

style in progress

wo-mens fashion




The Longview
Anne Lise Kjaer

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Hype and Reality. What Chances Do Fashion Newcomers Have?
Master of Mainstream. Hugo Boss Is Marketing Itself Anew
The Secret behind Uniformity. Is the Notion of 'New' Really Dead?



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TOO MUCH OF EVERYTHING AND NO DESIRE

style in progress interview with Anne Lise Kjaer

How is it that almost every style is available at every price? Chief editor Joachim Schirrmacher posed this question to Anne Lise Kjaer. As a trained fashion designer and current trend consultant for companies like Camper, French Connection, Ikea, Sony, Swarovski, and Toyota, she understands all aspects of the business.

It is paradoxical: On the one hand, individuality has become a social ideal. On the other hand, the world has become more global and more uniform. Even 11-year-old school girls are asking why all clothes look the same. What is your answer?

Anne Lise Kjaer: It's madness. Today people go to so many places in such a short amount of time, to see as much as possible and to be exposed to new ideas. One delegation is in Japan, another in America, someone else goes to Milan, while others go to South America, or even Copenhagen. But when you get down to it, they actually see much less than in earlier times. And since everyone does this, everyone knows everything. There's no room for surprises anymore. But it's not about how much you see; instead, it's about how you see it. The challenge is to come up with the right combinations. For me, the future is about intelligent reduction; about making fewer, but therefore more meaningful, products.

What do you mean by 'meaningful'?

I mean practical products with soul. The problem with our society is that everything goes fast, faster, and faster yet. But there is more to life than going fast. You have to say 'stop' every once in a while and be able to reflect:

"Is it right and meaningful for me to do that?" First, ten collections per year, then two per month. What's next? A collection every day?

Yet, even high-end companies are orienting themselves around Zara.

Why can't they build on their own stories? Why would someone want to be like someone else? If you don't have your own identity, it's pretty hard to stay ahead because you always need someone to copy. That means you can never be a market leader.

What's behind this global uniformity?

Twenty years ago we still had different styles. Germany was focused on quality, Italy was casual elegance, France was always very chic, England was a little ugly, and Scandinavia had clarity.

Today's companies are not just selling clothes worldwide; they are also selling linens, home decor items, underwear, and even cosmetics, regardless if there is a market for them or not. It might be that a company could make good shirts, but who says that they can also produce good make-up? It's mass hysteria. Prada is making underwear? Then, we'll make underwear! Gucci is making perfume? Let's

make perfume too! But we already have too much, and we don't have the desire for more. That's why we are experiencing a crisis.

What measures are necessary?

If you offer everything, then what makes you special? The companies have lost touch with what makes them different from other companies. It's like the expression, "Jack of all trades, master of none."

Earlier, the various industry sectors had a closer eye on the future and they gave a lot of thought to what they would make in the following year. Now the span between deliveries is so short that there is simply no time left to think. It's not better, just faster. If you want to create something fruitful, you have to put seeds in the ground and wait until a beautiful tree has grown. Every great idea needs time and experience before it becomes a reality.

Today, one's own personal experience is the key to developing unique visions for the future. We live in a critical time of transformation. It affords us the chance to re-think what type of future we want to have. The head of trends and strategies at the Philips electronics company, Josephine Green, said at the "Time to Think" conference that productivity, performance, efficiency, and speed, will no longer help us to realize a meaningful future. Instead, what we need is time to reflect upon what it is that we want for quality of life, and not just in terms of what we consume. How might future growth look? Which future appears meaningful to us?

Is this sameness also a product of the media? We are always better informed and therefore always quicker to become bored. A prominent example is the store, Victor & Rolf, in Milan in which everything looks like it's upside down. It was shown in every magazine. Another similar example is with the Prada store in New York.

How honest can I be here?

We try to say things as they are.

Did you see the store in New York? It is a completely boring store that lacks soul. The Prada stores have started to look like very expensive, gourmet supermarkets. They are the same everywhere. That was Prada's new strategy. But it didn't work. Because it is too static, it is not pretty and not natural. It is similar to Donna Karan. In her store on Bond Street, here in London, entire busloads of tourists come just to look at this soulless temple with its overpriced products. Nobody actually buys anything there. The fashion industry over-extended the curve. The problem is that they are crying for attention. What can I do for my next trick? There is just so much out there that no one wants to buy.

It is purely suppressive competition. US companies have orders each year to generate 20 percent more profit in the already saturated German market.

Suppressive is a good word, because people are suppressing the real problem. You can't just increase your profits by 20 percent each year.

That's what healthy common sense would say. But the capital assets say, if you don't do it, then maybe the next person will.

We are living a great dilemma. Even I, with my little trend office, had to decide. Do I say, "Enough with the over-production!" or do I close my office? I have actually stopped doing things that don't make sense anymore and I produce only one trend book each year instead of eight. Why should I make trend books for such a fast-paced industry? I can forget the fashion sector.

Why?

Because they don't have the time to read that type of book. They say, "Why should I pay 500 or 750 pounds for a book? With that I can go to Milan five times." They don't have the money and don't want to pay anything for advice. They think that they can handle everything better and cheaper. Still, they just imitate slavishly. I loved being a designer, but I was so disillusioned. If you were constantly misunderstood, if nobody listened to you because they didn't have the time and they said that a good copy is better than a bad imitation, then you lose your ambition, and therefore also the meaning of your work.

And still Modeinformation Kramer offers 126 trend books.

It's like a supermarket.

My impression is that a large portion of the creative process is outsourced by means of the trend books. They offer the technical designs, the colours, the materials. The only thing missing is the website from which you can download the cut. And then, because the production will also be outsourced, you have to ask what the argument is for the companies to still be out on the market.

Our world is built upon logic, facts, and data. Man, however, was not made to understand logic, he relates to stories. In my office we help companies tell new stories.

Nevertheless, you say, "For 15 years I've explained 'feelings' to the companies and they are craving facts."

That's the dilemma. I got out of the fashion branch ten years ago. I knew that this would happen. Design isn't worth anything anymore. You can see that in the salaries which haven't changed in over ten years. And hence, we don't have design any more, just copies. And whoever continues with the copying can forget about their livelihood.

How many Western European companies have a chance at continuing to stay in business?

Everyone gets the same information. There are no surprises anymore.

I don't know. Perhaps they should cut their losses and close shop right away, before it is too late. They need to sit down and reflect upon what they want to do with the future. There will always be factory owners who will produce things for a low price. But it is no longer enough to simply be affordable. Quality at a good price will become standard.

That's the good old value-for-your-money principle. But what about when we're talking about the middle range of the market.

The middle no longer exists. You have either premium quality and you pay more, or you have reasonably priced products with decent quality.

But the quality at H&M is not good enough for me, and I can't afford Hermès even if I wanted to pay that much. I want good quality at a reasonable price.

What you are saying is true. There is a gap in the middle range of the market. We lack an option that's neither cheap nor expensive. But it also has to be exciting. All the boring stuff is old news. I want originality! I demand personality! I don't care about the brand! New Basics and New Premiums are at either ends of the spectrum. Now there's a chance for the middle range to make meaningful things at a good price. That is the future.

To pay off their debts, Prada announced that they would gain a 25 percent profit from, among other things, moving their production to the Far East. A rule of thumb is that retail products cost five times as much as the production costs. But in the fashion market, customers have to pay ten times more than production costs.

That is a very, very sensitive issue. Everyone is very touchy about that. We all are, I think, clever enough to know that when we pay premium prices we are not paying for better quality. We're paying for the brand name. But we can go on about that forever...

Do you enjoy shopping? I don't. Do you know why? The companies spend too much money trying to catch your attention. The advertisements have become too noisy. And the companies know that if they want us, the consumers, to ignore the crisis, they need to make this noise. The louder they scream the easier it is for us to ignore the crisis. The question is not if, but when, the companies will finally deal with it.

Is the idea of the premium brand over?

Brand loyalty is a thing of the past. Today we're talking about New Basics, Fair Fashion, and New Premium. You

can also present an image completely differently. You have to be much more adventurous and intelligent. The problem is that the affiliated groups like the idea of mass manipulation. We live in a world in which the big get bigger and the small die. Exactly for this reason Fair Fashion, which is based on the idea of ethically responsible consumption, is a key factor. We're not talking here about evolution, but rather about a revolution. Instead of producing more products, we have to create interesting products that I don't want to live without.

You're also talking about the gap between the intellectual and the creative process.

Henri Le Poincaré said, "One can prove everything with logic, but we make new discoveries through intuition." For so many years we had an industry based on the left brain, the rational. There were indeed a few intellectually creative thinkers, but the rationalists were the leaders and the intellectually creative thinkers were the followers. That's beginning to shift now. More and more creative thinkers are now leading the companies and the rationalists are following.

This position is certainly shared by different experts. In any case, the managers still have the clout within the companies. And they won't give it up that easily.

Of course not. Their primary problem is that they are so afraid. We don't want to get rid of these people. We want to combine the emotional and the rational so that we can realize a much more attractive future. It's about a different perspective. The problem is that most strategies only consider the facts and numbers. There is not an emotional dimension. No! New things need to come from the heart if they are going to strike a chord with people. And then one should look at the facts and the data to find out if it works or not, not the other way around.

What do designers have to do for the management to understand them?

Designers don't have clout. They have to find a system in which they can convince the people who are sitting on the money. Designers can surely create nice things, but if they can't explain them, then they will never reach positions with clout. In my office we are working on ways to bring the rational and the emotional worlds together.

So you aren't really a trend office, but a translation office.

We translate trends into something with which managers, retailers and marketing departments can develop a strategy. If we have a design idea, then we look to see how we can bring it together with facts.



"Global Influences 2006/2007" is a trend management tool in which trends are turned into "Consumer Mindset Models" that can give inspirations to product developers.



Even if the customers don't know the details of how these companies work internally, they must at least have a suspicion of how it works. David Bosshart wrote in the culture magazine, "Du," that today there are no longer business customers and end users. Instead there is only one type of customer because the channels of information are the same.

The key to understanding the customers of tomorrow is to see them as a dynamic part of our business chain and not as the link at the end of the chain. Today's consumers have higher expectations and more options to choose from. There are also much more complex decision patterns. You have to navigate these complexities.

Many decision makers are business people with a very straight forward approach. They say, "If I increase the advertising pressure, then profits soar." How can these business people understand your approach?

Our economy has progressed from farming, to industry, to the age of information until now, where we have discovered the 'conceptual era.' A businessman, therefore, has to think more conceptually. Many young people will get an MBA and they will combine this business education with a degree in philosophy or anthropology. You can't derive everything rationally.

That means that we are seeing a more complex business model?

In the future we'll be dealing with bigger but more complex markets. In Europe, we're shifting our emphasis from abundance to a balance of diversity. Because this is so complex, you have to have a higher emotional level. Many business managers say to me today that their intuition is their most important tool. Earlier it was taboo to say something like that.

Why don't you make the step from a trend office to a design studio then?



We come up with concepts for design. The companies have good designers. But they need a good briefing, a good concept.

But isn't it still the quintessential task of business people to set the strategic targets?

The companies come to us and say, "We have an idea. Can you help us find arguments in favour of it?" It is very important to have your own ideas. But outside confirmation is also very important and that's what we offer our customers. We support the companies as they frame scenarios. You also need people who can approach it from different angles. Lots of people concentrate on their sector. But you also have to draw upon examples from other sectors in order to find out how your idea can be translated. You have to let yourself be inspired from the concept and you have to have the feeling that it will work. In addition to the marketing people and the managers, this type of thinking also requires anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers.

Your mission really is to make the world a better place?

I have a small mission, yes. I want to be an inspiration. Very often I act as the wake-up call in the company. They have good data and facts, smart marketing, but where does all that lead? Do you believe that they can carry on for five or ten years?

If you say that there is an absence of new ideas and planning in the companies, that means that the system needs to be changed. How should it look?

No one wants to answer that. Lots of firms are in a panic right now. They say that I don't show anything new in my trend book. But, I lead the companies back to the fundamentals, back to the basic questions. How did you get here? What is meaningful to you?

You try to bring good old common sense back to the companies?



That's exactly what I try to do. I have worked with amazing firms which know that you have to be ahead of the curve if you want to be successful. As with Ikea: They plan five to ten years ahead. Here's an example. I worked with the paint company, Dulux. They had 100 wall paints in their collection. Under the "Seaside" theme I developed a very solid collection with 16 paints. There was a huge discussion. They couldn't believe that something so simple could be so successful. Since its launch in 2000 it is a bestseller.

That must require courage.

It does. Why does the Otto Versand company need to have a 500-page catalogue? 100 pages with fewer brands could be much more successful.

But this requires a change in the entire system. Otto has purchasers who are accountable for certain pages. If one of these purchases buys too much beforehand, then it puts a risk on the final figures, and also his career.

Because a smart businessman has calculated how he can make more of a profit. He thinks in a linear way. If he has less expensive offers, the costumers will buy more. But there are fewer and fewer customers to buy this excess of stuff. Does Otto want to sell five of the same thing to the same customer? There should be two completely different items.

This can't be courage that comes from despair. Instead, it should be knowledgeable courage. How can people gain this knowledge? Or rather, how can someone bring the intellectual and the creative processes closer together?

I'm a creative, emotional person and I explain things with lots of words. A pragmatic, rational person is only interested in two-word answers. That is a fundamental problem. Less talk and more to say is a difficult combination and means that both sides are working on the border of frustration.

Here's a simple example. The manager wants a cafe latte. I also want a cup of coffee, but a special one – made from fair trade beans and with soy milk that hasn't been genetically modified. What chatter! But it isn't nonsense because it is important to me. The manager wonders why I pay two Euros more. After all, it is just a cup of coffee. It is a discourse between two worlds which have to go forward together.

So managers have to learn to listen?

They have to learn to feel. They hear well enough, but they don't understand anything. It has to go from the head to the body. They have to feel it.

How much time do we have here in West Europe until we can take to this new type of business thinking? The Chinese are working hard to get a foot in the European market.

There's not a single answer here. If we're talking about manufacturing, then the problem is that someone farther down in the chain provides support by buying the products. We have to bring what we've outsourced back home. We have to produce locally again. Tesco almost has a monopoly in England. We call it Tescopoly. They sell books, music, clothes, insurance – everything!

They sell so much that they can influence what is on the best-seller lists, and then they sell even more. It is a self-fulfilling system.

Yes, it's very frightening. The only way is to boycott. Don't buy Starbucks coffee. Don't go to Tesco. Only shop at small stores if you want to support your country.

It's not fun to talk about it, but if we take a look at the future, doesn't it seem a little dramatic. Here are two examples. The new German government is reaching deeper into its people's pockets than ever before. At the same time, young French citizens are setting brand new cars on fire because they see that as the only way that they can make their point. Nobody would have guessed we would have this kind of turmoil. Someone like you, who has learned how to interpret the signs of the times, what do you make of all this?

When we were talking earlier, you mentioned a friend of yours from school who has been afraid for years of losing

his job as a locksmith in Germany because the trade would be outsourced to Poland or China. Many of these qualified people won't be needed in our economy. That is a big political problem that reaches further than just consumption. We'll all have to reposition ourselves in the future. The world is imbalanced politically. But I'm actually glad that this is happening so that we can finally see that these problems really do exist; in Germany, France, England and everywhere else. These uprisings show which problems the governments have pushed to the side like a poor family that nobody wants to associate with. And now it comes crashing back down on us because we didn't pay attention to it earlier. It is a global crisis that's happening while we are looking with worry at Asia. That is a big conflict. How are we going to handle the problems right on our doorstep?

The fashion industry can't answer that alone, but doesn't the fashion industry have to consider it?

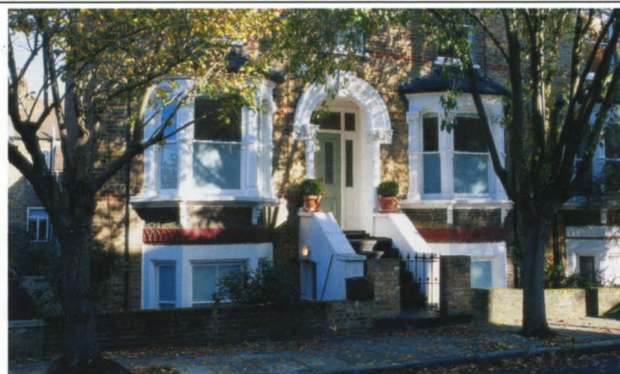
Of course! That's why I've been saying that we produce more than we need. We have to get back to the core of what this sector is about!

Has the fashion industry lost its position as the Goddess of appearance? Is it taking its role as the seismograph of the economy seriously?

I don't see it that way. My experience is that fashion has always been very shallow, as extremely soulless. Fashion often reflects what's happening in society. But the trendiest people that I know of can be found in the art world. The arts reflect very much what is happening in society. If you look at all fashion designers, you see one big mass without many differences.

In the weekly paper, "Die Zeit," Hanno Rauterberg wrote, "Never was the art world as successful as it is right now. Never was its importance worse. It has lost its value because of its ubiquity. The art lacks force, influence, and social relevance." That conclusion can easily be applied to architecture, design, and fashion, can't it?

Art has become fashionable. The problem is the speed of society. It's like a dog that's trying to bite its own tail. And if you talk about an art show, that has artistic origins, I still see a movement of people that want to be creators. I want to formulate my life myself and I don't want to be a victim in which 20 percent more profit for some company comes out of my pockets. I am the consumer and I have the power. I decide for myself if I don't want to buy my clothes from Tesco. I believe that we'll have a better future if we buy from small retailers. In the end we, the consumers, decide for ourselves our own destiny. If we want to keep on buying cheap, mass-produced products, then one day we'll be unemployed and then we won't be able to make it at all. It really comes down to a global balance.



This is the space in London from which Anne Lise Kjaer changes the world.

Our fast paced world influences everything, including our decision making process. But at the end of the day, you have to decide who you want to be, if you want to be noticed. And when I know that, then I can ask myself what I want for my future, no matter if I'm a retailer, a worker, or a private person. But we don't really have the time for that because we're constantly shopping, eating, consuming. We have to decide for ourselves what kind of future we want.

Thank you so much for talking with us. *



Kjaer Global is one of a new generation of trend offices which specialises in translating consumer trends into holistic product concepts. It was founded in 1988 by the fashion designer **Anne Lise Kjaer** (*1962, Esbjerg), in Denmark. Since 1992, the office has been situated in London and has 8 fixed and 4 freelance employees. Kjaer Global mostly consults multi-national companies in various branches, like Camper, French Connection, Ikea, Sony, Swarovski, Toyota and the Copenhagen International Fashion Fair (CIFF). Anne Lise Kjaer gives numerous lectures, is a member of the British Textile Colour Group, and sits on the advisory board of the Brussels-based Decosit Trend Komitees. Each year in October, Kjaer Global holds a trend conference in Copenhagen. Anne Lise Kjaer speaks English, Danish, German and Spanish.

www.kjaer-global.com