

What's killing the fashion show?

BY VANESSA FRIEDMAN

The first big show of New York Fashion Week will not take place in a traditional venue. It is not even on the traditional schedule, which lists roughly 150 shows stretching from this Thursday morning to the following Thursday night.

Rather, it will take place in the behemoth environs of Madison Square Garden, will feature not only a clothing collection but an album launch, and will be attended by a select group of editors and critics and retailers, as well as a much larger group of ticket-buying consumers, who will fill out the more than 18,000 seats and who are paying up to \$8,584 on resale sites. (Officially, the public tickets sold out in minutes.)

For those consumers who cannot make it to New York, the show will be filmed and screened in movie theaters in 25 countries, including Macedonia and Australia.

The event is the debut of Kanye West's Yeezy Season Three as well as the unveiling of his music project T.L.O.P. While you could dismiss it as a distraction from the business of the fashion season, three days later something else is to happen that casts the Yeezy experiment in a somewhat different light.

On Sunday Diane von Furstenberg, the founder of the brand that bears her name and, as the chairman of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, a pillar of the fashion establishment, will hold her own "experience" over two floors of her meatpacking district headquarters/New York pied-à-terre (she lives on the top floor).

She will invite select guests to filter in and out for over an hour (or to stay and drink and schmooze) to see vignettes of Karlie Kloss and Gigi Hadid, among other major models, acting out real-life scenarios, choreographed by Stephen Galloway, while wearing pieces from her new collection.

And if that were not enough, one week later when Burberry hosts its fall show in London it will be clad in nostalgia because come September the brand will abandon the concept of "spring" and "fall" and present combined men's wear and women's wear shows that will be panseasonal. The clothes will be in stores directly after the show.

The three events reflect a tipping point.

"Everyone drank the Kool-Aid for too long, but it's just not working anymore," Ms. von Furstenberg said last week. "We are in a moment of complete confusion between what was and what will be."

This is turning out to be fashion's season of existential crisis. Suddenly designers are asking big questions about "purpose" and "effect," re-examining the system on which they rest; and they are

doing it in the cold, blue light of the smartphone's glare. They are doing it, arguably, because of the smartphone's glare.

Complaints about the fashion show system, a monthlong twice-yearly four-country treadmill to see clothes six months before they reach stores, have been around for a long time: fashion week is too tiring, too old-fashioned, too crowded.

But while fashion people have largely complained about the effect the system has on their own lives and jobs and creativity, today's problems are driven by a force even more powerful than simple self-interest: financial interest.

Which is to say, the buying public.

Interviews with dozens of retailers, editors, designers and private individuals over the past few weeks suggest that women are experiencing product fatigue. After being inundated by images and livestreams from runway shows, from awards shows where the items are worn mere days after they appear on the runway, and from ad campaigns (and the making-of-ad-campaigns), by the time these customers see the clothes in stores the dresses and skirts and suits seem tediously familiar. Old. Over.

Ken Downing, the fashion director of Neiman Marcus, said recently that he was showing a client a hot-off-the-delivery-van \$11,000 embroidered jacket, only to have her wrinkle her nose and say, "but don't you have anything new?"

"It arrived the day before," he observed. But it had been online since last October.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

"Social media is the laxative of the fashion system," said Scott Galloway, the founder and chairman of the digital consultancy L2. "It makes everyone digest everything much faster: trends, product discovery."

Though the Twitter/Instagram/Facebook/Snapchat nexus started as a golden promise, it has created a situation in which it is no longer acceptable to many women to wait six months for something they have just seen. Especially if they can get an acceptable simulacrum at a fast-fashion brand down the street, like Zara or H&M.

"In the past we used to see a dramatic spike of sales when the collection was delivered to stores; that trend is no longer really the case," said Paolo Riva, the chief executive of DVF.

Sarah Rutson, vice president, global buying at Net-a-Porter, said: "Our psyche has changed. It is all about immediacy."

However, as she pointed out, the fashion world is on a schedule that demands that retailers be shown a collection months before it can be sold, as they have to place the orders and wait while clothes are manufactured. And

magazines like Vogue and Harper's

Bazaar have a three or four month lead time. Fashion week has traditionally served as the fulcrum for this — and fashion week has developed a set of stakeholders that have nothing to do with fashion per se: the municipal industries that are ancillary beneficiaries of the influx of capital associated with fashion. According to the New York City Economic Development Corporation, for example, fashion week is worth close to \$900 million in total economic impact each year, including an estimated \$532 million in direct visitor spending. Its impact is similar on the other three fashion week cities: London, Milan and Paris.

So on the one hand you have an immovable system of four interlinked geographies, and on the other you have "consumers and digital platforms that did not get the memo that fashion has four seasons," Mr. Galloway of L2 said.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Last December the CFDA hired Boston Consulting Group to suggest changes to the show system. It has canvassed insiders for ideas and will release its findings in March. But as Malcolm Carfrae, the global head of communications for Ralph Lauren, pointed out, whatever the company finds it won't work without the buy-in of the entire fashion week universe, especially the European brands.

For an industry that pretends to embrace change, fashion is notably resistant to alteration. And not every city's fashion week is on board.

Carlo Capasa, the chairman of the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana, the industry's governing body in Italy, referenced the above problems, and added, "producing before showing doesn't avoid a leak, and it can cause a black market of information." His counterpart in France, Ralph Toledano, the president of the Fédération Française de la Couture, du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode, expressed even more vehement reservations.

As a result designers are casting about, with a gulf opening between bigger brands and more niche players, and between New York and London, and Milan and Paris.

Thakoon Panichgul, whose clothes are often worn by Michelle Obama, has stepped off the New York schedule, having sold a majority of his brand to Bright Fame Fashion and having decided to reinvent himself as a see now/buy now brand — as did the Bill Blass brand before him.

In London, Matthew Williamson has also abandoned the official schedule and is turning to a direct-to-consumer model. Thomas Tait, a former winner of

the LVMH prize for young designers, swapped a show for a presentation. Tom Ford, who has been part of London Fashion Week for the last few years, began experimenting with different options when he took his Fall 2015 show to Los Angeles during Oscar week. Though he originally said he would do small presentations in New York next week, he recently announced he would follow Burberry, and show both men's and women's wear together in September, the day the clothes are available in stores. He's sitting this season out.

"We have been living with a fashion calendar and system that is from another era," he said.

Ms. von Furstenberg has no patience for those clinging to the past. "They are going to realize this is best for everyone," she said, noting that her show change was partly conceived as a test of her own principles. "And I am seriously considering a consumer-relevant show in September," she added.

She is also selling a select group of items straight from the runway. Ralph Lauren already does this, as do Versace and Moschino (though none yet to the extent Burberry and Mr. Ford will in September). Versus Versace is already in see now/buy now mode. Meanwhile, Vêtements, the buzzy Paris brand, said that next year it would move its shows

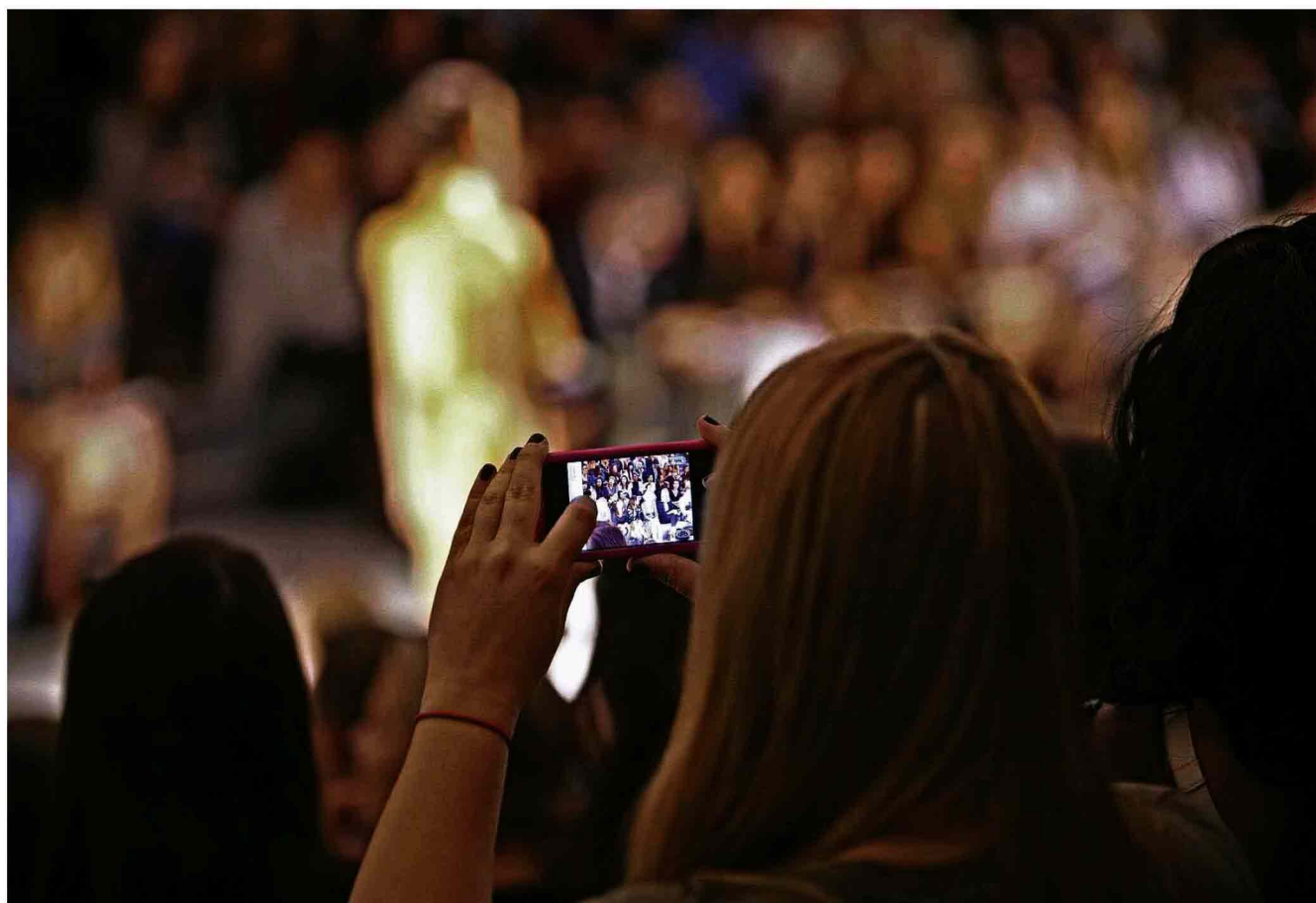
to January and July and aim to deliver clothes in-season the month afterward, thus creating its own timeline and confusing the matter yet further.

"It is going to get worse before gets better," said Mr. Downing of Neiman Marcus.

Which is the risk of this when-to-show-what-not-to-show fashion world angst. The irony is, amid the tension and mixed messaging, the consumer can only watch and check her phone, hoping that waiting for resolution won't be like waiting for Godot.

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ELIZABETH LIPPMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The immediacy of the smartphone and social media have highlighted the time lag between fashion shows and the appearance of clothes in stores. Diane von Furstenberg, far left, the designer and the chairman of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, said the current system is "just not working anymore."

