

Threads of Resistance

by Silvia Bombardini



Art School

All around the world, the youngsters march – in response to the reactionary forces that threaten their future, to the callousness and self-interest of generations past. A season of global sociopolitical turmoil, when climate change deniers have found their way to power and bigotry once more became the norm, rekindled the fire in the young activist's heart. It would be disingenuous though, to dismiss the recent rise in juvenile resistance as a simple matter of cause and effect, to fizzle out on its own for better or worse once things have settled. Those who do fail to acknowledge how uniquely equipped young people today are to stand up for their ideals, in terms of both determination and tools – to champion empowerment and change to such a scale they never could have before. Growing up in the cradle of the world wide web has made them the most tolerant demographic yet, building bridges faster than any wall can rise. At the same time, technology both amplifies and externalises the scope of our collective memory, by way of accountability: we're reminded daily of the consequences of both our actions and passivity. Their virtual proficiency may have earned them monikers such as *clicktivists* or *slacktivists* – lazy activists, whose sincere commitment is dubious. But it's online that the youth #StayWoke, and movements like New Africa are born.

On the other hand, there's no denying that activism is trending, and oftentimes as poorly exploited as any good cause. It's not a bad thing though that cruelty feels old, or if guilty pleasures are questioned and less readily forgiven. "True liberation comes from desiring what's good instead of desiring what's bad" writes Antwerp's ModeMuseum curator Karen Van Godtsenhoven in an article titled *Decency is the new punk* for the online magazine [Kvadrat Interwoven](#). "By disentangling desire from anxiety" she claims, "a new generation finds peace of mind". But their personal peace of mind is perhaps no longer the ultimate goal. A socially minded and self-aware consumer, who lives and buys by their principles, has taken on a more prominent role across the market over the past few decades – yet there's still a fundamental difference between the familiar notion of sustainability and activism as we speak of it now. Where a sustainable lifestyle cares to minimise one's own impact on the world, activism strives to maximise it, and mobilise the masses.

The clothes we wear and the objects we choose to surround ourselves with have always been vehicles to send a message – our class, our wealth, a much misinterpreted disposition to seduce. But as fashion adapts to reflect our time and newfound sensibilities, the messages we send are also changing. In days of uncertainty, when our very identity is called into question, to wear our heart on our sleeve is for the youth a matter of pride – status is trivial, values are what's precious. This industry of appearances graduates into an informative and educational tool: to raise awareness and express solidarity with marginalised groups, to let their voice and numbers be heard. The extent to which young demographics approach fashion with a more layered set of expectations than their older siblings used to is exemplified by the evolution of a publication like Teen Vogue as a beacon of critical wisdom in President Trump's America. In the age of post-truth "young people are craving something real, craving authenticity" says editor Elaine Welteroth in an interview with [The Guardian](#), "we're a woke brand, and our readers are woke, too".



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Fashion statements are no longer figurative, nor subtle: slogan designs abound. Once a prerogative of the counterculture trade, and a selected few high-profile designers like Vivienne Westwood or Katharine Hamnett, tees printed with progressive captions have now become a seasonal must-have across the spectrum. With mixed results to say the least, though some highlights: Prabal Gurung's *'Nevertheless, she persisted'* tee, to name one. The Council of Fashion Designers of America handed out pink pins reading *'Fashion stands with Planned Parenthood'* at New York Fashion Week in February, and the menswear shows of Pyer Moss and Astrid Andersen, spring and fall, were introduced by contemporary poets Cyrus Aaron and James Massiah speaking their mind on the injustices of our society, with all of its trials and traps. Of course it's not always easy to know for sure what's genuine sentiment and what's a tentative radicalism professed to please the crowds and gain media coverage. The debate that wonders whether the end result – the backing of a good cause, proceeds donated to charities – excuses the means – a promotional stunt on the designer's part, and fashion's inescapable ties with the capitalist system – always bites its tails. But perhaps we should give more credit to a generation who are teaching themselves to look for truth in a sea of alternative facts: young customers are not easily fooled, and trained to read between the lines. Even when catchphrases are spelled out as loud and bold as the Balenciaga logo in Bernie Sanders' campaign typeface, on a giant scarf at the brand's FW17 menswear show.

PIETÀ

History has it that convicts were trained for clothing production already by the 19th century, yet up until now it had always been clothing, never fashion: either military uniforms or their own, a loop coiled so tight around itself we seldom heard of it on the outside. In more recent years, however, the pared back look of the uniform, and styles that are functional rather than lavish have often found their way to the runway, and into our wardrobes next – a disciplined response, perhaps, to the overindulgence of decades past. It seems natural then, that prisoners themselves should be allowed to contribute their expertise. Especially in Peru, a country where sewing is such a widespread skill that a brand like Pietà could almost be considered in tune with the local tradition, even though it operates from behind bars. *"There is an enormous history of textiles and fibres here"* says founder Thomas Jacob, who hails from France where he studied design and law. *"Cotton, wool, alpaca... but now these activities are for the lowest class, so the more exposed to them are also those who don't have enough money, who end up involved with criminal activities and later in jail here in Peru. That's why a lot of guys in prison know how to sew, embroider, or knit"*. The label is based across three prisons in Lima: Santa-Monica in Chorrillos, San Jorge, and San Pedro in Lurigancho that Jacob first visited in 2012, together with a friend who was there teaching French. *"I never planned to develop my own project. I visited a jail, met a lot of wonderful guys and started Pietà to help them earn a little money"* he recalls. He named it Pietà after Michelangelo's sculpture, which speaks of the values at its core: compassion, humility and dignity. With such a premise, it didn't take long for the project to take off. *"I felt that it had the potential to become a strong brand"* says Jacob, *"I put all my*

money into it and step by step, by selling items, we received some more to invest in the project". But even though Jacob sounds paternally proud of their achievements so far – he calls Pietà *"the best firm in the world! The coolest to work for, for sure!"* – he also admits that there's still room for improvement. His workshop in San Pedro involves 30 inmates, for example, but the prison counts over 10,000. Jacob would like to welcome everyone who wants to participate, but in order to do that, they'll need to produce more, and that's expensive. That's why he's now considering investors, but only those who will allow the brand to stay true to its principles, and aren't those always the rarest to find. Eventually, Jacob hopes that Pietà will grow internationally. But in the meantime, its presence is strong in the Peruvian market, and some of the convicts whose sentence has ended can still be found working with him in the free world – *"the objective is that all of the work outside, such as logistic, sales and stores, will one day be managed by ex-inmates!"* he promises.

ART SCHOOL

It wouldn't be right to describe Art School as either mens- or womenswear, but neither does it fall in with the gender-neutral trend that's become so popular – and commercially convenient – in fashion over the past few seasons. The young label is the brainchild of Eden Loweth and Tom Barratt, partners in work and life, to elevate queer style and represent non-binary identities such as their own, that the industry as a whole has only so tentatively begun to acknowledge. *"It is not about re-addressing the current fashion system"* they clarify via e-mail, *"it's about society re-configuring its ideas of what men and women are supposed to wear. Fashion is a powerful communicative tool that can be extremely influential on society"*. Rather than blurring the lines of male and female codes, Art School hints at the new ground yet to be covered. It strives to express gender, whatever than may be, and send a message of tolerance and solidarity. *"There's a particular way of dressing adopted by some trans- and non-binary people which plays with the body and style in new ways"* the duo explain *"of course, the masculine silhouette can be explored in a whole host of new ways which have been mostly rejected by menswear. It's not just cut however: a queer sense of dressing has come to represent a celebration of culture and fashion both rich and poor, elegant and trashy. Queerness is iconoclasm and so all elements of culture are filtered through a queer gaze to make something new, usually with a strong sense of humour throughout"*. They chose not to use their own names as a label because the project is bigger than the two of them – a gesture toward the great number of people who've helped them launch it, who continue to be Art School's own muse. Their debut collection too, took its cue from collectives: the Bauhaus, the Ballet Russes, and all the notions of community, collaboration and togetherness these inspire. *"From a queer standpoint, community has always been an integral part to how we live and how generations before us have lived. We have to create spaces and communities which facilitate our safety and creativity much like any other marginalised group in society"* the designers note. At the same time, it's a profoundly personal project. It showed in London during Men's Fashion Week last month, worn by friends and family rather than models, with a presentation choreographed by the

Theo Adams Company around the theme of 'rehearsal'. *"In a sense the process of transformation that occurs within a rehearsal space with performers becoming characters can be compared to the transformation of fashion, with the clothes acting as a catalyst for this process"* they add, *"for queer, non-binary and trans- people ideas of transformation and identity play a huge role in everyday life. There is a constant push and pull of what we personally identify as and the dreams and fantasies of our idealised and true selves"*. A Vogue journalist praises their work as *"liberated from libido"*. But Loweth and Barratt only agree in part: *"we are perhaps liberated from the hetero-normative understanding of sexuality! Therefore the clothes and the bodies they adorn are able to transcend prior notions of the male and female libido. The clothes come to life on queer bodies"*.

BUREO

More than 600,000 tons of fishing gear are dumped in the seas every year, with some of those plastics expected to last for up to six centuries – saving the oceans could seem a hopeless endeavour, but Ben Kneppers doesn't think so. *"As horrible as the situation is globally, the problem has achievable solutions"*, he says, and skateboards might just be one. Bureo, the company he founded together with friends David Stover and Kevin Ahearn, recycled over 70,000 kg of discarded fishing nets in 2016, and aims to reach a 200 tons goal this year. With different but matching backgrounds in sustainability, finance and engineering design, Bureo was born in 2012 out of a successful Kickstarter campaign, when all the three of them had in common was still just their love of the sea and a sense of urgency. *"We took a really academic approach to understanding the problem of ocean plastic and the ways to solve it. We read all the research we could find and reached out to experts via Skype"* says Kneppers, *"we were amazed to find fishing nets made up 10% of the oceans' plastic pollution, and were found to be the most harmful form of it"*. Bureo means 'the waves' in Chile, where their recycling program, Net Positiva, is based. Kneppers, who was working his previous job there as an environmental consultant, had noticed that the coastal communities didn't know much about the consequences of discarding nets in the ocean. *"At first the villages were a little confused about our project"* he admits, *"as you can imagine, it's strange to tell people you want to collect their 'trash' to make skateboards. We had a breakthrough when we finally were able to present them the first skateboards made from their fishing nets. It gave the villagers a source of pride"*. Now, Bureo employs local workers to manage the collection of nets – a single Bureo board is made out of more than 30 square feet of them – and supports workshops such as beach clean-ups to educate the youth in the area. The skateboards themselves have become something of an educational tool, with the power to inspire future generations of environmentally conscious villagers to reassess the value of waste and contribute to the fight against plastic pollution. It shouldn't come as a surprise that Patagonia, a company whose dedication to sustainable living and a circular business model have been exemplar over the past four decades, soon took a liking to Bureo. *"We were always aware of their investment fund, Tin Shed Ventures, but thought we were still too small to be considered for something like that. To our surprise, they approached us"* recalls Kneppers, *"one of*

the best parts of partnering with Patagonia is that they value environmental and social gains more than economic gains". With their support, Bureo is starting to supply their recycled fishing net plastic to other companies, and looking forward to expand to other countries – with goals as high as 1,000+ tons of nets recycled annually in the next five years. They've already begun to make sunglasses out of them too.

THE STREET STORE

"We don't call people 'rich' and 'poor'. We are not all rich, and people who aren't want to make a difference too – but we all still have more than the homeless. So we say haves and have-nots" Kayli Levitan explains. She and co-founder Max Pazak opened the original Street Store on the 14th of January 2014, on the railings of a building in Green Point, Cape Town. In partnership with The Haven Night Shelter and the advertising agency they both work for, it was the world's first rent-free, premises-free, free pop-up clothing store for those down on their luck – the first of many, though they couldn't have guessed it at the time. 'Hang up. Help out.' is still its slogan to this day, but The Street Store aims now for more than just donations: the process, they've come to find, is just as important as the end result. "The haves fear the homeless" she continues, "so they dehumanise them to ignore them. The homeless feel ignored and are embarrassed to beg – so they look at the haves as pockets, rather than people. It's also an act of dehumanisation. By bringing these two worlds together on the streets that they share, they overcome their stereotypes". "When the haves and the have nots meet one another, they learn from one another" adds Pazak, "This personal act becomes something more than just giving clothes, it's an act of humanity and of kindness. The result is not just dressing a person in need but a change of perception". There are enough facts to back up their words. Among the volunteers who've become involved with The Street Store over the past three years, there's someone who later opened a homeless shelter, and someone else who started an organisation to help people find food. Everyone seems to come away a little bit wiser. "At the one store, a certain homeless man kept coming back over and over again trying to get more clothing" Levitan recalls, "we had to turn him away and so I called him aside and said that if he took extra, someone else would get nothing. A few hours later I saw that he'd returned to the store, and I sighed, thinking I'd have to go over it again. But he completely surprised me by thanking us for teaching him to be grateful and that he must realise that there are always other people who are worse off than you". More people than we can believe, most of the time – it's estimated that over 70 percent of the world's population wear second-hand clothing. But also, that people still throw away 70 pounds of it annually, per person in the US. In this light, The Street Store is also a way of recycling. "Not everyone has money to give" admits Levitan, "but there is one thing that we all have, that the homeless certainly don't – clothes we CHOOSE not to wear". The concept of choice is taken very seriously at The Street Store – it's one of its core purposes to allow the less fortunate to experience something we ourselves take for granted, whenever we open our closets each day: options to choose from, according to both comfort and mood. "This gives people an opportunity to realise the wastefulness that sits in their wardrobe and use it to make

a difference” she says. Because this is true throughout the world, and so is homelessness, soon after their first launch Levitan and Pazak decided to make the project open-source. Anyone can go to their website and take a pledge to host The Street Store in their own neighbourhood, wherever that may be – they’ll send you a how-to guide and access to all of The Street Store designs for promotional materials. According to the online calendar, upcoming Street Store are due to take place in Georgia, India and Sri Lanka. When we’re published, they’ll have crossed the 600th Street Store threshold. *“We would like to see The Street Store continue to go grow and tap into different communities as it continually creates awareness, heightening people desire to try to end the problem”* Pazak tells me. Obviously a future when no Street Stores are needed because poverty no longer exists is still a long way to go, but one can’t help to feel optimistic at the rate that Street Store are multiplying across the map. *“In the meantime”* says Levitan *“we hope that everyone who hears about what we do and how we began, will be inspired to do good – to try and make the world a better place. If a little idea like ours can grow into what it has, surely theirs can too!”*.

2026

As our nations become increasingly isolated in the current political climate, the tradition of escapism via creativity finds new disciples – and largely thanks to the world wide web, this is simpler now than it ever was before, in Africa in particular. Ibrahim Kamara, a young stylist based in London but born and raised in Sierra Leone, tells me about the New Africa movement: *“it’s the freedom to express yourself, almost a newfound way to express yourself with. It sparked with the introduction of the internet, which means young people in Africa are seeing what other young people around the world are up to and are able to exchange ideas and go on to create something new in their own right”*. *“The greatest revolution in Africa at the moment is information, there is so much power when people are given access to free information which enables them to make up their mind about what to do with it”*, he continues. It’s on the internet that Kamara met South-African photographer Kristin-Lee Moolman, also in her twenties, before taking off for a month-long residency in Johannesburg, where they worked together on a project for his Central Saint Martins’ degree in Fashion Communication and Promotion – a collection of 60 portraits grouped under the title ‘2026’. Only a few months later, the project was selected by Somerset House curator Shonagh Marshall to be exhibited as part of their *Utopian Voices Here and Now* showcase, which set out to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's inspirational text throughout a year that, fatefully, would go down in history as the dawn of very uncertain times for young foreigners in Britain. Back in Johannesburg, Kamara and Moolman had been spending their days dressing up the open-minded local youth with outlandish outfits sourced in the city’s dumpsters and thrift stores – *“I was looking for garments I could cut up into something new”* Kamara recalls. Young African men in wedding dresses, peach kimonos, a David Beckham jersey tee wrapped around the tights like a stretchy pencil skirt. It’s a side of South Africa we’re not used to see in mainstream western media, youth willing to experiment and play. *“The fetishization of the*

black body has been rooted in the western consciousness ever since slavery. The west has always had an idea of what it thinks the black body is, which has translated to fashion and film over the years” argues Kamara. This pigeonholing affects the most young black men who seek to find and affirm their own identity, sexual or otherwise. *“I think not so much fashion but style has the power to say a lot about who we are. I approach my styling as an experimental form”*, he adds. Here’s a vision of black masculinity unencumbered by the pressure of prejudices and clichés, sensitive but proud, multifarious. We’re not quite there yet, but 2026 gives it just about a decade. Though critical of the status quo, Kamara and Moolman’s work is never cynical – it’s uplifting instead, and urgently hopeful. Some may call it romantic, and it certainly fits the *Utopia* theme of the show. But in the wake of Moonlight’s Oscar win, if at no other time, surely we are allowed a measure of optimism: may this be the eve of a new era. Stereotypes shall be shattered.