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White Space

by **Semmi W.** | Posted October 2, 2013

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Creative Director of Lucas Hugh, Anjhe Mules at White Space. Photo by Semmi Woldeyesus.

The cost of fashion week has been steadily increasing over recent years with the demand [for a Spectacle](#) continually being raised. For emerging designers, the pressure is particularly high; not only are they battling to win the attention of buyers and editors, but they are also fighting to bankroll expensive showcases. New York Fashion Week alone had over 250 shows and presentations earlier this month, a significant portion of which were live-streamed. As Rachel Arthur wrote for *Mashable* in September, the full video package can reportedly cost anything between USD \$20,000-\$50,000 a pop (depending on production requirements).



White Space founders Alison Brokaw and Ruth Runberg.
Photo by Semmi Woldeyesus.

The price tag of renting a venue is equally as high. As *The Vivant* reported last month, rental fees at the Lincoln Center (the official home of New York Fashion Week) range from \$15,000-\$50,000 depending on the size of the space. And for historic venues like the New York Public Library (where Marchesa was showing this season), fees start at \$50,000. Once you factor in styling, public relations costs, models fees and celebrity appearance fees, then a runway show can often represent the pinnacle of economic impracticality - even for established brands.

Most of the time, such showcases aren't even necessary for buyers to secure their purchases. As Simone Lock, CEO of The Lock Group put it

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bluntly in a recent op-ed for *The Business of Fashion*, "the same fashion weeks that initially catered to buyers and editors are now geared towards creating media impressions via celebrities and social platforms. Long suffering buyers who, nowadays, have mostly made their buy prior to the show via a showroom visit or lookbook preview, often can't even get an appreciation of one garment before the next one flies past [on the runway]."

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Locke's sentiments are shared by former Browns buying director, Ruth Runberg, and stylist Alison Brokaw. As industry veterans, the two friends felt it was important to begin supporting emerging designers and thus set about establishing a far less crowded platform in comparison with the standard runways. During New York Fashion Week, the pair joined forces to create The White Space - a showroom presentation that took place at Jeff Koons' studio complex in West Chelsea.

The appointment-only studio event featured five designers, curated by Runberg and Brokaw. Unlike MADE Fashion Week or the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund 'Americans in Paris' initiative (whose dinner reception was hosted this past weekend by Tommy Hilfiger), The White Space steered clear of elaborate press mentions or endorsements. Instead, the goal was to create an unassuming presentation, where each designer could establish meaningful connections and explain the ethos of their brand clearly.

"I had spoken with some of the designers I had known in the past when I was a buyer... I knew that they should be showing at New York Fashion Week," Runberg explained when speaking with *The Genteel* during a quick break in the presentation. "I knew so many stores that they would be great in, but it's a matter of finding a space... so we put our heads together... and we just decided to do it."

For three days during fashion week, a small group of designers selected by Runberg and Brokaw were able to showcase their collections-without having to pay a venue fee. Instead, participating designers agreed to give the duo a small percentage of any sales made during the event. "Fashion Week has kind of become this huge thing... most designers when they are starting out can't even enter at their first season," Brokaw points out. "We have been so flattered... we've had such an amazing response with the buyers that have come by, time is really precious."

For Holly Fowler, a British designer featured at The White Space, the venue and concept provided exactly what she needed: "The White Space is an incredible opportunity... so many people have come here: international press, international buyers, a broad range of people that you wouldn't be able to meet normally." Fowler, a graduate of Central Saint Martins, already has a line of hand-painted dresses on sale at Bergdorf Goodman. However, despite the successful inroads she has made as an entrepreneur, Fowler still finds the crowded climate surrounding Fashion Week somewhat stifling. "In all the fashion capitals, I think it's become quite saturated with new designers because there is so much talent. And this showroom is so exclusive... Ruth and Alison have picked each one of us to compliment each other."

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Aside from Fowler, the showroom also featured Yaser Shaw, a fifth generation Kashmiri shawl designer, and Anjhe Mules, the ingenious designer behind Lucas Hugh, a high fashion active wear line. Accessory designers Lee Savage and Jody Candrian were also handpicked to participate. Savage's metallic clutch bags are inspired by corrugated cardboard, while Candrian's range of handmade necklaces, rings, and cuffs (featuring natural, semi-precious stones) hark back to her native Arizona upbringing.

For Savage, presenting at The White Space is not only a golden business opportunity, but also a way to maintain an independent voice. "It allows you to meet with buyers yourself and get feedback yourself. And be able to show what you laboured so long for without having someone else do it for you."

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To date, all five designers have been approached by and introduced to publications ranging from *Vogue* to *Numéro Tokyo*, as well as stylists for the likes of Katy Perry and Uma Thurman and buyers from Barneys New York, Lane Crawford, Fivestory New York, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman. AlOthman in Kuwait




Accessories collection by Lee Savage.
Photo by Semmi Woldeyesus.

have also expressed interest in the designers.

Neither Runberg or Brokaw mentioned having grandiose business plans to take on more designers next season. For them, The White Space was an experiment. A test to see if cancelling the white noise - the celebrity-driven marketing clutter that often distracts both buyers and consumers alike - could help revert attention back to the real newsmakers of Fashion Week - the clothes. "In a way this is a bit of a protest, a bit of a revolt... what happens when what you are showing is just a white space... no gimmicks, no pyrotechniques, just talent, what happens?" Runberg asserts. "It's been

so heartwarming to see that it's actually worked."

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