

Vaporwave

by Silvia Bombardini



Neil Barrett, SS15 – via showstudio.com

It could by all means have vanished in the blink of a page refresh, the way so many online microtrends in these mid-twenty-tens appear to do. Subcultures, as we've long romanticized them, are now simply too stagnant for Gen Zs, who much seem to prefer a non-committal approach – you may call them fickle, but then, you're probably born before Photoshop. Besides, we know well what happened to punk or grunge.

And yet awareness of the mainstream fate most likely lying ahead, for which the fashion industry is generally to blame, has thankfully still to impede the spontaneous creativity of youth, however nonplussed with it older generations might be. When the very elements of mass media are wisely employed to protest the same, as is the case with vaporwave, it could just happen to secure the style a longer stay than expected.

Accelerationist, conceptually grounded and yet sentimental, even poetic at times, vaporwave begins in music – unlike, say, normcore, and just as promising counterculture movements used to do once. According to Dummy Mag critic Adam Harper, the term echoes both Karl Marx's own precept that *"all that is solid melts into air"* and the disillusion of *vaporware*: in the computer industry, hardware or software products announced to the general public but never released, that occasionally never even intended to be. A supple

label, granted, but which one isn't to this day? Timely, if nothing else because of its own ambiguity, it still registers as more rigorous than most. Attuned to the sedative simple melodies of hypnagogic pop or mallsoft, vaporwave sharpens with undertones simultaneously sinister and steamy, and rather than serving as a tool for the performer to voice their dissent, as for example does rap, is dissent itself, synthesised in music. As it chops, flexes, layers and loops the sonic artefacts of corporate culture from the 90s and noughties, it would seem that its message couldn't be more clear – and yet, due perhaps to the unusual gentleness of most of its tracks, it's subversive in an quasi subliminal way.

Less aggressive and more mature than its older sibling seapunk, its aesthetic is specific even when discrete, and discrete enough to have carved for itself, undisturbed, a potentially sustained commercial lifespan. If seapunk went from a hashtag on Tumblr to restyle the looks of Rihanna and Azealia Banks in a matter of months in 2012, only to boil away rapidly afterwards, vaporwave, less showy, lingers at the back of your mind – in a parallel way indeed, as elevator music does. Sufficiently removed from organic matters to feel contemporary even in its curious recent-past nostalgia, vaporwave imagery is oil-slick but crude, a hybrid of unselfconscious, mesmerizing web surfing and the late memory thereof. It features unrefined animations and refigured logos, the undermined interfaces of glitch art, unrepentant overuse of kanji and kana lettering and decontextualized classic marbles looking more lost and diminished on these mauve virtual chessboards than they ever did in a metaphysical painting – think of Hans-Peter Feldmann's helplessly pink *David*. The milieus they find themselves in span from photoreal computer renderings to ever so slightly outmoded ones, a destiny, it's implied, that shortly awaits the former. It's what in fashion terms would be at the *dowdy* stage of *Laver's Law*. The vanity of all things, and our at once informed and inexorable fascination with them, gives vaporwave its more maudlin edge.

As it trickles down from the screen to the wardrobe, it shouldn't disappoint that vaporwave may forgo some of its ideological depth. After all, it's online that digital natives compose and polish their own identity, find likeminded souls, come of age, regroup. The real world flattens, comes as an afterthought. Fashion, when worn consciously and at its best, can just barely hint to the complexities of one's virtual persona, wearables notwithstanding. On top of that, not that it ever stopped commercial appropriation before, but it's still as a critique of consumerism, however oblique, that vaporwave originally were born. And yet the microgenre's perpetual engagement with the same makes it so that there where we've seen various movements vanish in shame, vaporwave lives on. It carries through its prettiest iconography, technical candour and DIY hyperreal appeal, and its influence grows: fluid, warped or lo-fi, prints are haphazardly placed like they would in ether, multi-layered or spread out almost as if they were being browsed through.



Madonalisa Tee by Perks and Mini, #BEENTRILL# X Linda Farrow

Naturally, the brassy labels of underground streetwear, sensitive by trade to new developments in music, are where the style is at its most keen, deliberate and unfiltered. Vaporwave graphics upgrade oversized t-shirts, short crop tops, tracksuit bottoms and snapback caps, and increasingly often, socks, by brands such as Whatever 21, Revolution Tomorrow, W.I.A. or Perks and Mini. But it's also true that off-schedule bridges are being built between that end of the spectrum and the proverbially aloof, expensive world of luxury and ready-to-wear higher-ups. For spring, the art collective and DJ crew #BEENTRILL# collaborates with Harvey Nichols, and invites designers the likes of Gareth Pugh and Shaun Samson, but Hardy Amies too, to work on a limited edition capsule collection with a conspicuous vaporwave vibe, currently also on sale at colette.fr. Taking its cue from glitch art as the brainchild of Tokyo artist Nukeme, glitch knit revamps woollies and embroidery for the hoodie-clad digital youth by hacking a Brother KH-970 knitting machine to corrupt megacorp logos and generate uniquely flawed textiles. Similar sensibilities inform the recent work of Cypriot designer Alexandra Hadjikyriacou of House of HAD, whereas prints of distressed sculptures make an appearance on both Frankie Morello's and Neil Barrett's SS15 menswear designs, and Cottweiler opts to showcase their own via a hyperreal short film directed by Daniel Swan, slow and waxy, with the very liminal narrative of a weeklong vacation spent by the pool.