

UNIQUE VOICES RESOUNDING ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Africa's creativity and re-interpretation of Fashion could be seen as an active affirmation of what in 2015, trend forecaster Li Edelkoort, resoundingly declared to be "... the end of fashion as we know it". Yet Africa's disruptive edge was ahead of the wave described in Edelkoort's Anti_Fashion Manifesto. These new talents were and continue to be critical agents socially focused on establishing creative connections around the continent and with a global audience.

Africa is known for costume and the joy of its people in - dressing up. It is a joy that declares itself in the interplay of colour and texture; and the compelling forms and conversations between the elements that comfortably shout loudly through vibrant colour and bold pattern. Every culture has developed its own array of traditional garments to mark status and gender, for participating in ceremonies, festivals and market days, even extending to the proclamation of political support where a presidential candidate or incumbent's head is boldly printed on garments. And culture is embedded in cloth, an understanding expressed in the abstract image derived from a concrete object - "the *fabric* of society." But now, traditional seamlessly unites with contemporary to celebrate and drive change.

What I will discuss here is not uncommon in regard to costume and how its intrinsic value in social life has been viewed in the past. I will imaginatively position my optimistic African, upcycled pair of glasses (thanks to Cyrus Kabiru), and offer a personal exploration of my insights; of what I *see, hear and feel* emerging from this ingenious continent.

It is strongly apparent to me that creatives in Africa have taken their development and education into their own hands - there is no design education in Africa that can offer what they are predisposed to. They either have already found their voice, or are being inspired to find it. I see these visioneers as the heart of a future impulse for crafting new cultures of social innovation and production. Enriching mind and soul through actual practice of creativity and social enhancement rather than theories, they are sufficiently themselves to not be swept up in the prevailing thinking of the time. It is clear that their creations derive from an inner place of truth and it is this inner revolution that is inspiring others to enlarge their concept of creativity and fashion.

IDEAS AND THOUGHTS

With their attention focused on a constructive worldview, designers oAfrica are questioning conventional Western thinking. The courage to make the deep dive into one's

personal interior awakens their senses and awakens amongst them the sense of self-authorship.

New values, beliefs and ideals, relationships and collaborations are fashioned and ever greater activity is generated by doing what they love.

I sense a groundswell of vibrant output coming from this new generation of fashion explorers, tapping into the generative power of authenticity, and expanding their perception, ingenuity and artistic capability with uncompromising vision, skills and artistic direction. They are actively pursuing new encounters with individual purpose and social commitment based on collaboration. Fashion designers are mindfully amplifying processes of thinking that freely communicate ideas to the public through wearable concepts.

These modern harbingers of things to come have a contemporary relationship with their craft/s and have adopted a "slash" type philosophy, which I think clinches their many talents. The Ghanaian musician Steloo is described by Kobby Ankomah-Graham as a "sound and fashion artist" whilst another designer is listed as a music maker/fashion/textile designer/photographer. From viewing the collaborative video Steloo made with *Accra House Music Makers, Steloo and Yaw P*, I think the "slash culture" sums up what this community of forward thinkers is all about - it comprises a multitalented, experiential mix of individuals working cooperatively in Africa.

Fashion has proved to be a purposeful avenue with which to challenge normative thinking and come up with something original. With an ability to observe, think critically, and act upon their thinking, these men and women have directed a significant display of extraordinary human creative capacity.

Africa is instinctively resourceful, and now more than ever this resourcefulness can be seen weaving new forms of thought into Africans' creations, speaking directly to the worlds in which they live. If progress is underpinned by changing the way we think, and making us more responsive to the times in which we live, then there assuredly is significant progress being made on this continent.

An example of this can be found in the cultural-modern synergy apparent in the work of Laduma Nxgokolo. His striking knitwear range infuses Xhosa tradition with significant contemporary cultural value. In his ingenious way of distilling ethnic design he has advanced a new take on the old, which in this case was the prescribed colonial forerunner, Pringle knitwear which originated in Scotland. Instead, Nxgokolo's knitwear designs communicate a local dignity, capturing an inherent sense of pride in each initiate's truly modern attire - a commentary on the ritual of circumcision - the adolescent boy becoming a man.

Design is inherently forward thinking - and can manifest in rebelliousness (back-track to the Punk era with Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren). It's not hard to understand where the inspiration comes from amongst fashion rebels such as Maitele Wawe. His post street style in South Africa is an eclectic mix and glorification of a rebellious style. Wawe, in collaboration with other creatives, has formed *The Social Market* in Pretoria, causing something of a revolution. What touches me most is his inherent joyfulness, exuberance, willingness to dare, and an openness with all who share the slogan "*Create the things you wish existed*".

The creative partnerships include photographers, film makers and musicians who together make the local landscape and social contexts visible. Local is intimate enough to include family. For instance, Congolese fashion designer, Tara Mabilia, uses her family as models for her fashion shoots. Mabilia remains true to her heritage, and true to herself whilst living in London, creating intriguingly languid silhouettes and volumes reminiscent of a long gone elegant past which are created out of recycled garments, many discarded by family members. Although she cuts a fine contemporary figure she keeps her inspirations *close to home*. Mabilia declares "I believe that a given society can only go further and get better if more people feel related to their society's artistic expression". She is just one of these revolutionary thinkers reminiscent of the Avant-Garde and an advocate of Afrofuturism. She melds styles and influences which are resonant with the late 20th century pioneers (for instance, artist Jean Michel Basquiat and Grace Jones, singer and fashionista) in documenting the journey of fiction, fantasy and narrative.

This is a generation that is unafraid. They themselves have been witness to challenging times. They too have been known to drop formal studies like Raby, who relinquished her business studies midstream to follow her heart when she discovered it was Fashion that was warming her heart. Kgomotso Neto Tieane ditched a law degree to become a photographer guided by the dictum "Stay true to yourself". Not only are these creatives committed to staying true to themselves but are having an enormous amount of fun doing it while putting out a message to the youth that encourages them to pursue their dreams and find meaning in their lives by following their passion, rather than following the trend of "business as usual".

This type of improvisational design, of processes without borders, of channeling creative forces towards new horizons has given rise to some remarkable hybrid products. Interdependence and cooperation is a part of the creative process and goal. Narratives about *things* that exist or exist only in the mind's-eye, lead to narratives vested in the magical imaginary, even the fantastical, expanding the art of storytelling to incorporate fashion.

There are some of these gallant adventurers who even appear to be surprised by their creative resourcefulness though keen to tap into it. Selly Raby Kane boldly states that she wanted to see what she would do with the creativity she didn't know she had. Rabe's initiative with the Dakar based collective *Les Petites Pierres* uses creativity to change the world little by little, "stone by stone". The group's name means "The Small Stones" and their installations are an invitation to participate and contribute to "build a common building" or vision. Rabe cleaned out an old derelict train station involving the young people from the neighborhood who participated in the cleanup of the building. The collective re-created a village by reaching out to local suppliers and hosting different music, art and fashion events, all open to the wider community.

I feel it is also important to note that the talents of such individuals on the continent are reaching the global community and are counteracting the negative experiences and perceptions of Africa with highly positive ones that speak of other equivalents of Ubuntu - such as the slogan used in the film media for the fashion label Kenzo, called *Gidi Gidi Bụ Ugwu Eze*, meaning 'Unity is strength.' Community includes the extended family and strength comes from being able to trust and work together with an ideology and unconventional pairings.

It appears that the question most likely to be asked is more about the *why* than the clothes themselves, so Edelkoort's prediction may indeed be accurate. That said, this new approach to fashion in no way diminishes the outstanding creations produced. But unitive participation underpins, helps grow and enhance such creations.

So what is ringing out for me is the concept of a multitude of voices investing in a human identity where freedom and responsibility are key. As Professor Kate Fletcher from the University of the Arts (UK) positions: fashion is more and more dominated by "being", connecting and finding ways in to be radically together. A surreal mood exists that expresses an ideal to venture further towards, overcoming the alienation of the human being and human mind to a future celebration of cultures through a multiplicity of human talent and potential. If that sounds too idealistic, it is still at the very least a valid and needed thinking into the future.

Life in Africa has been and wearily still is that of disruption, uncertainty, violence, disorientation and more often than not a disenchanting worldview. Can this shift? Can a critical intelligence, warmed through by the freedom to create, help lighten and liberate the weight of this? The impulse is on the rise and I feel is motivating African youth to overcome hegemony, blur gender boundaries, transform attitudes, seek truth and promote goodwill.

Fashion itself is testing new forms of artistic expression, pushing boundaries and seeking undreamed of horizons. Could this be the wrapping up and demise of conditioning as we know it? of vapid egocentricity and kowtowing to the gurus' dictates? is it possibly the inauguration of a shared vision; of faith, hope and empathy; of imagination and aesthetic sensibility towards greater autonomy, freedom and self-determination? The adventurous spirit of these young people is equaled by their readiness to find their own voice. I find it enthralling to think that change can come from such an unexpected place.

Absorbed throughout this exploration as I have been, questioning my role in Africa's transformation and renewal, I feel encouraged to experience Africa simply as she goes about her everyday life, "to feel the vim!" as Ghanaians say. For those who are willing to develop the perception of truly *seeing* will see hope in our creations and those who develop the faculty of *hearing* will *hear* a chorale of magnificent African voices, uniting the continent and inspiring the world.

Africa in the late twentieth century rode the wave of liberation from European political control. Could this early twenty-first century emergence of powerful African creatives be the equally as potent, if not more so, second wave of *cultural* liberation? I would posit a yes.

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