



## FASHION RETHINKING SUSTAINABILITY

*When “sustainable fashion” becomes  
a marketing buzzword, is its message diluted?*

*By Alison S. Cohn*

THE CLIMATE CRISIS has loomed large lately, with wildfires and superstorms becoming more frequent, while the months of lockdown and social distancing are showing the impact of changed behaviors on the environment. According to an August consumer survey by Coresight Research, shoppers have become more focused on sustainability during the coronavirus pandemic, with 29 percent of respondents saying that it's become more of a priority in their purchasing decisions. That sounds like good news for the planet, but the reality is more complicated.

“Plot twist: There is no such thing as ‘sustainable fashion,’” says Maxine Bédar, founder and director of the New Standard Institute (NSI), a New York-based fashion policy think tank. “We need to move away from this sort of wishy-washy sustainability—which can mean anything to anybody—to measurable, concrete, specific actions.” Bédar explains that the meaning of “sustainable” has eroded as brands rush to cash in on consumer demand, using it to market items that contain a small percentage of organic or recycled materials. NSI's Roadmap for the Rebuild, released earlier this fall, offers data-based macro plans for companies to meet quantifiable environmental targets.

When sustainable fashion pioneer Stella McCartney founded her label in 2001, she used the term “sustainable” to define her commitment to never using fur and leather, in part as a means of curbing greenhouse gas emissions produced by animal agriculture. That decision made McCartney a self-described outsider. But over the course of her 17-year joint venture with Kering, which ended in 2018, and her new LVMH partnership,



From left: A look from Maggie Marilyn; Urs Fischer's *My daughter, Charlotte MacLeod*, 2020, from Stella McCartney's *Our A to Z Manifesto*; a look from Coach Forever

she has proved that it's possible for a luxury fashion label to adhere to strict environmental standards. Ahead of her brand's 20th anniversary next year, McCartney is taking a closer look at her terminology. She recently released *Our A to Z Manifesto*, a compendium illustrated by artist friends including Urs Fischer, JR, and Cindy Sherman. It functions as an explainer in 26 points for what her label is doing to reduce environmental impact, starting with accountability and ending with zero waste. “I'm hopeful that out of the pandemic one of the things this moment will bring us is our sense of values,” she says.

Other brands large and small are similarly reexamining the language surrounding sustainability. “I actually stopped using that word,” says Coach creative director Stuart Vevers, whose Spring 2021 lookbook (shot by Juergen Teller) celebrates re-wearing clothing. “This is the moment to be disruptive,” he says. At least one piece in each look contains an upcycled element, such as vintage jeans and Coach bags given a new lease on life with embroidery and embellishments. “I think fashion brands need to talk more about how they're accurately measuring and reducing their carbon footprint instead of just using flowery words,” says Maggie Hewitt, designer of cult New Zealand label Maggie Marilyn, who partners with environmental certification company Toitu Envirocare to do just that. Hewitt—who uses only organic cotton, ethically farmed wool, and recycled polyester—has shifted to a seasonless model and publicizes the results of her annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions audit.

Paradis Perdus, launching this month, is a carbon-neutral knitwear brand designed by a group of Lanvin and Isabel Marant alums. Care tags on each knit—made from 100 percent recycled cashmere, wool, and cotton—have a QR code that links to the Web site of REMOkey, an independent agency that calculates environmental savings. “We want to show what is possible,” says cofounder Thomas Polis. “A lot of brands are saying by 2030 we will do better. No, you can do it now.”