the world, no wonder, that the Copenhagen Fashion Summit every two years takes place. Launched in 2009 alongside the United Nations Climate Change Conference, the non-profit event aims to sow the seeds of sustainable wisdom in what's shamefully become the second most polluting industry on Earth – according to the Danish Fashion Institute, fashion is second only to oil. Organised on behalf of the Nordic Fashion Association, under the steady patronage of Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Mary of Denmark, on May 12 the Summit gathers for its fourth edition around the overarching theme of *Responsible Innovation*, with a lush line-up of renowned voices in the fields of media to politics, activism, business and philanthropy – everyone who's anyone, from Suzy Menkes to Nadja Swarovski. A broad enough theme suits a broad enough movement: no longer a niche interest, sustainability has grown over the past few years into the core value to redefine luxury for generations to come; and upon which to build, or redeem, the fashion behaviours of the future.

But words can speak louder than deeds, and a call for action, despite our best intentions, is not quite action yet. It could, and has been argued that three years after the Rana Plaza collapse our vocal outrage has failed to achieve the substantial change we had foolishly believed it could. On the wake of the ambitious promises of recent months, i.e. the 17 Sustainable Development Goals approved by the UN General Assembly in September,

and the adoption in Paris of the first universal, legally binding global climate deal a few months later, a palpable sense of urgency informs the Summit in 2016, more strongly felt perhaps than it may have been in previous editions. There's no more time for baby steps, pats on the back and hums and nods at this or that piecemeal improvement. Livia Firth, Oxfam Global Ambassador and UN Leader of Change, as well as the Founder and Creative Director of Eco-Age, calls them the *Band-Aids* of a broken system – they've long proved unable to bring forth the radical change we need. *"Whichever way you do the math, incrementalism and efficiency measures will not get you there"* agrees Hannah Jones, Chief Sustainability Officer and VP, Innovation Accelerator at Nike *"we have no time to be satisfied with less bad"*. She demands for the entire industry to jointly converge towards a single code of conduct, one assessment tool, common monitoring protocols: in other words, written rules. For even as we like to maintain that change can be driven by virtue rather than force, we can no longer afford to rely purely on conscience and best efforts. The idea has more momentum than one might think: proto-codes of such sort are already in place in certain milieus. Any brand hoping to sell in Selfridges, for instance, needs to comply to the ethical standards that the department store's buyers are educated to pursue, which are set to influence, and inspire, designers and consumers both. Meanwhile, the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana recently published *Chemical Substance Guidelines*, a set of precepts that aim to reduce the use of specific groups of chemicals in the production processes of Italy's best known fashion labels. Because clothing companies with honourable goals won't save the planet working on their own – not even giants like Nike or H&M, nor Rick Ridgeway's Patagonia sadly enough. Competition, that's often excused as healthy and whether or not that may still be the case, now needs to make way for alliance. In Jones' words, it's time to collaborate *furiously*. Not just in between brands but within each: Firth, who's also a founding member of Annie Lennox's The Circle, a powerful women's advocacy group, insists that producers should work in partnership with brands, not in servitude to them. In this sector, where the workforce is predominantly female, this could be a substantial victory for gender empowerment too. To quote one of Nike's most familiarly catchy slogans – makers of the world, unite!

And yet, it would still only be but the tip of the iceberg. If a responsible fashion system is to replace our own, it will have to be built from the bottom up. A sold-out Summit welcomes over 1200 participants from 52 different countries, but is still, in many ways, preaching to the converted: a focal point of debate that comes up repeatedly through the day, is therefore on how best to engage the masses. Because fashion will always be an industry that caters to people's desires, and we wouldn't want it any differently – but for a chance to earn ourselves a sustainable future, first and foremost, we must learn as a whole to be content with less, and change the way we shop. We all got used to own so much more than we need or wear. For the general public at least, this requires every purchase to be almost morbidly cheap, and responsibility soon seems unaffordable. *"Nothing will ever change until the business model of fast fashion stays as it is"* warns Firth, *"continuing to addict us to crazy cycles of consumption"*. Rick Ridgeway, Patagonia's VP of Public Engagement, agrees. *"To achieve true sustainability"* he admits, *"we might just have to adjust our businesses and our business models to accommodate what, in our company, we actually assume is the inevitable reduction of global compounded annual consumption"*. Ridgeway is also a world-leading mountaineer, part of the first American team to climb K2 in

1978 and honoured by National Geographic with a *Lifetime Achievement in Adventure* award. He makes sure first-hand that Patagonia's clothes be made only from 100% organically grown cotton, their down feathers sourced from farms that don't force feed or live pluck the geese, their wetsuits crafted from natural rubber trees in Guatemala tapped by the locals in certified plantations, rather than neoprene made out of petroleum. Nonetheless, he as well appears to believe that it's in the hands of consumers that the ultimate power lies – precisely, in our willingness to form new habits. It doesn't end just with thinking twice before we buy, our responsibility towards our clothes lasts throughout their lifetime: a lifetime that initiatives like Patagonia's *Worn Wear* program, or Nudie Jeans' free in-store repairs, wish to extend. It could sound like bad business from a company's perspective, but it also builds a unique form of loyalty between brand and client, which Peter Frank, Nudie's Product Development Manager, confirms has worked wonders for them. Sustainability is always profitable in the long run, occasionally in very concrete ways. Take Nike's Flyknit technology: since its launch four years ago, it saved 3.5 million pounds of waste whilst allowing for trainers both lighter and stronger, engineered down to the pixel – and is now a billion dollar business.

Eventually, the best of products will be beyond repair, and that's when a responsible consumer will see to its recycling – all of the brands mentioned above have some use for our worn-out oldies, that they would collect and turn into textile fibres, fix and resell as second-hand clothes, or grind into the kind of rubber granules that pave running tracks and tennis courts. Closed-loop products and closed-loop value chains will be the spinning wheels of a new fashion industry: in the circular model that speakers and panellists all concur we should strive for, the thoroughly consumed is the raw material for a new cycle of production. Today's post-consumer, but also pre-consumer and post-industrial textile waste will be tomorrow's textile resource. The Summit's attendees are reminded of this by the most forward-thinking of all speeches, when 116 students of 40 different nationalities group on stage to present, to the industry at large, their demands for fashion's redemption. Drafted upon the United Nations' 17 SDGs, they're a list of ideas for corporate action that, when followed, will lead by 2030 to a fashion system they'll be proud to be working in. One where success, capital, and profit will mean something different than they do now.

Especially among younger generations, more conscious customers and more conscious designers are on the rise. True, a throughout understanding of the gravity of our situation may still be missing, and sustainability has yet to figure out, according to *The New York Times'* Fashion Director and Chief Fashion Critic Vanessa Friedman, the pop culture pitch that will make it sexy. The very word, in mainstream media and branding, was long believed to be best avoided – better to focus on the aesthetic qualities of a product, and only as an afterthought point out how decently it were made. But the need to mince words should no longer be indulged. We're learning to be responsible for our taste, and that what we consider good design is our choice. We're training ourselves to dig deeper: we wear more than just pretty clothes. There's a story between the threads that's our duty to tell.