Fashion Pact: NGOs say industry model needs to change

By Matthieu Guinebault - 29 August 2019

The Fashion Pact presented on August 23 to French President Emmanuel Macron, and three days later at the Biarritz G7 meeting, is a unique document for the number of major groups that signed it, from fast-fashion giants H&M and Inditex to luxury groups Kering and Hermès, to sporting brands Nike and Adidas. However, NGOs remain sceptical about the Pact, which pledges efforts that rely solely on voluntary action, and whose implementation is yet to be discussed.

For example, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), an organisation mentioned as a benchmark in the Pact, has been extremely cautious in assessing the latter’s scope, which is based on three commitments, one of which is the restoration of biodiversity. “Apparel consumption worldwide doubled between 2000 and 2014,” said Pierre Cannet, joint programme director at WWF France, talking to the AFP agency. “If the plan is to sell more and more [apparel] by resorting to renewable energy, it won’t be enough. The whole model needs to be reconsidered, cutting down output, making clothes that can be utilised longer, that won’t release microplastics when they are washed and that are sustainably produced,” he added.

Words that echo those of the Ethique sur l’Etiquette collective, a French organisation promoting corporate social responsibility. “In the last three decades, multinationals have made a plethora of voluntary engagements of this kind, but they never considered overhauling a business model that is catastrophic,” said Ethique sur l’Etiquette, adding that “Nike has signed the Fashion Pact, but also introduced a subscription (...) to buy up to ten pairs [of sneakers] per year; H&M refuses to acknowledge the term ‘fast-fashion’; Inditex refuses to be accountable to consumers or society. This pact is less than convincing, owing to the divergence between declarations and actions.”

According to Greenpeace, the Fashion Pact is “yet another instance of window dressing,” with no independent scrutiny of the progress that the signatories will claim to have made, at meetings scheduled on a yearly basis. “This industry absolutely needs to be regulated. Instead, Emmanuel Macron entrusted the 32 fashion industry signatories with the task of setting up their own rules, creating an evident conflict of interests. It is the state which
signatories with the task of setting up their own rules, creating an evident conflict of interests. It is the state which must regulate this market in the first instance, through legislation,” said Greenpeace.

"The state isn't the ideal enforcer"

Unsurprisingly, this position is the polar opposite of that held by Kering, whose boss François-Henri Pinault is the brains behind the Pact. “In fashion, the ideal enforcer isn’t the state, it's the consumers and citizens,” said last week Marie-Claire Daveu, chief sustainability officer and head of international institutional affairs for Kering, as journalists marvelled at the absence of independent scrutiny on future progress in this direction. “What counts for us aren’t the means but the results. When CEOs sign their names on a document like this, there have to be outcomes,” said Daveu.

According to Daveu, any failure by fashion labels to live up to their engagements will be sanctioned first of all on social media, with potentially “very significant” harm to the labels’ brand image. The same point made by the French Minister for Ecological Transition, who said she relies on “influencers and NGOs, which are keeping a close eye on the potential gap between words and actions.” NGOs which, however, have not been consulted during the project’s preparation. Nevertheless, Kering said NGOs will have a role to play, since they are already involved in several eco-responsible initiatives which the pact has been designed to harmonise.

A hasty initiative

Between the Pact’s presentation to the press on August 22 and its unveiling to the French President the day after, the number of signatories grew from 30 to 32, with the last-minute addition of the Karl Lagerfeld label and of luxury and fashion e-tailer MatchesFashion. A sign of what could eventually turn out to be the pact's real weakness: it
was drawn up in haste. It was mid-May when Emmanuel Macron tasked François-Henri Pinault with the initiative, and the latter will convene the document’s signatories to define its implementation in mid-October. Since May however, the pact’s unveiling had to bow to the G7 calendar, causing its definition to be rather rushed. “Mr Pinault had to go the extra mile this summer,” said Daveu.

This haste, remarkable for a project with such a far-reaching scope, leaves it open to potential backlash. Consumers, bombarded with ‘green’ labels and by news of controversies such as those involving the Better Cotton Initiative, have developed an almost instinctive mistrust of the ecological pledges made by fashion labels, even in those cases when their compliance is verified by independent bodies. The Fashion Pact doesn’t impose any constraints or controls on its signatories, and no campaign seems to have been readied to counteract potential suspicions of greenwashing.

It may be a fresh example of the widening gap between labels and clients, already highlighted by the French Fashion Institute at the end of 2018. The body carried out a survey after which it indicated that only 8% of fashion retailers put sustainable development at the heart of their strategies for 2019. When instead no less than 20% of consumers stated they bought at least one sustainable fashion product in 2018.

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