

On not wasting your skills



Designer and Slow Factory co-founder Céline Semaan discusses working fast and slowing down, moving through the judgements of others, creativity as a channel for trauma, and why she's not surprised by all that she's accomplished.

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As told to Annie Bielski, 2506 words.

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Your work as co-founder of [Slow Factory Foundation](#) is at the intersection of human rights and environmental justice. How did you start Slow Factory?

It started with a URL. It started with [partner and co-founder Colin (Collis Browne) Vernon and I] buying [slowfactory.foundation](#) because we were working in such a fast-paced industry and we were joking and bought it, as "one day we'll do something with that." The idea of slowing down, it felt so simple, but also at the same time, so strangely innovative, like how are we going to slow down if everything is going so fast?

Years later, I picked up Slow Factory again and said, "Okay, I'm going to start something with that." I was really fed up with how everything was siloed. You would be working in science and then you wouldn't be talking to designers, and you would be designing and you wouldn't be talking to environmentalists. If you're an environmentalist, you're definitely not talking to the media, so everything is so fragmented. I wanted to create a space where we could connect the dots between industries and sectors.

Slow Factory started as a lab, as an experimentation, and we started connecting the dots between NASA and fashion. From that point on, we connected the dots between Gaza and fashion, then refugee camps and beauty, identity, dignity, and the fashion industry; environmentalism and fashion; and so on and so forth.

As we were doing things, we started realizing that we were using fashion as a medium for social and environmental change, so I coined the term "Fashion Activism" because it was the action of taking fashion and doing something that's changing the course of ideas or changing the course of perception. Before 2016, things were very blurry. The public didn't really understand so much what this is about. After 2016, everybody suddenly became an activist and used fashion as a medium for social or environmental change. I think the work picked up a lot from that point.

What do you do fast and what do you do slow?

I think I'm a pretty fast worker. I multitask like crazy. I am a bit like an octopus, where there are many hands everywhere, so I work fast, I think fast, and I do multiple things at the same time. I will be thinking about something and almost writing something in my mind. Then when I get to [actually writing] it, it's just like spitting it out. I'm multilayered, multitasking, focusing on everything and basically having my eyes 360 and also 360 around the world, thinking about the systems of things. What do I do slowly? I'm also a living contradiction, and so I love, love being lazy and doing nothing at all—which I do very well—and lying down and lounging. Oh my gosh. I invite everyone to lounge.

Have you ever burnt out?

Alhamdulillah, I have not burnt out recently, but I had two back surgeries in 2016, when things started to pick up drastically for me. It was after two children and a lot of working fast-paced in tech, and that required a lot of your time and energy. Long, long days, which I had the energy for, of course, but the two back surgeries back to back in 2016 knocked me down in a very hard way, where I had to relearn how to work, how to use my legs for six months after the surgery. That literally reset everything for me. That's where people were like, "Well, you have a company called Slow Factory. Why are you going so fast? And I'm like, "I'm not going so fast. I'm actually going so slow. You have no idea how fast it is in my brain."

Anyway, it wasn't a burnout, but it was a reset, a big reset. After that point, alhamdulillah, I did not burn out, because I think that I'm very much built for high energy everything. I have the energy for it, but like I said, I'm a living contradiction and I love resting and laying down and being lazy. I'm very lazy. My team is laughing, meanwhile, in the background. Am I not lazy? It's a contradiction. I do things very extremely, and in contradiction with one another.

What do you think about the relationship between survival and creativity?

I would say that, first of all, the only thing I know how to do is exist on survival mode, which I am trying to get out of, and trying to exist on a more grounded, peaceful mode. So basically, I exist on survival mode and it's tiring. It's also ignited a lot of ideas inside me, and also has continuously pushed me.

I've been pushed since a very young age to go outside of my boundaries and limits. So that's something that I am, at the same time, very grateful for and suffering from, because I don't know where to just sit back. Now in relationship to creativity, that's where I'm grateful for that survival mode. But I don't know. It's such a cool question. It's definitely a coping mechanism to be able to create while on survival mode, because it's not given to everyone, that this is the best way to channel the trauma. I would definitely say it's a coping mechanism.

Considering social and environmental injustices, the landfill, and the climate, what would you say to an artist, designer, or anyone who makes things and puts them into the world and asks themselves, "Why should I do this? There are so many things already out there."

There's too many things already out there, but you must do things because they are coming to you. I think the challenge is, why go to the store to buy paper and things—although I love doing that—if we can start with something that already is discarded? Maybe the challenge that we are facing now as we are existing in a time of decline is, "How do we adapt to this situation? What is the role of a designer or an artist in times of great decline?" And perhaps for us to look at our challenge in a way where, what we're supposed to be doing is helping the world cope with what's going on.

If that's the case, then how do we best become of service? I think that's the best way for me to find peace in what it is that I'm doing, because I could also be judging myself or listening too much to the people judging me and saying that I'm too much, or I take up too much space. It's definitely something I heard a lot in my life, I'm too loud, taking up too much space, and so on. I just feel like, when you are born gifted with anything that was given to you as a skill or a way of looking at the world, or any skill that you discovered eventually, if you decide to waste that, that's also wasteful. So I would say, how can you reconcile with creating things that are of service to the world so that you don't waste the gifts that were given to you?

I'm thinking about death in terms of ways of being, systems in place, our own mortality, ecosystems, the pandemic. I'm also thinking of conversations that include "What will X look like in our lifetime?" How do you think about those topics in your world?

The way [my family and I] observe death is from a Judeo-Christian perspective, so, it's not necessarily how death is, you know, it's through the layer of our beliefs, and I think that that's important to observe. I don't have the answer, but when I observe it through these layers of beliefs, I get scared and I get insecure, and then I

hold on to another belief that it's going to be better out there or whatever. But the more and more I journey into spirituality and environmentalism in parallel—because there's a lot of relationships between the two for me personally—I wonder, what is this notion of death, and [I wonder] if it's not a concept introduced to the world by a more cerebral belief and observation. When we observe death in nature, it's regenerative, it does not necessarily end. It starts something else, starts something new. It's not ending anything. It actually continues life on this planet. The death of, let's say a plant, creates food for the earth, and then the earth continues to regenerate itself. Similarly with our bodies, and the bodies of the animals, blah, blah, blah.

So basically, on the notion of death, there's also this linear system that exists, that's just something that we take for granted, but in fact, this belief is an artificial belief. It's an artificial thought about death and linear systems. In fact, I think that reality and the way that nature works and even the way that science has been able to expand its knowledge, has adopted a more circular thinking or a more spiral approach, at least to certain notions. I don't have all the answers and I certainly don't know.

The internet has a big role in your work, from gathering educators and students in online classrooms, to using social media as an educational platform.

First of all, I have to say, before social media there was the internet. I just want to go back to the web, because I very much identify as a web native, which basically means I came of age with the internet, listening to the modem singing songs so that we get connected. That was very much a part of my life, especially in Beirut when it was really, really hard to find a connection. Finding a connection, getting online and then being connected to people, strangers all over the world—that was such an important part of who I am and how I was brought up. What ignited me and inspired me and really helped me rise above depression, in a lot of ways, was to be able to connect with others, open knowledge, and the knowledge that you find online.

Also, being able to build your career or to reinvent yourself, or to be able to learn something online outside of the institution, that's very much what makes me happy. It inspires me. I've always wanted to contribute and give back to what has given me confidence and even a whole career, where I worked for about 10, 12 years as an information architect, as an experience designer for the web. I was basically able to create this career because of open knowledge and the open web. I entered that community back in the early 2000's, which is basically what I feel is the heyday of the internet as well, because it was very much that the geeks owned the spaces before the influencers and all that stuff. When I entered those spaces, I was welcomed, I was encouraged to learn more and to give back. There was this idea of whatever you're taking you give back, so I started a blog giving back what I'd learned, then I was discovered as a designer. That way, I came to New York and worked, and then started teaching my field in various places, online, offline, and in new institutions that were starting. That's what I feel is the internet for me.

After that, there were the internet bubbles, the apps, and the social networks and the things that were more trapped within a specific Silicon Valley-backed venture, which is what we're all now existing within. It's very rare that we will go back to the open web as we did before. It's also kind of an exhausting place to be in. So with the same spirit [as the open web], that's how I approach social media. I want to connect with people and encourage them to learn and encourage them to have the confidence that they can own their skills and skill sets and understand that they have the power. The knowledge is at their fingertips, this knowledge should be free, and that's what we do at the Slow Factory.

I made buttons at one point, for one early, early, early SXSW crew, when they first started the interactive section. The buttons said, "I am open," and it was for everyone working in the open web. We all had those buttons, and those were the days where people on the internet were building the internet, growing the internet, and teaching each other how to code, teaching each other how to design. It was very much peer to peer, which is the energy I also contribute and give back with the programs that we run at Slow Factory. Open Education is one of them, and that's how we approach social media. Social media, what we do on Instagram—it's literally a 10th of what we do in everything else.

What are the conditions for you to do your best work? For instance, what is a good day or good afternoon for you?

Taking the time to be slow and fast, but balanced between slow and fast. Definitely taking the time to meditate and connect with the spirits, and also exercising. Simple things like taking a shower and putting on clean clothes could be a big achievement. I've been setting myself with all that I can to be productive and feeling good and connected with my spirits, and not being driven by fear or insecurity, which is very difficult because what we do sometimes can feed into that.

How do you move through those feelings when they come up?

Again, I don't know all the answers, but sometimes I let them creep in so bad and they stay in and they stop me from doing what I want to do, and I feel like I'm closing off, just feeling very scared. Then, sometimes it's a friend or a conversation [that helps]. Sometimes it's the courage to just literally snap out of it and go for a walk outside or meditation, just gaining perspective. It's so hard. When it occurs, sometimes I can wish, wish, wish it away. Other times it's creeping slowly and it's setting itself in there, and then it just becomes harder. It's like a guest in your hotel, and then maybe you're a bit too welcoming to certain aspects. We shouldn't be too welcoming because you don't want their energy.

What has been most surprising about your path?

I guess most of the time people are surprised because they underestimate me, but me, I'm not surprised because I wish I could do even more. I'm not surprised yet.

Céline Semaan Recommends:

Podcast: [How to save a planet](#)

Documentary: [Dope is Death](#)

Music: [Collis Browne](#)

Book: Naomi Klein, [This Changes Everything](#)

Meditation: <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CMN94rflFGT/>

Name

Céline Semaan

Vocation

Designer, advocate, writer, founder of Slow Factory Foundation

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Shana Trajanoska