

# Junktopia

by Silvia Bombardini



Vetements' window display for Saks Fifth Avenue

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *Anthropocene* as *'the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment'*. In other words, we've reached as a species a level of proficiency that threatens the survival of the planet, and our own.

The cues of mass extinction are already all around us: melting poles, the ozone hole, vanishing bees. But whereas we're on the cusp of it on a geologic time scale, from the perspective of a human lifespan this state of emergency isn't exactly news. With hindsight, experts have dated the beginning of the Anthropocene back to July 16, 1945, when the world's first nuclear test dispersed in the atmosphere radioactive particles. What's more novel, according to Timothy Morton, is the inescapable knowledge of our own culpability. In his book *Dark Ecology*, published last year, he calls it *ecognosis*. *"It's a sinister, paranoid moment of ecological awareness"* he writes, before quoting Sophocles: *"of the many disturbing beings, man is the most disturbing"*. But we have to be wary of an overindulgence in guilt, for though it is true that every little counts, wallowing in our own shortcomings may distract us from the bigger picture. We could always be more mindful, but climate

**change wasn't caused by you or me tossing a napkin in the wrong bin, nor will choosing the right one save us.**

**As we keep to our best behaviour, we shouldn't forget to condemn the business models and corporations truly responsible for our perilous future, as well as those that from our guilt will profit.**

We do live in paradoxical times. On the one side, consumers have never been more conscious of the environmental consequences of their choices. As Morton puts it, "*we can't unknow where our toilet waste goes. We think about toxic plastics dripping down our throat when we drink an innocent glass of water. Which is not innocent*". Our carbon footprint follows us like a shadow, we recycle with urgency and apprehension. But on the other side, we seem unable to halt or even just rein in the accelerating pace of our self-destructive, hyperconsumptive compulsions. Take fashion, chief among those. A 2016 report by McKinsey & Company notes that global clothing production has doubled between 2000 and 2014, reaching that year 100 billion items for the first time – that's nearly 14 items of clothing for every person on earth. Accordingly, the number of garments purchased annually by the average consumer has increased by 60%, and almost three-fifths of these end up in incinerators or landfills within a year of being made, presumably to make room for new ones. Across every apparel category, we now keep clothes about half as long as we did 15 years ago: as the world's population swells, garments multiply at the same time as their longevity shortens. By 2050, when there'll be almost 10 billion humans alive at once on the planet, one might assume we'll be making our way to the mall by wading through piles of discarded clothing, only to throw away our shopping in turn just as soon as we exit the stores.

Some may remember a time when clothing was cherished – if that's no longer the case, it's common knowledge we've got fast fashion to blame. The low price tags of high street chains are how we've come to think of fashion as disposable, how we've got used to buy some in bulk. Before it was capitalism's cash cow, fast fashion had briefly stood for a worthy cause: dressing the masses in the silhouettes of the elites, at prices everyone could afford. But there's little of that class struggle left in the greed that drives accumulation, the voracious temptation of sales. The McKinsey report counts 24 new clothing collections issued by Zara every year, whereas Topshop.com launches 400 new products every *week*. But far from blameless, at the opposite end of the spectrum luxury labels too have sped up production. As the seasons of the year blend together in global warming, fashion makes up new ones, so that now we have such a thing as 'cruise'. If in 2000 a designer brand released two collections annually, nowadays they are closer to six. Unlike previously thought, buying an expensive product can only soothe our guilt to some extent: just as *we can't unknow* that what keeps fast fashion convenient is a murky supply chain and the cheap labour of seamstresses in faraway countries, *we can't unknow* that however much we pay for them, a single cotton t-shirt can take up to 2,700 litres of water to produce, and a single synthetic garment in our washing machine sheds thousands of microfibers that end up in the oceans, and in the digestive tracts of sea turtles, sea birds and fish.

This awareness, perhaps we should call it *fashiognosis*, is widespread and haunting. But it's not because they're lacking restraint or sustainable options that it is so hard for conscious consumers to find peace of mind. The reason is that they're *consumers*, still. Consumption, and the production it depends upon, always generate waste. A completely closed loop in fashion remains a myth, and all of our efforts toward sustainability, essential

though they are, are more of an issue of damage control. At worst, when consumers' moral qualms and self-reproach are exploited and commodified by the established economic order, they can become something of a green fuel, to keep the system running. For instance, a fast fashion store will give you a discount if you bring in your old clothes to recycle. But to recycle, by all means the right thing to do, is still not the same as not having consumed – the process itself requires natural resources, and not all parts of a garment we can repurposed. What that discount does meanwhile, is to encourage further, cheaper consumption. Of course, we can't expect a business to encourage parsimony in the wider public: the market economy fetishizes perpetual growth and besides, decreasing sales would cause losses and bankruptcy. But sometimes, some high-profile designers do – moved by their conscience or the wish to appeal to ours, they're using their platform and influence to invite their customers to think twice before they buy. This is risky from their perspective not simply because their customers might listen, but also because counterproductive advertising is bound to arise suspicion of ulterior motives.



Moschino, FW17

A notoriously fearless label is Jeremy Scott's Moschino, whose fall 2017 show was a tribute to the concept of upcycling. Wearing overstuffed trash-bag minidresses and a trash can lid for a hat, Scott's muse was described in the show notes as *"the antidote to the unsustainable cycles of consumption. Her cure? To take materials the rest of us reject and wear them with Moschino panache"*. On a similar note Vetements took over the windows of Saks Fifth Avenue in New York for four weeks this summer, not to showcase their latest designs but rather a pile of old clothes growing taller every day. *"Using unwanted clothing, the windows are a bold statement by Vetements calling us all to offset the excess in our lives"* reads Saks' Instagram page. At the end of the installation, the department store would donate the garments to a recycling programme. Meanwhile Stella McCartney, whose

vegetarian brand never uses leather, fur, skins or feather, shot her latest campaign at a landfill site on the Eastern Coast of Scotland, to explore *“the issue of waste and consumption”*. According to the press release, the images *“question what we are leaving behind for future generations”*. Some will find these statements instructive, others will see them as a marketing tool. But they might work as a marketing tool, regardless of their intention. A renowned ad by Patagonia comes to mind. On Black Friday in 2011, the outdoor clothing company ran a page in The New York Times with the picture of a Patagonia fleece and the headline *‘don’t buy this jacket’*. It famously backfired, and sales spiked. If McCartney’s will, too, remains to be seen.

We will have, eventually, to be persuaded to consume less. At the rate we’re growing as a species, slowing down the damage is crucial. Solutions able to match our pace may have yet to be found, but we have to give ourselves the time to find them. In this respect, it is perhaps uplifting to learn that there where humans are lagging behind help is coming from other creatures. According to a report published in Science Magazine last year, researchers on a recycling facility in Sakai, Japan, have observed a new bacterium that, through exposure, has evolved to be able to eat polyethylene terephthalate: a plastic resin commonly known as polyester.