WORK-LIFE CHALLENGE

THE CHANGING FACE OF WORK IN FASHION'S B2B SECTOR

SEASON KICK-OFF
AW 20/21
CREATING OUR OWN RULES

What are you most looking forward in your work with the students?
Fashion is only one aspect of many other topics, so I’m already looking forward to seeing what happens when we mix this aspect with other disciplines. This isn’t my first time as a lecturer as I spent around five years teaching in Vienna at the University of Applied Arts. But this is a new challenge because my work at the HTW Berlin is very likely to be quite different. The plan is to share my 25 years of experience as a designer with the students and connect with them as best I can.

Young designers these days are confronted with an anti-cyclical fashion system that is creating short-lived trends at an increasingly faster pace. That was certainly different when you were a young designer. What do you think needs to change and what can you teach your students to help them deal with the hard realities of the fashion world?
Speed is inevitably the less exciting part of fashion. Personally, I rely a lot on working periodically, i.e. a few collections that are interconnected and follow the idea of slow fashion. I develop and improve them within this process, so to speak, while always having the option of adding something new. Fashion these days is lacking in quality, relying instead on quantity. We already have enough merchandise on this planet. I don’t think designers should be bringing hundreds of new pieces onto the market every season. There should be more focus: only really good and appealing clothing should be produced – not an easy task, because it would also require resolute policies and less greed from us. Slow fashion and clear ideas, instead of overproduction, are what we should be focusing for the future, especially the next generation.

You are setting a good example – but are others following suit?
Me and other designers, who work in similar ways, have certainly been inspiring for a lot of people – in the industry and the world of education. But it’s not just us. There are lots of Japanese and French designers who have all helped to inspire and I know that a lot of my work has been new, in a fashion genetic sense. As I said, the Hussein Chalayan brand has been used as reference for fashion education, but I’m not the only one. We have inspired many people and helped other designers, so I’d say yes, they have followed suit. It’s the nature of the work and it’s been exciting. I’m very grateful for that.

The career trajectory from designer to professor is nothing new and, in many respects, quite logical. This is a path that British fashion designer Hussein Chalayan has also taken. For the winter 2019/2020 semester he has taken up a professorship at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin (HTW Berlin), where he is teaching Fundamentals of Design and Design Processes.
An ideal opportunity to talk to him about the future of fashion and what it actually means to be a designer these days.

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What does it mean to be a designer nowadays?
It means being very active on social media, being a good communicator, and also a good networker; if you’ve created a voice that is sustainable then you have created a voice that will help you make it as a business. So in terms of success, connectivity is the most important word for me. You can be a very talented designer, but if you don’t have a network, if you don’t know people, if you’re not connecting digitally, no one will know about you. At the end of the day, it all comes down to connectivity, which can, in many cases, be more important than talent. I’d love to see it being more balanced because there are a lot of talented people out there who no one knows about. Even with the big brands: you hear about the creative directors but never about the designers who are actually doing the work. There’s a lot of smoke and mirrors in fashion and it’s about time that changed so that we really know who the talent is and respect them and show them appreciation.

Would you consider yourself and similar designers as part of the classic fashion system?
No. We function within the fashion system, but definitely have our own way of working. We try to create our own rules so we can actually work in a way that suits us. So although we might be seen as being part of the system, we do things our own way.

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