THE NONCHALANCE OF A YOUNG COUPLE

It has always fascinated me to see an idea, a rough sketch become something tangible; to see a belief being shaped into something that accompanies other people in their daily lives and becomes part of their personal culture. This creative process is nowhere as prominent as it is in fashion. Often started with a simple thought, an inspiration is being translated into such an impactful product that people wear every day, that people engage with and live their lives in. Hence our emotions, our values and ideas often shape what we put on and therefore we choose to wear certain types of garments or go for specific attitudes that we can relate to. Through fashion we are able to build an aesthetic or atmosphere around us that follows us no matter where we go.

For as long as I can remember I wanted to be in fashion because I am intrigued by this capability of creating a specific story around me and my ideas with such a simple yet powerful product that really everyone is familiar with. I had this very romanticised and classic idea of the fashion world; a world of elegance, beauty and the appreciation for a sense of aesthetic, which felt so different to the environment I grew up in. It was this contrast that fuelled my curiosity and the longing to express myself creatively through something so prominent as clothing.

Growing up in the cut off German countryside, more than 100 kilometres away from the next big city, Frankfurt am Main, people lived their lives without much influences from the outside world. Life here was less about the varnish of things but more about living a simple, but good life, hence aesthetics was never as important as characteristics like practicality or simplicity. People's modesty shaped their ideals and therefore their attitude towards garments and fashion, which for them was a secondary. Spending more money on something that simply was more beautiful, was almost frowned upon. Details such as pockets or silhouettes would be
simply defined by their needs and profession not by their interesting design or construction. A carpenter for example would choose a pair of trousers with multiple pockets while someone working in a bank needed to wear a suit. In their spare time they would wear very vacuous garments such as bland jumpers and cheap trousers, because much more than expressing themselves they wanted to fit in, look and act like each other based on the values and modesty they shared. In a small town like mine, being noticed for something out of the usual or being different wasn’t considered to be something favourable. I missed the excitement about clothing that I was feeling, the possibility to enrich ones’ personality rather than aligning it with those of everyone else; the ability of choosing to underpin who you were. Clothing here did not breathe any refinement, quality or eye for the little detail that would make the difference, because it was only a necessity. Nobody saw a positive opportunity in underpinning their own persona with what they would put on. Their dress behaviour had no soul, no identity in my opinion. It was not personal at all, which for me was one of the main qualities of fashion. There was no specific attitude to it, as no one here shared an interest for this remote world of fashion of which I wanted to be a part of.

Eventually I had no other choice than leaving my home town behind and to move on in order to explore the world of fashion and its diverse opportunities and to meet likeminded people from whom I would learn. With 16 I enrolled in a pattern-cutting course as I did not know much yet, so I thought that the only way of making it into fashion was the job of a designer. It was just then when I discovered that there was much more to this world that I had imagined back home. In the end my path took a lot of twists and turns, from a more technical course, over working for a Berlin-based designer and a Fashion & Branding education triggered by its opportunity to tell stories and create identities that had triggered me to go into fashion back then, until my graduation in Fashion & Design today.

All these personal experiences form the backbone of my identity and my philosophy as creative within a fashion landscape that is fuelled by the era of image, hybridity and a collective sensitivity. In the following text I will elaborate on who I am as a fashion creative and how I relate to the fashion industry today. Furthermore, I will discuss how my roots and experiences have shaped my graduation project and the subsequent menswear collection ‘the nonchalance of a young couple’.
“Even if a brand has a beautiful coat, if the person who designed it is not the kind of person I can relate to in terms of vision or opinion or culture, then I just do not want to wear it” (Raf Simons in Interview with Miuccia Prada, 2016). In this interview Raf Simons explains further that the fashion industry today has changed. Everyone is able to create a beautiful product nowadays and therefore it is all the more important that those garments did not only originate from the urge to simply create something beautiful but much more carry the mind-set of the brand or designer, yet also the person who would actually wear the garments. Fashion today is about creating an image, a clear story and atmosphere that does not only run through your collection but also through every other aspect around it in order to create real value for the target audience. Therefore, designers today need to blend a product-driven approach with an editorial eye. In the so-called ‘era of image’ contemporary fashion is less about clothes making and more about image-making (Angelo Flaccavento, 2015). This new way of approaching a collection needs to pinpoint their identity as designer through their visual language but also throughout their actual garments and what they are standing for, proposing a more diverse and hybrid way of thinking.

Today brands that are able to create very clear atmospheres and cultures around them are likely to be very successful in what they do. Smaller brands such as Vetements, Hoody by Air and Off-White quickly became very popular and very recognizable while many big luxury brands are on the edge of loosing their identity because they want to be everything for everyone and many collections are ruled by marketing trends. This became very visible at the peak of licensing contracts of such brands as Calvin Klein or Gucci that had lost bits of their esteem by trying to be too approachable for everyone rather than focussing on their core target group.
“A lot of fashion houses today are being run like consumer packaged goods companies. There is no difference between selling handbags and toothpaste” (JJ Martin, How to fix the fashion system, 2016).

Something that those brands like Vetements have in common and that they do differently is that they a being run by a collective of creative people from different fields, with each different angles and viewpoints that are contributing to the story of the brand. Next to the often rather simple garments in terms of construction, they are creating attitudes that people want to wear and be a part of. Often the people working for and with those brands are also the ones that are very much like the target audience itself. In an oversaturated industry where it becomes increasingly hard for starting designers to exist, this showcases that it is more crucial than ever for young designer and labels today to focus on their personality and identity in order to make their own mark.

Coming from branding to design helps me to understand the importance of a multidisciplinary approach and how crucial it is to have a very clear, yet personal language in everything one does. Therefore, it was essential to not only create the collection but also to think about the starting points for my own branding and the visual language for my graduation project, which eventually resulted in the design of my own logo, thoughts about the target group and how the items I design are relating to them but also to myself, as well as my collaborative working approach together with other creative people.

(Fig. 6) Branding research board during design process (own picture)  

(Fig. 7) Icon research and brainstorm during design process (own picture)
Although I have always missed the sense of beauty and refinement, as well as storytelling in the environment I grew up in when I was young, the idea that fashion in the end of the day is a product, relating maybe more to principles of product design than to art, stuck with me and still defines the way how I work today. Moreover, I believe that it is important that items can easily be combined with each other and do not only work in fixed sets of outfits. Therefore, my designs are based on a range of classic garments with an eye for refinement, detail and a playful twist, allowing me to experiment within the recognizable characteristics of classic garments, prints and other classic references within fashion. The description of broken elegance defines the core of my design identity and visual language, as well as the attitude that my garments are conveying. Whereas broken does not necessarily refer to something being damaged, it rather means little elements, details or the fit that seem slightly off; subtle clashes and contrast that play with each other hand in hand. Elegance however refers to the prominent tailoring influences and choices of classic, high-quality fabrics I am working with. Together the two words, which are a contrast in themselves, emphasize the mind-set of being dressed-up and dressed-down at all times and any situation throughout ones’ daily routine, which for me is very important for a modern wardrobe.

(Fig. 8) Illustrations of three outfits from the line-up of the collection the ‘nonchalance of a young couple’ (own illustration)
THE COLLECTION

My approach towards designing is rather intuitive and atmospheric, often very personal and led by feelings or emotions that a certain starting point conveys. Since my roots have really shaped my way as a creative but also my ideas about fashion, it felt only logical to make this a part of my graduation. The journey of this graduation collection ‘the nonchalance of a young couple’ started with a few old photographs I found in my great grandparents’ picture album that I had discovered last summer back home in Germany. It showed all their beautiful pictures when they were very young and so deeply in love for how I had always known them. There was a touch of everlasting nonchalance of this very young couple full of hopes and dreams that immediately stuck with me. This naivety and playfulness of young love, once you grow older often being lost in people’s daily despite, inspired me to start this graduation collection and defined its design ingredients and romantic notion. The collection I developed from that captures the beauty and carefreeness yet also the fragility and rawness of those first relationships and those boys coming off age, playing with nostalgic and modern notions by combining elements from young boys of the past and the now. A description will follow below in which will be explained how this notion is used within the collection and its most important design ingredients.

(Fig. 9) Selection of pictures from my families photo album (own collage)
While flipping through the pictures, I was intrigued by how elegantly my grandparents and other people, especially young boys, in those photographs are dressed. It stands very much in contrast to the very rural and raw area, which aesthetically I had experienced so differently when I grew up there decades later. This idea immediately corresponded with the contrast of broken elegance that I so often like to work with. One suiting shape with very broad shoulders and narrow waist worn by a very young boy especially caught my attention and serves now as base for the tailoring pieces due to its interesting fit that in fashion history was first considered to be a bad fit and later on as one of the most elegant silhouettes in menswear.
In order to infuse them with more contemporary elements I looked at what young boys coming off age are wearing today, which are mainly garments heavily influenced by street- and sportswear. We are “being swallowed by the casualization of life; sports- and street wear influences nowadays look less like a trend, than a paradigm shift in dress.” (Vanessa Friedman, International New York Times, 2016). Therefore, I played with the proportion of the jacket, as well as its stiffness and the ergonomic shape of the sleeves that are derived from a biker’s jacket in order to combine the elegance of the past with what is relevant in clothing today. Standard details such as the collar of the shirts are shifted to the middle of the neckline, creating a subtle yet interesting detail and new construction of the garments.

**SHARP VS. FLUENT SILHOUETTES**

The sharp and clear line of the jackets is fuelled by the softened and elongated silhouette of tailored trousers that sit low on the hip and are extremely long and wide around the ankle, referring to the fit of classic sweatpants. Also the tailored shirts follow the same silhouette as the jackets yet are more oversized and fluent. The collection plays with pass forms that are slightly cropped, too small, too big or too long referring to the young guys coming off age and garments that they wore in a period of personal transition. Together those elements create a contemporary yet subtle take on classic tailoring silhouettes.

**MACRAMÉ & CROCHET-LIKE TEXTURES**

The macramé tank top and bags are inspired by the long walks through nature and the picnics my great grandparents used to have with the entire family. Those textures of connected knots have something very romantic to them yet at the same time those kind of bags are very common, practical items in peoples everyday life. Through the combination of nylon and leather strings, as well as fur they are a modern interpretation of this nostalgic memory I connect with them.

(Fig. 12) Research board for macramé constructions (own picture)
FLORAL PRINT

The floral print emphasizes the youthfulness and playfulness of the collection, yet also the sense of fresh romance that is important to the collection. It is inspired by classic shapes of abstract flowers and merged with the idea of stickers or children tattoos. The random placement in collage style that refers to the graphical way of how the pictures in the photo album were glued in, supports the childlike atmosphere and stands in contrast to tailored pieces on which it is applied on in form of digital print or loose patches that come back in different outfits.

(Fig. 13) Floral printed shirt - picture from photo shoot (own picture)
CONTRASTING MATERIALS, MIXING THE CLASSIC AND MODERN

High-quality, elegant tailoring wools with different textures and weights are combined with synthetic, sporty fabrics such as nylon. Cottons like the sweat fabric or the light drill structure for the shirting and the wool-cotton mix of the tailored coat add the certain casualness to the fabric selection. The cotton-based knitwear that reminds of crochet textures plays with a modern interpretation of nostalgic slipovers within its design and adds a softness and refinement to the collection's fabric selection.

COLOURS

The collection balances brisk combinations of very classic colours such as black, navy blue and a distinctive tone of light shirting blue with soft, almost faded nuances of pale pink, whites and subtle hues reminding of aged paper. Besides, the combination of the classic check pattern and a modern interpretation of a floral print adds a certain carefreeness yet also randomness to the more classic colour hues; making the collection in combination with the material choices more diverse.

(Fig. 14) Colour and material board (own picture)

Looking back at my roots and where I came from, the graduation collection ‘the nonchalance of a young couple’, captures the essence of who I am as creative within a multidisciplinary fashion landscape. The sense for practicality and product-driven approach towards fashion shaped by the environment and the people I grew up with, together with my longing for defining my own aesthetics and language, results in a very personal collection; a collection that captures the sense of broken elegance within my designs and translates it through a ‘seasonal’ concept that emphasises the intuitive and very personal approach of how I work as a designer.

Using the starting point of my great grandparents’ photo album, I am translating the once nostalgic inspiration into a modern collection capturing the beauty and rawness of youth and young romances from the past and now.
SOURCE LIST

BOOK
Ibidapo, T., 2011, Cult of Boys, teNeues Publishing Group, Kempen
Wood, T., 2013, Men / Women, Steidl Publisher, Göttingen

ONLINE VIDEO
ShowStudio, Panel Discussion – Vetements Spring / Summer 2017, video, From: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSU1PeEOEc4&t=1244s

WEB PAGE


MAGAZINE
(Fig. 1) Smits, M., Collection Shoot Stephen Piel, From: own archive

(Fig. 2) Deisenroth, O., Neukirchen (Knüll) in Schwalm-Eder-Kreis fotografiert vom Knüll-House, From: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neukirchen_(Knüll)#/media/File:Neukirchen_Hessen.jpg [retrieved 09 November 2016]

(Fig. 3) Unknown., CORD ZUNFTHOSE MODYF TRENKERCORD SCHWARZ, From: https://www.modyf.de/zunftthose-modyfr-trenkercord-schwarz-57626-6 [retrieved 21 November 2016]

(Fig. 4) Unknown, Untitled, From: http://burschenschaft-neukirchen.de [retrieved 09 November 2016]

(Fig. 5) Teller, J., System Magazine Cover, From: http://system-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/SYSTEM8-1-1.jp [retrieved 08 December 2016]

(Fig. 6) Piel, S., Untitled, From: own archive

(Fig. 7) Piel, S., Untitled, From: own archive

(Fig. 8) Piel, S., Untitled, From: own archive

(Fig. 9) Piel, S., Untitled, From: own archive

(Fig. 10) Unknown, Untitled, From: own archive

(Fig. 11) Piel, S., Untitled, From: own archive

(Fig. 12) Piel, S., Untitled, From: own archive

(Fig. 13) Smits, M., Collection Shoot Stephen Piel, From: own archive

(Fig. 14) Piel, S., Untitled, From: own archive