



KATHARINE HAMNETT

— text by Silvia Bombardini

It seems strange to think of it now, but boldface protest t-shirts haven't always been around, nor was there always widespread awareness of fashion's footprint. A pioneer of sustainable clothing and an outspoken environmental activist, Katharine Hamnett remains on the frontline of the movement she started. As we sit for a smoke outside her studio near London Fields, a stone's throw away from where the city's best vintage shops sell rare 1980s Katharine Hamnett outfits at premium prices to connoisseurs, Hamnett is nursing a passed-out bee on her palm back to consciousness with drops of water and sugar.

I light her cigarette with a match so as not to dislodge it, and we start talking – about politics and organic cotton, weaponized bodies and ideas taking roots, a Green New Deal, a golden era, and more.

In a couple of weeks, we'll both be on our way to an enormous sustainability conference in Copenhagen. Every year I go, and for the few days I'm there, it fills me with hope. Leather made out of pineapple, down jackets filled with wildflowers, seaweed and orange peel and recycled fishing nets fibres. Bicycles are everywhere. Then I come back here, take a walk on the high street, and as the months go by and nothing changes, it is hard to hang on to my optimism. How do you manage to do it, and what can we do for sustainable innovations to be taken seriously, outside of trade shows?

Well, the things that you saw in Copenhagen are doable. If on the high street it's not happening, it's voluntarily. We need legislation; it's the only thing that forces anybody to do anything. Everything is politics. We need legislation that only allows good things into our economic bloc, things that are made to the same standards outside as they would be inside. This means pollution laws, labour, health and safety, human rights, healthcare, minimum wages, paid holidays, no forced unpaid overtime and no underage workers. There's got to be a way we can do this – and this would level the playing field. By making outsourcing more expensive, it would encourage western manufacturing, or developed economies' manufacturing, and save the lives and livelihood of millions of workers. Outside our economic bloc and inside too, because it would make their goods more competitive.

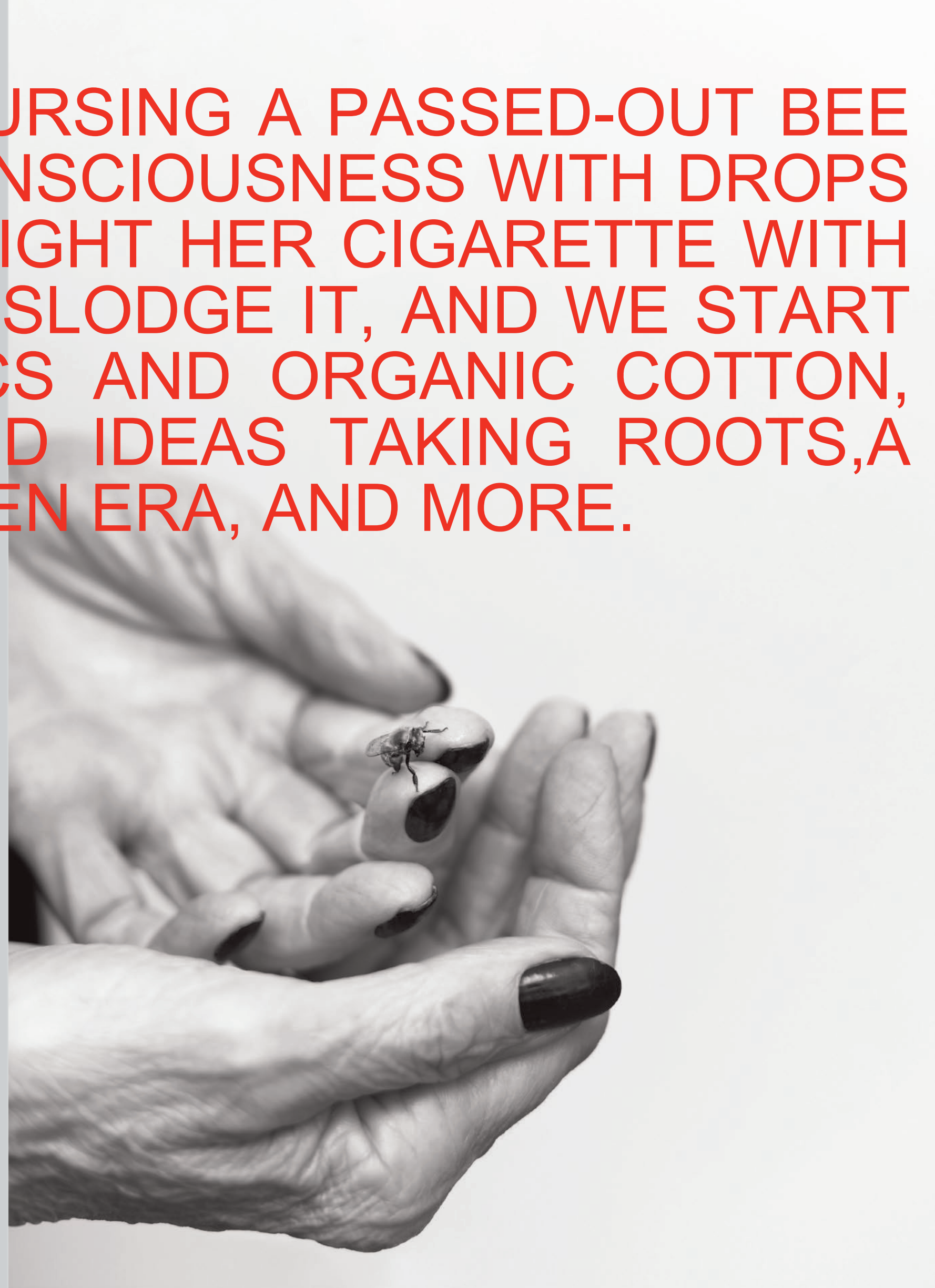
We've got to find a way; you have to believe it. I can see that it could work. It could even appeal to the right wing, to protectionists, people like Trump. Because it encourages manufacturing in developed economies that have been deindustrialized through straight deals, for instance with China, without first addressing their artificially deflated currencies or their human rights issues – we missed a big opportunity there. Moreover, Chinese government officials are now saying that they won't improve workers' conditions because big brands have asked them not to. So we must make them.

Still, speakers in sustainability conferences often talk of legislation as a worst-case scenario, what would have to be done if all else fails. However, why does it have to be thought of as such a scary option?

Indeed, we need it now. We're up to our necks in a worst-case scenario. We need to put a warning out now to the outsource countries that legislation is coming, that they must get ready; otherwise, they won't be able to ship. Now you've got the E.U., which is the largest, wealthiest trading bloc in the world, that's joining in with Japan – if you want to ship to these territories, you'll have to produce responsibly, or your goods would be returned.

ALL IMAGES BY FREDERIC ARANDA // MUA MAYA LEWIS

KATHARINE HAMNETT IS NURSING A PASSED-OUT BEE ON HER PALM BACK TO CONSCIOUSNESS WITH DROPS OF WATER AND SUGAR. I LIGHT HER CIGARETTE WITH A MATCH SO AS NOT TO DISLODGE IT, AND WE START TALKING – ABOUT POLITICS AND ORGANIC COTTON, WEAPONIZED BODIES AND IDEAS TAKING ROOTS, A GREEN NEW DEAL, A GOLDEN ERA, AND MORE.





Brands are worried, of course, of it denting their profits; they like slave labour because it's cheap. Unpaid overtime is cheap – if you start paying people properly the costs go up, profit goes down.

The state of the planet appears to be much worse now than back when you started in 1979, or at least we're now much more aware of the damage we're doing to it, with almost every step we take. Still, the reason why you restarted your brand in 2017, after a 15-year pause, was that sustainable materials had at last caught up to your wishes. What are you able to do now that you weren't able to do before?

Yes, it's easier to do it now. The range of sustainable materials has expanded dramatically. When we first started, you couldn't get organic cotton in any quality good enough to use. However, now, you wouldn't be able to tell that it's organic. What's great is that consumers are driving it. Now we've got to put pressure on industries.

It's true that with newfound self-awareness, consumers have become more careful with their purchases, and demand for sustainable clothing has reached new heights. Is there a risk, however, when activism is popularised as a trend? Fashion trends tend to be short-lived, yet we have to commit to this for the long haul.

No I don't think so, because you can't unsee or unknow it once you've learnt that life on Earth is threatened- or if you have a child, what the world is going to be like in 70 years. These facts won't go away. The more people know, the more they get concerned and become active. It's not a trend; it's the beginning of a movement.

I've read somewhere that from the start, your signature t-shirts were designed to be easily copied so that the messages on them could reach as many people as possible. I thought that was interesting, and a very unusual approach to say the least. Designers in the West tend to be very protective of their intellectual property.

Well they try to be, but it's tough for designers to protect their copyright when you've got brands like Zara that get copies of bestsellers on their shop floor within a matter of weeks. We were getting copied a lot, everybody was copying all the clothes we made, and so I thought: 'what can I do that it would be great if it gets copied, that it would even make me happy?'. Also, I thought of giant political messages on social or environmental causes, on issues that we need to resolve. Because you can't not read a t-shirt. So once it's in your brain, it's there to stay. Seeding ideas in your brain, that's what t-shirts do.

And even when they aren't unofficial replicas, tees are perhaps already the most egalitarian piece of clothing of all. They're worn across classes and genders and throughout the world.

And across age groups. 'SAVE THE FUTURE' on a baby looks very good. We can do them for dogs too. Arthur (Hamnett's Yorkipoo, sitting on her lap as we speak) has a recycled polyester puffer coat with 'LOVE' on the back, he practically stops traffic. We're going to introduce dog and baby lines soon. As someone said, I'm weaponizing bodies to carry around environmental messages.

T-shirts are also comparatively cheap, which may be a solution to the elitism that sustainable fashion is at times accused of because ethically produced garments can become expensive. Is keeping your price tags affordable something you take into account when you design?

Well, we've got two levels – the ones that we produce ourselves in Italy, and then we do these campaign t-shirts on issues like Brexit, that we simply want to be universally accessible so that people can use them for protest.

Still, t-shirts don't change anything, unless you follow them up with political action. I think that's the tragedy of the environmental movement, that we've had marches, petitions, t-shirts for half a century now, and nothing has changed. The only thing that changes politicians' behaviour is something that threatens their ability to get re-elected.

— KATHARINE HAMNETT REMAINS ON THE FRONTLINE —

Also, I've just heard of schoolchildren coming out in the U.K. fighting climate change and were being penalized by their teachers, being punished. It's so wrong because what we need now is for everybody to become politically engaged. Children from 8-9 years old being politically involved is what will save the planet. Those teachers should be disciplined.

Out of fashion circles, it is in fact for the protest t-shirts that most people know you, and the protest t-shirt most people think of when they think of protest t-shirts is one of yours – the '58 % DON'T WANT PERSHING' one you wore to shake hands with Margaret Thatcher. Still, there's a lot more to your brand than tees, and some of your archive pieces from the '80s are now collectors' holy grails. Kanye West is famously a fan. Does it ever bother you that for the general public, knowledge of your work may narrow down to that one slogan, or is that just proof of a slogan fulfilling its purpose, of being unforgettable for decades on end?

It's interesting isn't it, because I did it when I was riding a wave of success, and we were getting massive amounts of press coverage on all our clothes. Now we've been building our product line again, and it would be nice to get more coverage on that. We do sell them in some of the best shops in the world: Liberty, Barneys, beautiful shops in South Korea. However, the t-shirts are good because we're in a state of desperate emergency right now. It's hard to think about fashion with Brexit going on.

I've listened to an interview you did with the BoF podcast recently, where you described yourself as impetuous. Looking back now, is there anything you would have done differently in your career?

Yes, I probably should have been slightly less impetuous about closing down conventional production. It would have been smarter to phase that out and phase in sustainable production. However, no, I had to stop it, which made everything harder. Because you lose your distribution, and shops are not just your window into the world, as a brand they're also your voice. My advice to anybody else who wants to change from conventional production to sustainable production is to phase one out as you bring the other online. Otherwise, you can damage your business, which is to say your reach and your ability to affect change. Being out there is essential.

And looking forward, what are you looking forward to, and

what are your hopes for the seasons and years to come?

Well I would like to see the Green New Deal happening, a global Green New Deal accepted by all the countries in the world. Because life on Earth is threatened and the clothing industry is responsible for a large part of it. I'd like to see it turn around into something that it's good for all living things rather than harmful. It's possible you know: we have hydrogen fuel cells, we have electric cars, we have online deliveries done by electric bikes and vans, we could generate that electricity sustainably. In the U.K. we've got the best potential for renewable energy in Europe if not in the world: we've got inshore and offshore winds, extensive coastlines, we've got solar, deep marine currents and tidal. This country could be leading the world in renewables, in manufacturing and exporting hydrogen fuel cells which are great storage for renewable energy. I'd like to see manufacturing come back to the U.K.; I'd like to see fabrics being woven here. 'Made in the U.K.' is regarded as supreme quality, particularly in menswear – we could be investing in that. Fashion education could improve, and it should be free. Because we're always going to need clothes, and we need to work out a way to make clothes that's clever.

Especially as the population grows, we'll keep needing more and more clothes. We can encourage people to buy less and better, but there's going to be so many more people, so soon. I find the overpopulation issue disheartening.

If we stopped waging war, which is the most significant environmental disaster and displacer of persons after climate, we could be growing all the food that we need, we could use sustainable practices. We could try to have no more than two children if possible. There was this extraordinary Buddhist prophecy you know, made two thousand years ago. It says that this is the time when we go from superficiality to materialism and more materialism. It's going to be either the end of the world or the dawn of the golden era. The Green New Deal could be the dawn of the golden age: we have to really go for that.

SAVE THE FUTURE

KATHARINE HAMNETT SLOGAN T-SHIRTS
UTA BEKAIA & LIKA EVGENIDZE // MELANCHOLIA COSTUME PROJECT
NATA SOPRPMADZE PHOTOGRAPHY

MOVEMENT THEATRE DANCERS:
Indira Reyes, Giorgi Khachidze, Ani Talakvadze, Beqa Garsenishvili.
Photographer assistant: Tamar Nodia
Location: Paravani Lake, Georgia

