Photography by Tung Walsh. Conversation with Claire Thomson-Jonville.

On the necessity of sustainability for luxury brands, on seeing sustainable fashion as a new design opportunity and not a constraint, on the emotional motivations that inform our choices, and on the impact of our consumer habits on the environment.

Claire: There are different types of climate risks. One key risk is physical risk, which is basically about how changes in the climate are affecting your business. For example, are you going to be able to get your products from point A to point B; are you going to be able to grow the cotton that you need or the trees that you need? A good recent example of this kind of thing in practice is what happened in the US after Hurricane Irma in Florida. FEMA, the disaster recovery agency, was able to make sure that that money was distributed in the country to get involved in the massive disaster recovery efforts, and that affected all kinds of logistics for the private sector. Another key risk that is really important for the luxury industry is input risk, or the impacts on raw materials, as there are certain materials that you need to use in your supply chain because they won’t be available or they’re going to be a lesser quality.

Tara: Can you tell us more about the six key raw materials that are making a huge difference? Their quality is critical and how companies are making themselves vulnerable through using those?

Elisa: In the report we did in partnership with Kering, “Climate Change: Implications and Strategies for the Luxury Fashion Sector,” we looked at some of the raw materials used by the luxury industry—cotton, viscose, cashmere, leather, sheep and lamb leather, and silk—and what you can see is that climate change is affecting the availability and the quality of those materials and that’s going to get worse. And, if you look across other industries, you see the same thing in the beauty industry, where there is a big reliance on plant-based raw materials, it’s a similar story. So it’s really important for companies to understand how they are dependent on key materials and then what they can do to begin to fix the problems or turn things around, and that’s what we focused on in this study for BSR. It’s very hard for one company to fix a system. So, if you talk to cotton, for example, right now we’re over-sourcing cotton. There’s a lot of stress on the cotton in gin and harvest and issues with the people raising the goats, etc. And it’s not just one company that’s going to go in and fix that situation; it means you need to be a collaborator to companies, and that’s fine, but if you’re adding on that layer of making sure that, if you’re showing this beautiful fake fur coat, you are still setting aspirations for fur. In some places, this will mean using plastic alternatives or in other places they may be better off being more realistic about what they’re trying to do as a business. It’s not only climate change—a climate change is going to change the landscape and all of these sustainability investments are enabling that. The best definition of sustainability is “staying the course of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Elisa: We look across the complete spectrum: environmental and social. Workers in specific countries or trafficking, how they are paid, how they are treated, and what to do to change. We work with companies to think through how to change the current system. For example, companies are using a lot of resources and not really replenishing them; how can they move to have more regenerative models? It’s true that there is a lot of momentum in the industry these days to begin working towards different models and ways of working.

Claire: What are the risks to companies if they don’t start making changes to the supply chain and production processes?

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Claire: Sustainability is now no longer an option for luxury brands; it’s a necessity. Could you tell me the differences in approaches that you’ve seen over the last 10 years?

Elisa: First off, CEOs are talking about sustainability, and once you have leadership involved, then that ignites the energy and resources in companies. Finally, sustainability is becoming a main-stream conversation.

Tara: There is a significant dialog going on right now among luxury brands about their use of fur. Fur is the first thing man ever wore and it’s never gone away, so I personally don’t think it’s going to go anywhere. But we are seeing a lot of brands that have been traditional users of fur asking questions about it.

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TARA NORTON & ELISA NIEMTZOW

one that’s next to it that’s not part of the same collection? So that,
I think, is an interesting thing to work out.

Elisa: It’s important to buy from companies that have made very
strong commitments on product quality for all their products.

Tara: And, behind the scenes, global high street brands such as
H&M and Zara are actively searching for innovation in the supply
chain to try to come up with more sustainable materials, more
circular processes. They’re actually using waste back into the
same process. It’s just how do you get the communication balance
right and make sure that it doesn’t feel like a consumer has to
make a choice.

Claire: If we look at the larger picture: can you talk about the
COP21 Paris Agreement?

Elisa: The departure of the US from the Paris Agreement in no
way, shape or form should be a break on what needs to be done
and I think the message is ok, Trump, you want to get out, well,
go play in your corner, we’re moving on, we’re moving forward.

Tara: When someone new to this says, “I don’t quite understand
sustainability,” the good news is that the global agenda is actually
set and there are a clear set of resources to look to, which provide
guiding principles to everyone. There’s the Paris Agreement on
Climate change, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and
Human Rights, the UN Women’s Empowerment Principles,
and the Sustainable Development Goals. So there is a very clear
articulation of the global agenda, and even though they’re kind of
academic and wonky documents, there are lots of lovely transla-
tions of them, so it’s pretty clear what we need business to do.

Elisa: Local governments and businesses are very active on
climate in the US.

Tara: The government of California has taken a major step and is
hosting its own Climate Summit, which we’re actually a partner
on. It’s a huge international event. One of the important aspects
of the Paris Agreement is that all countries need to make commit-
ments about their reductions, about reducing their impacts. So
what has happened in the US is that a series of governors and
cities have said, well look, we can still meet our requirements,
even if the government pulls out. We can still meet our agreement
with our own reductions and this is what we’re going to do.

Elisa: And companies can still agree to reduce their emissions
according to the amounts that we need to avoid the worst effects
of climate change. And, for the fashion and luxury industry, all
the more so because this is an industry that is the trendsetters and
the trendsetters and so we need fashion and luxury as a voice on
these issues.

Claire: How do we move forward?

Elisa: In your everyday life, one thing is just looking how you
can do things locally: local products in your food—it doesn’t
necessarily have to be organic because a lot of smaller suppliers
of food can’t afford to be organic certified; it doesn’t mean that
they don’t have the practices. It’s just thinking about “what do
I really need this season”? “Do I need as much as I usually buy or
do I have great things in my closet? Or second-hand. Of course,
the industry needs to sell clothes to survive and that’s not the
question, but there are more and more people on the planet, so
what if the people who are currently buying just think a little bit
about how much stuff do they really need? And let’s continue
the tough but inspiring work to make fashion sustainable and
regenerative. That’s true beauty.