

UNDER THE RADAR

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The average age around our table of twenty in this restaurant in Rome is thirty-five. Only one of us—mostly artists and curators—wears a suit jacket. The others wear more functional jackets—perhaps making it easier to pop out for a smoke. Practical attire is well-served in an environment concerned with appearing functional.

Whenever conversation turns to complimenting someone's clothes, that person generally responds by saying how old and cheap it is, how thoughtlessly they pulled it out of their closet—that "it's just clothes". In the atopy of language, everyone claims to be occupied with something more important. Nobody wants to be that person who follows fashion's fads too obviously. Fashion seems to have gone out of style, and whatever is left of it simply happens to you. Besides, in this crowd, it's cooler to dedicate your life to art. Participation in the present proper to art is danced out as a complex figure of approaches and reversals. We encounter the present in its passing, in a momentary flirtation with art's timelessness; that which is fleeting in quality, is discarded like a worn out pair of shoes. Some people at this table believe they have attained a level of success, but they also want to leave a little room at the top.

Following the rise of speculative art buying since the turn of the millennium, the term "security" has been cropping up more and more in the art business. Securities traders call a company's stocks emerging if there are positive value projections for the company's value, in the same way *upwardly mobile* is used for people. Artists are called emerging as long as they are not yet considered established and their prospective value remains a promise. Becoming established doesn't necessarily imply plummeting monetary value, but it does mean dwindling attention.

Maintaining an emerging status depends on how long the speculative human object can manage to keep making an upwardly mobile impression, or, in other words, how long that person can preserve an allure that is not-quite-yet-outworn, before interest drifts away, bored, from what has established itself or doesn't seem capable of establishing itself.

The detail extracted from the military uniform—a piece of camouflage or heavy boots—can, in referencing attack and defense, convey an impression that its wearer is still in the process of establishing his or her self and hasn't yet concluded their upward maneuver. Upwardly mobile people don't yet know where they are going to end up, so they try to prepare for anything. It's hardly surprising then that one of the women seated at the table is sporting the *politics of preparedness* classic, the MA-1. It's common to spot two or three or even more of these in a group, which, unlike showing up in the same dress, doesn't seem remotely embarrassing.

Sex

The MA-1 produces an ambiguous effect in several respects. It was invented for men, and yet Barbara Vinken's "phallic moment" only covers "the divesting of femininity" to a limited extent when women wear this item. Especially for the woman wearing it, the MA-1 might feel "manly" for a moment after

putting it on. Its cut, however, adapts to multiple body types. While broad shoulders do look good, they're not strictly necessary. That the jacket easily adapts to different bodies plays with how the "logic of the secret" has traditionally shaped women's clothing. Garments for women conceal and mask. A baggy bomber jacket only shows so much of the contour of a woman's upper body, it leaves something to the imagination, and the zipper offers the option to toy with visibility. Whereas the classic bomber accentuates the butt, that part of the body now tends to disappear beneath popular XL sizes and its spin-off, the bomber coat. The standard problem with the uniform—with which the body frequently fails to comply—can be met with great ease in the bomber jacket.

War

The MA-1 is the original bomber. It was initially produced for the United States Air Force by the company Alpha Industries in 1958 and came in different colors. The Korean War presented challenges that required a more innovative approach to the leather flight jacket. Nylon was the chosen fabric: lighter and all-weather. Alpha design's bright orange lining could be used as a pilot's emergency signal if their plane was shot down. With the MA-1, Alpha attempted to advance to the next level in industrialized warfare, not only technologically, but also psychologically. Rounded shoulders relaxed the harsh lines of the uniform's rigid contours. The formerly straight back eased into a softer posture that rolled forward slightly. This fluid, casual appearance contributed to a certain democratization implemented elsewhere by the US Army in an attempt to increase its efficiency on the heels of World War II: they presumed that superficially leveling the ranks could strengthen self-reliance and rebuild manpower.

Civilian Doppelganger

The London boxing outfitter Lonsdale introduced another story and branch of meanings when it put a civilian bomber jacket on the market in the 1960s. Rising boxing greats like Muhammad Ali quickly donned the Lonsdale jacket, making it a symbol of black self-empowerment that embodied the social mobility people were literally fighting for. Charged with a new meaning, the bomber jacket became affiliated with the movement forming around ska music within the British Afro-diaspora, the skinhead movement. The bomber had taken its first step in the long march through youth culture. In addition to being erotic, it held an industrial charm, which worked on the music coming out at the time and since, its rhythms were derived from machines. Furthermore, the latent emptiness of its serialization accommodates multiple contradictions: the uniform of skinheads whether involved in liberation movements or neo-Nazism. Wreaking of the poisonous stench of their stigmatized wearers, violent skinheads, the bomber became the enemy dress code, and staple among fringe groups, even though their politics diverged completely. Fetishists, gay sadomasochists, and petty criminals with an immigrant background, all distanced themselves from mainstream

society demonstratively in bomber jackets. Not only did the bomber feel like protective armor, it enveloped its wearer plus imaginary pit bull in a cloud of potential for protective violence.

The Self Goes Underground

Translating "uniform" into German, Adolf Loos points out its proximity to uniformity: sameness of form. Youth movements and subcultural currents often dress uniformly. The repetition lends itself to a momentary synchronicity that is recognizable: the search for the protective body of a community is accompanied by the wish to liberate one's self from the burden of being a subject. People assimilate to become part of a collective subjectivity in which they can disappear.

Along with puberty comes the conflicted perspective that one will soon become an adult and relive your parents' nightmare lives. Young people instead would rather not be themselves, but one of seven standing in a schoolyard in identical jackets. In a society of control governed by self-reliance, everyone is at school for life. Yet the obligation to become a self, carries with it the antithetical obligation to become what you're supposed to personify.

Another guest at the table's outfit is an attempt to slip free of productivity and the control of being a refined subject. He is one of the growing number of young artists who have, in the last few years, withdrawn from every display of individualism in an attempt to look like a freshly showered office worker who would rejoice in spotting a colleague wearing the exact same blue polo shirt. This abstinence from self-representation, the unique selling points of one's own refined persona, is represented by an especially boring bomber jacket. A good horse doesn't jump higher than it has to and a good jacket doesn't attract notice. Fashion companies use reticent takes like this and others as they rummage through ways to bring back the forgotten niche classic.

The bomber's comeback can be attributed to several factors including the computer worker who has neglected their body and wishes to flirt with the image of being a bouncer capable of violence, and more strongly, the wish to become one of many. The latter proceeded the 2013 dossier, "Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom" published by the New York group K-Hole. A hybrid organization operating between trend research and experimental writing, the group tried to analyze a new behavioral strategy deployed by consumers in self-defense. K-Hole's oft-quoted PDF starts with the lukewarm insight that youth culture is no longer tied to a certain segment of a lifespan. Youth culture now denotes an attitude toward the world that can be adopted at any age. K-Hole connects that change in the concept of youth culture to the claim that, in light of ever-finer differentiation between subjectivities brought about by "mass indie", it would now be "the truly cool attempt to master sameness". They write that such a mastery of similarities would have to surpass the efforts of a cultivated minimalism and would lie in a slight aberration of the normalized that operates at the limits of the perceptible. According to K-Hole,

one consequence of the accelerated imitation of any and all outwardly attractive forms of individuality is that the work of the self has devolved into the base invention of new trends. K-Hole calls “normcore” the tendency to dress as ordinarily as possible in reaction to that. Instead of discussing last night’s dreams, a normalized heart talks about the weather. Speech dries up, and the self retreats into the greatest density of similarities, exempting itself thereby from understanding its own desire. It withholds the quantifiable input of subjective content from cybernetic behavioral controls such as Big Data. Camouflaging itself with dissimulation, the self presses the like button exactly where every other self does, rather than wherever it really likes something. Instead of being itself, the individual hides behind a uniform, where “individuality can best conceal its richness”. Being one of many, the individual no longer needs to get any better. Against the call to self-optimization, it makes itself small and pretends to have found peace with its own normal averageness in its perfectly average bomber jacket. This strategy is an attempt to trace a line of flight out from the cul-de-sacs of a self-optimization that culminates in a narcissistic character, where no other satisfaction remains beyond getting more and more grandiose and only the disappointment awaits that there’s got to be something more awesome out there.

Normcore first showed up on the streets in nondescript jeans and a new craze for the mother of standards, Levi’s 501s. Preferably, they would be combined with a somewhat misshapen sweatshirt and an ordinary bomber jacket. Pants that had been sagging for years inched upwards, until resting well above the ankles. The legs underneath typically showed some skin through serial damage halfway up, a slit in the cotton through that let the knee pop out like a bulging pimple. That disfigurement has repeated itself as if the flesh wanted to proclaim in staggering unison out of rips that open up wide like mouths with every step: we are so many that you can no longer tell the difference between us.

On the fringes of that anonymizing mass chorus, an exaltation in ugliness voices itself and takes the backdoor to a ‘90s revival. The sound to go with the resurrected look is called techno, the music that promised the birth of a new breed in the mass.

As with earlier revivals, the reinstatement of the taste of yore made room for itself through the punk gesture of a somewhat ugly back to the future. But there was also the heterosexual translation of the dykes’ earlier toying with the over-emphasized flaw. Wearers sink into X-sized jackets, wrap themselves in bad materials and flash absurd brand names. It’s a refined attempt at not looking good.

Clothes Not Fashion

The motives behind the ordinary turn, the exaggerated ordinariness, are in effect more diverse than language can describe. Worn fashion defies being reduced to a set of theses. Bodies getting dressed generate continual semantic short-circuits and dissolve in multiplicities of meaning, something Roland Barthes already knew years ago. But now the structure gets even

more complex, because a dense web of feedback loops has taken effect between what people wear and what designers propose. Information from the catwalks disseminates within seconds in the virtual sphere, whereas it usually takes months for material clothes to make it into shops, at which point any suggestions have already been copied using the options on hand.

The clothing label Vetements tried to implement those dynamics at a recent show in Paris, where the catwalk dropped so low that the difference between the models and the audience all but vanished. In a 2016 interview with the *New York Times* company head Demna Gvasalia hardly even talks about fashion anymore, using the word clothes instead. “It’s really just about that... just clothes.” He confronts the inevitable collapse of seasonal trends head-on and marks the pieces he designs with their year of origin. That practice has thus far been a taboo in the transience of fashion, because people operated under the assumption that outdated merchandise was unsaleable. But Gvasalia paints another picture of wearers, or *users*, who repeatedly update articles of clothing over several years through different combinations. Trends cannot possibly be dictated anymore, since they are negotiated between end users and producers. Retrospectively, it would be possible to read the comeback and ensuing refinements of the bomber jacket as part of that same development.

In the jungle of simultaneities, whoever tries to position themselves against trends easily ends up a self-styled clown whose resistance no one understands. But it’s easier still to make a farce of what is left of fashion. Instead of beating a retreat into ordinariness by way of discrete modesty when faced with the traps of compulsory narcissism set by self-optimization, one can twist the surfaces into their perfect opposite. The Italian clothier Brioni subverts the mass-produced bomber trend by opting for scarcity. Inspired by a kimono tailor in Kyoto, Brioni designed “a bomber jacket kept in dramatic sepia tones for the modern gentleman” available worldwide in a limited edition of twenty unique models of the finest tailoring.

The Kyoto punchline parallels a bomber by Yves Saint Laurent, which an English painter is wearing underneath a light raincoat this evening at the restaurant. Strictly speaking, it’s a varsity jacket, the civilian uniform precursor to the bomber jacket. A colorful woven paraphrase of Peruvian folklore in a sickeningly beautiful palette covers the torso and culminates in a star based on those in the US flag at the neck. The main ornamentation is broken by a crystalline being that extends over the entire back. That complex motif is none other than the pixelated image of a snake generated by a historic computer game. Just one glimpse and you can hear the panpipes tootling over a slick house track. Scene-stealing stunts of that caliber turn normcore on its head and exceed K-Hole’s transformation of the concept of youth culture to the point of hysteria.

When Men Learned To Talk

Looking for the turning point where youth culture became a play of signs between adults, multiple trails lead to one Belgian designer who has

influenced fashion's last two decades of fluctuations more than any other. The child of a maid and a soldier, his future career wasn't handed to him in the cradle. But his parents did have the excellent idea of baptizing their son with the initials of the British air force. That name would prove to be an omen. The letters R-A-F evoke a military symbol, the Royal Air Force's blue, white, and red circle, which the English mods wore like a target on their fishtail parkas, repositioning it as a key pop cultural symbol.

The young Raf initially decided to study industrial design. Bored, he fled to fashion and relocated to Antwerp after graduating. The skinny suits reminiscent of school uniforms he introduced at his debut stood out immediately. Subsequent collections took up the look of post-punk bands like Joy Division and its successor New Order. Steel-toed boots, bomber jackets, and reinterpreted details from uniforms wandered into men's haute couture arm-in-arm with a late-pubescent state of emergency and working-class promise of realness.

Young people understand clothing as a vehicle for information. A hole in your pants never means just a hole in your pants, and that is precisely what Raf Simons was interested in. He wanted to tap into men's fashion as a field of expression through the back door of youth culture's infatuation with meanings. Up until then, men's clothing had been downright speechless; now, he wanted to dress them in clothes that talked.

Simons's ready-to-wear assemblages of uniform, pop, puberty, and proletariat are incidentally amazingly erotic, exuding an enigmatic masculinity that he deconstructs again on the spot. Broad shoulders sway over spindly legs, heavy shoes lace up to grotesquely spartan overshoes. The designer protested when his clothes were described as "aggressive", retaliating that it was all "protective wear" whose apparently hostile gesture actually serves to armor the wearer's own fragility.

Appetite for Repetition

Dressing *in uniform* has an additional, unburdening effect in that it liberates the self from continual definition. The individual dissolves in the uniform. The taste for uniformity articulates a search for what lasts in a present that is experienced as fluctuant, and therefore tiresome, if only because of an excess of choice.

The overloaded self would rather stop choosing; it longs for continuity. Its fatigue fights back against the presumptuousness of relentlessly shifting fashions and the self-alienation keeping up with them requires. The self no longer wants to understand why it should constantly become someone else, once more bidding farewell to the latest impostor it had only just taken for its self. The stubborn refusal to put on anything but a bomber jacket and a pair of 501s in the face of change constitutes an asceticism that says: "This is how I am. This is how I always was. And it's how I'm going to stay." In a way, that attitude exudes a will to drive fashion out of fashion and quash a dynamic that has people asking themselves who would want to deny what actually changes.

Saying "no" to fashion's meandering language games and their feedlot stench of inadequate change doesn't feel unrelated to theories currently attacking contemporary art and recommending the abandonment of its self-referential randomness. Instead of more of the same, albeit in infinitesimal variation, they're calling for the "destruction" of the stalled game and demanding the start of a "post-contemporary" era, since the contemporary one was always already tainted by evil capitalism.

One of that attack's leading minds, Suhail Malik, is wearing a checkered raincoat consistent with the theory in a promo photo. The jacket is functional. It's so quintessentially timeless that it's as if Malik took it right off Sherlock Holmes's back. But it's also easy to picture Malik in a Barbour. The Barbour jacket made its comeback right after the 2008 financial crisis, practically the forerunner to the bomber: devoid of innovation, its stability promised satisfaction, striking the right chord in the hangover from speculation. The desire for the good old things was almost impossible to contain. What initially looked like the autumn of all that is solid in muted colors, persisted in a retro phase during which experimentation was out. This wave has often been called "heritage", after the German anti-fashion magazine of the same name and, in its wake, more and more people started dressing like their ancestors. At that point a relic of the late modern, the bomber complied belatedly with that trend. Its *industrial vintage* discretely dresses wearers within the nostalgic heritage style. Instead of looking just like grandpa, you can come across as so *modern* and timeless—on a level with Helvetica, the no-frills font that conquered the summit of the modern way back when. And while you're standing up there, with the whole world at your fingertips, if you lean back just a little, you'll hear a voice asking if there might not be a touch of Bauhaus in the bomber jacket too, and in a way there is, if only in the appetite for repetition.

