

## Street Views

by Silvia Bombardini



GmbH

A lot has changed from the time when Shawn Stussy was selling homemade tees off the boot of his car, as legend has it, in the early days of the 1980s around Laguna Beach, California. And a lot is changing, still. No longer an all-American trade, the international streetwear scene is blooming. There are new kids on the block, and wherever that block may be, their voices echo from miles and miles away. The physical street gives way to the speedy, boundless highway of the URL, and as the map grows bigger, so do their dreams. Streetwear and workwear, sportswear, high-end, all seem to interweave. Tribes that were once spontaneous are now deliberate, multicultural, and new collections are more and more often free from the constraints of seasons. Below, a selection of young labels from Brazil to Switzerland share their views – on localism, nostalgia, the internet, alternative families and a world in perpetual change.

Landlord

*"I think people don't care what's high-fashion or streetwear anymore. Just the price can define one from the other"* says Ryohei Kawanishi, a graduate of both Central Saint Martins and Parsons, who started his own brand, Landlord, in New York last year. *"I myself don't care whether the label is high-end or street. Let's say we are in the middle"*. But the lines are not just blurring between the street and the catwalk – workwear too plays a major role across the market, as the inspiration that everyone appears to be drawn to. *"That's because streetwear has strong references in the history and development of working class clothes"* Kawanishi points out, *"and now the aesthetic and utility of sportswear and workwear are important to the current fashion context because, obviously, they're comfortable to wear in the modern society. Why would people want to pay money for clothes that are uncomfortable, either physically or mentally?"*. Two collections in, and a blue collar aesthetic, baggy and boxy, has already been recognised as Landlord's signature style. Why did he go for a name so seemingly at odds with the concept, then? The designer admits that was just for laughs, *"simply because it's silly"*. But Landlord might also be a nod to the brand's CEO, Daniel Huang, who met Kawanishi at his Parsons MFA showcase in 2015, and gave him the opportunity to do this for real. Huang is the landlord of a U.S. military clothing factory in Brooklyn, which proved to be as great an advantage as one would expect for a young label setting up shop in the Big Apple. Landlord is already stocked at Opening Ceremony NY, LA and Tokyo, and in July, made its fashion week debut with a presentation on schedule at NYFW: Men. Titled *Please Excuse our Appearance*, the SS17 collection is dedicated to construction workers, like Kawanishi's father in Japan.

With hands-on experience in his native country, Britain, and now the US, I ask the designer about the most notable differences, in his opinion, for street culture across the three continents. Turns out that trends travel so fast today, it takes a keen eye to spot any. *"I can see the difference in the attitude of those who wear streetwear – but I'm not sure about the differences from a visual perspective. In my experience, all the influence comes from America in terms of the history of streetwear. It all started with hip-hop culture in the 80s in NYC. And now I'm living in Harlem where a lot of older people are still wearing Pelle Pelle, Sean John, Karl Kani, Rocawear and Ecko. Those label were huge in 90s and 00s but still I see them around a lot"*. And this right here, is what Landlord is all about: *"local kids in New York don't fascinate me at all. They're mostly wearing trendy stuff. I'm looking more into what older people wear here in Harlem, and to my own background, in nostalgic way"*.

#### **A-COLD-WALL\***

*"My opinion is that the shift to a working-class discussion in high fashion adds an entirely new texture to the idea of what narrative can be written towards affluence"* believes Samuel Ross, the founder and creative director of A-COLD-WALL\*. *"Rather than the point of affluence itself, the nuances of hardship will forever interlink to the idea of the American Dream"* he adds, *"the journey is often more interesting than reaching the end point, or goal"*. His own journey, surely has been. A-COLD-WALL\* was launched at the beginning of 2015 after Ross' two-and-a-half year stint as Virgil Abloh's creative assistant, and a long list of clients and collaborators on his

personal website features the likes of Kanye West and Drake, Stussy, and Shane Oliver's Hood By Air. Not that he let any of that get to his head – on top of that same page, a tagline reads: *acknowledge that sacrifice reigns in all endeavours worth attaining*. This, precisely, is the ethos that inspires Ross' own project. A *cold wall* is the feeling of chipped stone and coarse cement mixes found in British council estates, but also a slab of marble at the opposite end of the social spectrum, that can become a very similar case study. The name hints to the brand's approach to fabrications, the high-low mix of tailoring and uniforms into a product that's *beneficial & supportive to both avenues of culture*. But perhaps more importantly, it speaks of the label's aim to present itself as more than simply clothes, as something akin to a cultural commentary. *"Through the strength of visual language, every decision, placement, cut, is its own conversation. In terms of supporting the unseen, under and working class, the brand forms as a vessel to present societal issues that are rarely discussed"*, the designer explains *"for example, the brand's second physical installation, which was presented in Rotterdam, leant its focus towards zero-hour contracts, financial strain and household tensions"*. It was titled *Spatial Awareness*.

These installations are recurring features, and hugely important to Ross' message – he described them as the actual building blocks of A-COLD-WALL\*. Both audio and physical experiences, they appeal *"to the spherical nature of A-COLD-WALL\*, this idea and talking point that exists both inside and outside of the fashion realm. Each facet is a way to communicate an idea beyond a fabric, beyond a beautiful logo placement or graphic print"*. And it's Ross personally who develops the soundtracks or travels to a particular location to build the retail pop-ups himself, *"to ensure that the end result is of the purest, most honest nature"*. This heavy involvement on site has its roots in his own background: after a degree in graphic design and contemporary illustration, Ross was working for a product design firm who focused on commercial buildouts and domestic products. Upcoming pop-ups are currently scheduled for Barneys New York and Harvey Nichols in London, not to be missed.

### GmbH

*"There is a sense of German pragmatism and practicality, that influences the style of Berlin, and therefore also of the many foreigners who come to live here"* believes GmbH, a four-month young streetwear collective from the German capital. *"You rarely see people wearing a lot of designer clothes, the way you see them in other big cities, and that's partly due to people's income and the city's history of embracing counterculture. Berlin is understated, not flashy, and this permeates very deeply what is thought of as cool"*. Anyone who's ever visited the city might have noticed – or not have noticed, as that's rather the point. The Berlin youth appears to have developed a fortunate sort of immunity, a resistance at least, to the fleeting fashion trends we may find elsewhere. According to Serhat Isik and Benjamin Alexander Huseby, GmbH's founders, it's the local clubbing scene that backs this up. *"Living in Berlin, in your everyday life, you are less exposed to pop culture"* they tell me, *"going out to clubs you hear the best music in the world, but never anything from the charts"*.

When talking about street culture in Berlin, indeed, one needs to take in the clubs as well. That's what Berlin's streets are, after all: the prequel and sequel to its dancefloors. And however sensible or functional German streetwear may be, in GmbH's interpretation at least, there's something undeniably steamy about it too. Their first collection – or as they prefer to call it, collection 00, because *“it's just a beginning”* – is made out of deadstock materials and features leatherettes, unisex-y oxblood vinyl, and very tight, semi-sheer muscle shirts. It's titled *Girls in Love*. *“We were in Italy at the factory and our fabric consultant played this 90s German, quite goofy song called ‘Girls in Love’, while we were having a gelato break in the sun, sitting on the grass. It's German, nostalgic, and a little corny. It implies a bit of the love we feel for our GmbH family too”* they say.

Like those streetwear brands of yore, GmbH is a tribal brand, firmly rooted in Isik and Huseby's community. They cast models in their own neighbourhood, and name their creations after their friends. *“Most of us who have met through the techno and club scene in Berlin, including the GmbH family, come from all around the world and we're therefore often far away from our birth families”* GmbH say, *“this creates a desire to create new communities, and yes, in a sense, alternative families”*. Huseby himself is half Norwegian and half Pakistani, while Isik is Turkish-German, and nods to their backgrounds can be found in their designs, if you look closely. *“We have for instance our version of a kurta, that's a traditional Pakistani kind of men's kaftan, but we made it with materials and finishing of a much more utilitarian, almost German military style. There is also a sense of a Scandinavian simplicity, but everything is produced in Berlin”*.

As their newborn label grows up fast, neither is worried about losing those feelings of localism and intimacy that they hold so dear. Rather, Huseby and Isik plan to take care of their family in a very practical sense, a perfectly German way to go about it: *“we hope as GmbH grows that we'll be able to create jobs for many of the creative and wonderful people we know in this city”*.

### **Stray Rats**

*“The range of kids who wear Stray Rats goes from rap kid, to skate rat, to hardcore kid, to young fashion girl, to low-key record collector, to bigger rap stars”* says Julian Consuegra, who started the brand out of his native Miami back in 2010 *“I've seen Stray Rats pop up randomly through all the scenes and have been pleasantly surprised”*. It is, after all, what stray rats are known to do best: an underground sub-culture in a very literal sense. *“Rats were so often mentioned in punk and hardcore music, rat music for rat people”* explains Consuegra, whose career began designing show flyers and record covers, *“I always thought of me and my friends as a bunch of rats moving in the city, not domesticated, getting what we could get within the boundaries we had. Underground but moving above ground, back and forth”*. Stray Rats is all about this community, the so-called *Sewer Brigade* – and while Consuegra admits his signature style may be *“pretty scattered”*, he also would never make something that either himself or his friends wouldn't wear. From the get-go, he tells me, *“my drive for the*

brand was to make something for my friends that were wearing brands from New York or LA, but I wanted something hyper local that they could be interested in". That's also the reason why the Stray Rats web shop doesn't ship internationally. "The world is too big to want to ship to every city or country" reasons Consuegra, "I like to keep the brand within reach and sell to stores that I feel would carry the name well in the US".

Six years down the line, on the Stray Rats' Facebook page, the brand's short description still simply reads *MIAMI*. I hear that the founder himself, however, recently moved to the Big Apple. "I've spent my whole life surrounded by what Miami has to offer, so it's important to grow outside of the city but still represent it" Consuegra points out. He's found out that "there are monumental differences in what the kids wear between Miami and NYC, one of them being what people in Miami can actually wear because of the weather. I think Miami has perfected the tee/shorts style. It's the year-round outfit. But younger kids aren't generally too concerned with what they wear, which is nice because nobody is trying too hard or feels as if they have to put on a kit, but at the same time can be very limiting. To have a full wardrobe is rare, and when it gets into winter everybody fumbles for their old hoodies". The distance gave him a new perspective on his hometown too. These days, he tells me, "when I visit Miami it's really the nostalgia, the energy and the local Hispanic culture that influence my work. I see it differently every time I go back and it's always refreshing". Stray Rats' most recent drop, *End of Summer*, features nods to everything from youth crew and early 90s shoegaze to Freddy Krueger. "I've been pretty obsessed with birds lately", says Consuegra of his new *Golden Parakeet Tee* "especially with it saying Stray Rats underneath, I love to see how it confuses a lot of people to put such a pretty photo and smash it with something like the word rats, which people generally dislike". Still, the tee was sold out right away.

### **Astro Runners**

Ahead of a recent list of *11 Brazilian Streetwear Brands to Watch*, featuring the creative collective Astro Runners among others, Hypebeast writes that "despite the political and economic crisis, the Brazilian streetwear market is more active than ever". Is this true indeed, from a local perspective? The Astro Runners – João Lopes, Juliano Warperchowski, Lucas Oliveira and Luana Santana – would like to agree. "It's a bad time for entrepreneurship in Brazil" they concede, "but through tough times there is a rise of creativity. People are now seeing that it's possible to do your own projects, even if you go small at first". This isn't just due to tough times though, however the saying goes. "We think that the internet, and globalization, gave the Brazilian society a sort of acknowledgment of world culture in general. When we started the brand in 2010, it wasn't all that common to see kids wearing Air Force 1s. Now it's not hard to see copycats of American designers in Brazilian streetwear", and while some would despair of this, Astro Runners keeps the bigger picture in sight "there has been an evolution of the general public consciousness in Brazil, and it's awesome to be part of that".

Having launched as a digital entity for the release GIFs and Soundcloud mixtapes, it's not surprising to hear Astro Runners sing the praises of the internet – today, though, they insist that the web is more tool than creative inspiration. The four of them live in three different cities, for one thing, so online meetings are how the brand is run. Besides, *"I guess people expect Brazilians to carry the Brazilian flag, to bring that South American package"*, they tell me, and gummy flip-flops do come to mind, *"but we want our message to reach as far as it can, and the internet can help us with this"*.

Do not be fooled by their positive thinking, however: Astro Runner's first complete collection is a much more sombre production. *"It's a will to understand our present reality"* as they describe it, *"a world where constant change is the main agenda, where the structures that once were important to our society are now just lost memories"*. The promo film they've made sees models wearing big googles along with their clothes, and walking around a gritty, grainy landscape through rendered echoes of classic architecture. The collection is called *Lunar Mansions*, which, I've looked this up, are the segments of the ecliptic through which the moon moves in its orbit around the earth. *"Lunar Mansions is a good metaphor of an unachievable place, far from our physical world"* Astro Runners explains, *"we tried to show the atmosphere of a ruined world, with characters, looking almost like androids, who live in their virtual reality glasses. Experiencing some kind of hyper-real Lunar Mansions, where they can find fragments of the world that once existed"*.

### Polly Boom

To misquote William Klein, *Who Are You, Polly Boom?* Not much is to be found online about this Brit streetwear favourite, though this might well be due to the fact that up until last year, the brand went by the name of High Jinx. High jinks, I've learnt, was a popular 18th century drinking game in Scotland, from which comes the English word *hijinks*, that Urban Dictionary defines as *"unruly and often hilarious but troublesome fun"*. Polly Boom's designer, Nick Payne, says that the reasons for the rebranding were aesthetic to begin with, *"three dotted letters followed by two opposite flowing letters 'k' and 's' had to be changed"*, but there's more to it, too. *"Collections will no longer have a definite time period to exist in, for example 'spring/summer 2016'. The subjects and topics explored may have been created in a set timeframe, like any other clothing collection, but they can be revisited and reworked"*. Plus, *"removing this time constraint allows pop ups to be toured like contemporary artworks. Unlike a painting these works can be reimagined at a different time. The collections are fluid and ever-changing"*. Though most of them are presently sold out, a few items I recognise from older High Jinks' collections are back on sale at Polly Boom's online shop – like the *Worth It Longsleeve*, or the *KISS Hoodie*. But whereas the hand behind the graphics is clearly the same, there's no mistaking them with the latest releases. That *"Polly Boom is more mature, it's darker"*, is an understatement. The new prints feature the likes of a weeping skeleton, or a Charles Manson's portrait in stencilled black and white, with slogans such as *inferno* or *psycho wounds* besides.

Payne believes that *"interpretation is key"*, but adds *"I would love to hear that some kid in the bible belt is wearing an Inferno Tee as a fuck you to his religious parents"*.

When I ask for his opinion on the multitude of streetwear-inspired looks we've see on the catwalk as of late, the answer I get is expectedly bleak: *"Everything follows trends. The luxury brands that attempt to appeal to a younger audience are just a clear example of the power of money. They are just culture vultures"*. What else is new, right? Thinking back to Klein's 1966 arthouse gem, the moment when Grégoire tells Polly that *"fashion is about money and deception"* comes to mind. *"So is war"*, she answers.

### ADER error

For a long time, it seems, we've been taking for granted that streetwear, under the guise of being empowering, should be crass and hostile. Recently though, a handful of young brands from around the globe, like ADER error in Seoul or also Tuesday Girlfriend in LA, are coming up with an alternative mindset. With slogans such as *"it's sunny outside"* ADER error was established in 2014, as their website puts it, to *"reinterpret thing[s] that people would be able to miss easily"*, and *"focus on making not something new, but something special and different"*. Their silhouettes, it's true, are familiar – hoodies, sweats, varsity jackets, plenty of denim, polos, crewnecks and tees, caps, gym socks and *team pants* – if slightly tweaked: striped longsleeves with overly long sleeves, oversize pockets sewn in at odd angles, belt loops along the hem instead of the waist. Would an embroidery that reads *"Daddy's clothes"* explain perhaps the off-kilter fits? In ADER error's spring 2016 collection, cartoonish renditions of everyday objects feature throughout the knitwear selection – a landline phone here, a reading lamp there – and a new capsule line appears dedicated entirely to breakfast cereals. Their choice to play up life's simple, nearly missed delights could be seen as a deliberate response to the aggressive attitude of streetwear as we know it, but when I email the team to see if that's the case, ADER error ventures another perspective. *"There's no such rule that being cool equals to being rude. We can be cool without being rude, but we can be cool by being rude too. The important thing is how to be rude or not"* they answer wisely.

A first step, in their book, is to do away with the gender divide. Whereas in most of the western markets streetwear in particular is still considered very much a boys' club, in South Korea, that's not as unusual as a foreigner might believe. Lots of young labels are following a unisex ethos in the country, apparently influenced by local celebrity culture, and there's a burgeoning sense of confidence and cultural pride too. *"Young people in Seoul wear their own brands, even if it's not a luxury brand, more and more these days"* say ADER error, *"in the past, most of them – though of course not everyone – would just admire the luxury brands"*. While this is promising in many ways, there's no denying that for ADER error at least, inspiration, as well as their fans, may come from much further away. Take their online editorial *Call a chav, A chav*, as candid a homage as it gets to an

emphatically British character. It was styled and shot by So-Jin Park in Milan, Italy, and the team describes it as *“retro, rebellious, and girls”*.

### **Sports Club**

Picture five graphic designers in their early twenties, with different cultural backgrounds, playing table tennis in Zurich and talking shop. That’s how Sports Club was born, and that’s all you’ll find out about it, because we all know what the first rule of the Club is. *“Actually we’ve never written down a philosophy or statement about how to introduce ourselves as a brand”*, the collective admits *“the main focus should be on our creations, not on ourselves”*. Their creations, at the moment, are a limited selection of unisex basics with reflective details, Champion sweaters hand-printed with tailpipe graphics and their full sports-club.net URL, or embroidered with a slanted rendition of the European circle of stars. It’s a restrained, retro-futurist aesthetic – if by retro we think early ‘00s racing scene, and by futuristic of the sleek cyber-finish the internet had at that time. On the brand’s homepage, the line is presented with a short clip to the notes of *Faint* by Grammar of Movement, that sees girls and boys in lip-gloss, adidas’ caps and colourful gradient lenses, lounging around on cars’ bonnets and bikes. The film is interspersed with special effects like liquid silver waves or detailed renderings of the inner workings of motors – but the models wear New Balance sneakers and Nike tracksuit bottoms together with their Sports Club tops. The choice to visibly feature other brands alongside their own, adds to this computerised landscape a dash of offline realness. *“We wanted to reflect our current preferences and our personal identity without hiding anything”* says the team, *“that’s also why we don’t work by seasons, and don’t design in advance. We want our products to be as authentic as possible, capturing the moment”*. The design process itself is as quick as it can be: *“it happens in a very short time. We come together for ‘design’ or ‘idea’ sessions, and always finalize at least one product or concept per session”*.

Now if you’re wondering how come you’ve never heard of Swiss streetwear, they feel you. *“Switzerland is well known for its diversity of technical, cultural and creative outputs. Unfortunately there isn’t much of a scene in the streetwear world. It being a small country, with even smaller cities, people here like to stay local with their thoughts, designs and communities”*. Not Sports Club though: from the very first day, they say, their goal was not to become one of those *“classic local brands”*. From what we’ve seen so far, they’ve nothing to worry about.