Ahmet Öğüt

From Self-Design to Algorithmic-Design

Back in 2003, Berlin was described by its former mayor Klaus Wowereit as "*arm, aber sexy*" (poor, but sexy) – despite being one of the fastest-rising property markets in the world, with as much as 35 percent overvaluation. Berlin still boasts many creatives, with more affordable studio and living spaces than New York or London, albeit fewer job opportunities.[1] To understand why most freelance creatives struggle with depression and face the stigmas associated with mental illness in Berlin, one could look at some commonly used words that exist only in the German language: *Unverbindlich,* non committed; *Phlegmatisch,* skipping everything to the point of not doing anything; *Verrafft,* people who are confused about life; and something right-wing extremists like to use: *Links-Grün-versifft*, left-green-dirty.

Yes, Berlin is still proudly a stronghold of the left, green, and dirty; and its queer club scene also actively fights to protect the city's politically engaged culture so that Berlin doesn't become just another global center for entertainment.[2] In spite of all this, it's not at all a coincidence that Germany was represented at the 2017 Venice Biennale by an artist who wore a Balenciaga hat while receiving the Golden Lion award for best pavilion.[3] This was perhaps a double confirmation of the institutionalization of streetwear garments as high fashion, developing hand in hand with the adoption of "attitude" as high art. This is a far cry from the days when, for example, legendary fashion designer and activist Katharine Hamnett met with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984 and wore a T-shirt that read "58% DON'T WANT PERSHING," protesting the installation of US missiles on British soil. Following the appearance of the Balenciaga hat in 2017, it was a wonderful surprise to see that the artist chosen to represent Germany in the next Venice Biennale is Natascha Süder Happelmann. This is a deliberate misspelling of the artist's name, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, in order to highlight thirty years' worth of misspellings of her name by public officials.[4] "Happelmann" didn't say a word at the press conference; her head was hidden under a papier mâché stone, replacing the Balenciaga hat.

As argued by Boris Groys, the position once occupied by religion has been replaced by a new obligation for the modern subject to "self-design," which "forces the artist – as well as anybody who comes to be covered by the media – to confront the image of the self: to correct, to change, to adapt, to contradict this image."[5] Groys sees the modern artistic avant-garde as a design-free domain, one of honesty, high morality, sincerity, and trust.[6] Looking at the economy of symbolic exchange explored by


BALENCIAGA
BALENCIAGA
BALENCIAG


BALENCIAGA
MODE
VETEMENTS
VETEMENTS
BALENCIAGA

Marcel Mauss and George Bataille, with their theories on the gift economy, Groys reminds us that individuals who show themselves to be especially nasty receive the most recognition and fame. By contrast, Groys argues that there also exists a subtler and more sophisticated form of self-design, one that takes the form of self-effacement and self-sacrifice: the death of the author.[7] But in surveying what is happening in the world today, particularly with the algorithmic takeover of everyday life, it seems that religion has not left us so easily.[8] And just as religious-design has never really left us, nor has state-design, given that the nation-state acts as a continuation of the ethics and politics of religious power. This, of course, has been in progress for some time. In the 1920s, police in the US would stop women on the beach to make sure their bathing suits weren't too revealing.[9] World War II and wartime austerity didn't make things easier. In 1942, the US government issued regulation L85, around the same time that the British government issued regulations for "Utility Clothes": both policies introduced rationing measures for women's clothing, regulated women's skirt lengths, and required the repossession of all nylon for parachutes and other military uses, leaving only cotton and rayon for the production of stockings.[10] In 1970s Korea, under dictator Park Chung-hee, police took young women into police stations to measure their skirts. They also stopped men with long hair in the streets and subjected them to involuntary haircuts using the scissors they carried with them at all times.

In 2007, Turkish sociologist Şerif Mardin proposed the term "*mahalle baskısı*" – which translates as "community pressure" or "peer pressure," and which refers to the practice of neighborhoods policing themselves – to describe a common experience in urban Turkey today: a clash of intolerance between secular Turkish society and Islamic lifestyle. With the rise of right-wing forces all over the world, *mahalle baskısı* can be found in many places – wherever conservatism and patriarchy reign. This leads to a new danger, in which two kinds of policing combine: *mahalle baskısı* and "algorithmic-design," which is self-design mediated by algorithms for the collection of user data, the production of brand value, and surveillance. As an potential response to this danger, Groys's original conception of self-design can be empowering, though given the more complicated nature of self-design today, we will have to go further.

Self-design has been deployed by countercultures, LGBTIQ* communities, and social movements for identity-formation, political expression, and survival. But self-design is also used by conservatives and right-wing extremists. All of this happens under the shadow of algorithmic-design, commanded by powerful technology companies and governments, characterized by the increasingly invasive collecting of user data.

As alluded to above, on the individual and community level, self-design can be empowering. One well-known example is queer ballroom culture in 1980s New York, where gender norms and class divisions were overcome through performance and fashion. Less know are the "Sapeurs" of present-day Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo. ("Sapeurs" is derived from "SAPS," which in French stands for "Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes," or "Society of Tastemakers and Elegant People"). Despite high levels of poverty, Sapeurs dress in stylish French fashion from the early twentieth century.[11] In Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, young men have formed the gentleman's club "Mr. Erbil," despite the years of war that have ravaged the city. The members of Mr. Erbil dress in stylish Western suits, some designed by local fashion designers. Amidst violence and poverty, the men of Mr. Erbil also advocate for women's rights and organize weekly events in their neighborhoods, featuring activists, designers, musicians, and artists. Through this self-design strategy, Mr. Erbil members know how to generate international attention, although they purposely reveal little about their daily lives behind the scenes.[12]

However, self-design has also been used for utterly destructive and violent purposes. For example, from 1931 to 1945 the German clothing brand Hugo Boss supplied uniforms to the Nazi party and military, using forced labor by Polish and French workers.[13] More recently, Anders Behring Breivik, a right-wing extremist who murdered seventy-seven people in a bomb and gun attack in Oslo in July 2011, has refused to wear anything other than a red Lacoste sweater for his public appearances in court and at police stations. Before the attacks, he even prepared photos of himself wearing Lacoste sweaters in different colors, to be used by the press after he carried out his crime. In the 1516-page manifesto that Breivik emailed to his followers shortly before the attacks, he outlined a dress code, advising his followers to wear Lacoste clothing in conservative colors to avoid arousing suspicion. Lower-cost brands, he wrote, are not as effective at sending the "psycho-socio-economic signals" necessary for tricking potential targets.[14] Here, self-design is a way to accumulate, and designate, identity by way of a brand. Another case: among Turkish right-wing extremists, white winter hats have become a popular item, even a uniform. Ogün Samast was clearly wearing one

when he gunned down Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink in 2007.

At the annual Business of Fashion event in November 2018, Christopher Wylie, a Cambridge Analytica whistle-blower, explained how fashion profiling – codifying and targeting individuals based on the clothing brands they wear – has been a key metric in building Steve Bannon's global unified alt-right.[15] Wylie mentioned that brands like Wrangler and L. L. Bean were aligned with conservative traits, while brands like Kenzo were aligned with liberal traits. He also explained that knowing peoples' preferred clothing brands is useful for producing algorithms to find out how they think and feel about other issues. Employed by Cambridge Analytica, this strategy was possible only because the company had access to the data of fifty million Facebook users. The dynamics of branding are being harnessed by neofascists to spread their politics. Hugo Boss recently apologized for its Nazi past, and Lacoste has demanded that Norwegian police prevent Breivik from wearing its clothing in court. These brands are trying to prevent their images from being tarnished, but they often remain complicit.

The Hijacking of Anti-Anti

What do these examples tell us? What does it mean when an article of clothing like the bomber jacket, with its military origins, made to be versatile and functional, is symbolically repurposed by English punks or the postwar Japanese counterculture? It eventually made its way into high fashion, with adaptations by Raf Simons, Helmut Lang, and others.[16]

Other trends that, despite themselves, have become high fashion are normcore and the anti-fashion movement. Are these really just fashion trends, or are they sociocultural concepts? In its initial incarnation in the 1990s, the anti-fashion movement was not only a rebellion against the status quo of the fashion industry; it also emerged as a general symbol of cultural revolt. Normcore's return to the "norm" goes one step further; as a set of generic, ordinary tropes adopted by fashion-conscious youth of today, it's the antithesis of the highly stylized hipster look.[17] With this second wave of anti-fashion, urban subcultures prioritize *being with* over *being special*. But as Rory Rowan argues (building on the original normcore concept devised by the collective K-Hole): "Normcore smuggles in the backdoor an implicit idea of what is normal (white, middle class) even as it shuts the front door on the mainstream."[18] Today, this has translated to brands like Gap flaunting their normcore collections. Fashion designer Rick Owens has even perfected the "avant-normcore" look, with runway models wearing "normal" clothing.[19] Normcore has become what it was supposedly against.

In 2014, something very unusual happened in Paris. A new fashion brand made its debut, with the ironically generic name Vetements, meaning "clothing" in French. Designed by a collective of designers who remained mostly anonymous at first, Vetements steered attention back to the clothes themselves. It was not the first fashion brand to do this; the luxury brand Maison Martin Margiela had done something similar through the use of allusive, mysterious marketing. But what was new was the ironic abolition of the brand, the absolute return to the clothing, in radical contrast to the established idea of fashion. Vetements fought against the traditional fashion landscape. It brought back a sense of fun to fashion by hacking other high-fashion brands, repurposing non-fashion brands, and creating an aesthetic that was independent of trends.[20]

The main designers who launched Vetements studied together at Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts. It is also important to note that one of them, Demna Gvasalia, was born in 1981 in a small town in Georgia and grew up during the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict in the early 1990s. Another member of the Vetements collective, Maja Weiss, grew up in the small Slovenian city of Črnomelj, in the former Yugoslavia. Laura Tanzer, another Vetements designer, was born in South Africa in 1994, the year that apartheid officially ended and the African National Congress came to power; she was thus part of the first "born-free" generation in South Africa. This multi-gendered and multi-opinionated collective of creatives were well aware of what trend forecaster and educator Lidewij Edelkoort outlined in her 2015 "Anti_Fashion Manifesto": "The fashion world is still working in a 20th-century mode, and this places fashion out of today's society and makes it old-fashioned." They also were keenly aware of another key point from the manifesto: "The consumers of today and tomorrow (now we call them influencers) are going to choose for themselves, creating and designing their own wardrobes. They will share clothes amongst each other since ownership doesn't mean a thing anymore. They will rent clothes, lend clothes, transform clothes and find clothes on the streets."[21] This is clearly on display in cities like Berlin. (Vetements lost its radical attitude and original mission when Gvasalia took a job at Balenciaga.)

As Naomi Klein writes in her book *No Logo*, when one brand gets all the attention and criticism, others are let off the hook.[22] But brands today are constantly shifting, buying up smaller companies and hiding behind their less stigmatized image.[23] Klein also remarks that it's


GET next to
I want to
make my street
brand more
unique.

not only brands that should be on our radar: "Faceless resource-based corporations continue to conduct their operations in relative obscurity."[24] Still, brands are not untouchable – not even the faceless ones. Self-design may have an important role to play when it comes to confusing the processes of algorithmic-design.

From Self-Design to Algorithmic-Design, From Generation Y to Generation Z

In her work *Most of Us Are* (2018), Alina Bliumis provides a summary of recent global demographic research and opinion polling: "Most of us are named Mohammed, last name Lee, 28 years old, have black hair, brown eyes, blood type O, like the color blue, often say OK."[25] What algorithms tell us here is that the "most typical" person worldwide may not be who we imagine as "most typical." But who are we?

According to demographers at the Pew Research Center, the "millennial generation" (which includes those born between roughly 1977 and 1997 – also sometimes referred to as "Generation Y") currently makes up 27 percent of the global population, or about 2 billion people. According to researchers, Generation Y is less brand-loyal, but very self-design-conscious.[26] Its successor, Generation Z, is already taking things to another level, using algorithmic-design as a tool for self-design in ways that Generation Y could hardly imagine.

Since millennials have come to represent the largest segment of the global population, they will play an increasingly significant role in the redefinition of the legacy of self-design. It will have less to do with religion, less to do with the nation-state, and even less to do with traditional luxury. These will be replaced by the idea of rent-to-own luxury – a kind of "time-share" luxury. Social media will play an enormous role in this shift, with a new generation of "influencers" (formerly known as "consumers" or "buyers") deploying a self-developed visual vocabulary and reaching a broader public.

With followers in the low thousands, influencers can make $50 to $100 per post. When the followers add up, the cash adds up too. Influencers with five thousand to twenty-five thousand followers can get paid up to $250 per post. With twenty-five thousand to fifty-thousand followers, these numbers go up to between $200 and $450 per post.[27] Offering a wry critique of this state of affairs, in 2014 Constant Dullaart, using an eBay contact, bought 2.5 million artificially generated "followers" and distributed them free of charge to a selection of art world Instagram accounts for his *High Retention, Slow Delivery*.[28] Artificially generated followers are often used to boost the profiles of brands, political parties, artists, curators, and celebrities. Dullaart's democratization of this technique was a critique of the growing power of the attention economy under hypercapitalism. This new people-powered ecosystem initially appeared as an opportunity for emancipation, at least to Generation Y. But Generation Z sees what's was coming next: algorithmic-design taking over what religious-design and state-design used to dictate.

There is still a generational gap of understanding here. Considering that we know so little about Generation Z, it may be unfair to propose Groys's model of self-sacrificial marginalization and withdrawal as the only counter to narcissism, nihilism, sarcasm, and depression. Algorithmic-design keeps reinventing itself, learning from self-design as an empowering but also violent tool. In fact, algorithmic design is predicated on an "algorithmic imaginary" that can be shattered and overcome.[29] Thus, before algorithmic-design completely takes control, there is still another chance: the more we confuse the algorithm, the more liberated we are.

×

All images courtesy of the author

1
Andrew Nunes, “Comparing the Costs of Being an Emerging Artist in New York, Los Angeles, and Berlin,” *Artsy*, September 5, 2017 https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-comparing-costs-emerging-artist-new-york-los-angeles-berlin.

2
Particularly the group Creamcake, which organizes parties and discursive events such as Europool, 3hd, and the ‹Interrupted = “Cyfem and Queer”› symposium. In summer 2018, a hundred clubs from Berlin’s techno scene co-organized a counterprotest against the AfD; see Agence France-Presse, “Thousands from far right and Berlin’s techno scene face off in rival rallies,” *The Guardian*, May 27, 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/27/thousands-from-far-right-and-berlins-techno-scene-face-off-in-riva l-rallies.

3
Simone Dattenberger, “Medizin gegen die Destruktion,” *Merkur*, May 18, 2017 https://www.merkur.de/kultur/biennale-venedig-ehrt-kuenstler-anne-imhof-und-franz-erhard-walther-mit-goldenen-loewen-8323382.html (in German).

4
“Natascha Süder Happelmann to represent Germany at 2019 Venice Biennale,” *Artforum*, October 25, 2018 https://www.artforum.com/news/natascha-sueder-happelmann-to-represent-germany-at-2019-venice-biennale-77324.

5
Boris Groys, “Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility,” *e-flux journal* no. 7 (June 2009) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61386/self-design-and-aesthetic-responsibility/.

6
Boris Groys, *Going Public* (e-flux journal and Sternberg Press, 2010), 43.

7
Groys, *Going Public*, 45.

8
In Pakistan, women who wear jeans are still threatened with being doused in nitric acid.

9
See Kathleen Morgan Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 104; and David Matthews, “When the police could arrest women for their bathing suits,” *Splinter News*, August 14, 2015 https://splinternews.com/when-the-police-could-arrest-women-for-their-bathing-su-1793849965.

10
Joan Styan, “Wartime Hardships: Rationing in London,” *BBC*, June 17, 2004 https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/98/a2756298.shtml.

11
See http://www.henrikenaumann.com/commedeskinois.html.

12
Robert Spangle, “Meet the men of Mr Erbil, Iraq’s suited-up style collective,” *GQ*, July 27, 2017 https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/gallery/mr-erbil-iraq-street-style.

13
“Hugo Boss apology for Nazi past as book is published,” *BBC*, September 21, 2011 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15008682.

14
Ben Quinn, “Stop Anders Breivik wearing our clothes, Lacoste reportedly ask police,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2011 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/09/anders-breivik-clothes-lacoste-police.

15
Vanessa Friedman and Jonah Engel Bromwich, “Cambridge Analytica Used Fashion Tastes to Identify Right-Wing Voters,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2018 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/style/cambridge-analytica-fashion-data.html?fbclid=IwAR2c1aXaYSkePguscTgVRe2L8VgTTGPTlvpoi5O64ymNqRZE7nrVZXsJXaQ.

16
Berlin fashion label GmbH has used working-class iconography in its designs, such as a hammer and pickaxe. See https://www.instagram.com/p/BnELbGXB_Sz/.

17
See http://khole.net/.

18
Rory Rowan, “SO NOW!: On Normcore,” *e-flux journal*, October 2014 https://www.e-flux.com/journ al/58/61168/so-now-on-normco re/.

19
Isabella Burley, “Say hello to ‘avant-normcore,’” *Dazed*, March 2, 2014 http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/19081/1/say-hello-to-avant-normcore.

20
See http://www.thefashionspot.com/runway-news/495167-vetemen ts-best-emerging-designer/#/ slide/1.

21
See https://mycourses.aalto.fi/pluginfile.php/243780/course/section/70823/anti_fashion_manifesto011.pdf.

22
Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Picador, 1999), 422.

23
Two years after Facebook was founded, it received an acquisition offer from Yahoo for $1 billion, but turned it down. Six years later, Facebook acquired Instagram for $1 billion, two years after Instagram was founded. Today, hardly anyone talks about Yahoo. Instagram has become Facebook, or Facebook has become Instagram, as Facebook’s own platform is dying. Tomorrow, Instagram might buy another emerging company and might itself disappear.

24
Klein, *No Logo*, 426.

25
See http://www.alinabliumis.com/mostofus/.

26
See https://www.atkearney.com/web/global-business-policy-council/article?/a/where-are-th e-global-millennials-. It’s important to look at the characteristics of cohorts within generations – and not only according to a Western-centric bias, but also in other parts of the world. Some examples are those in Malaysia known as Battling Lifers (born before 1942), Idealistic Strugglers (1943–61), Social Strivers (1962–77), Prospective Pursuers (1978–91), and Neoteric Inheritors (1992–present day). In Japan there are groups known as the Danso Generation (1951–60), the Shinjunrui Generation (1961–70), the Post-Bubble Generation (1986–95), and the Yutori Generation (1987–96).

27
Henry Cooke, “How much cash could you make with your Instagram?,” *Stuff*, May 17, 2016 https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/money/77536020/how-much -cash-could-you-make-with-yo ur-instagram.

28
Constant Dullaart, “Why I’m Amassing an Army of Fake Social Media Followers,” *Hyperallegic*, November 4, 2015 https://hyperallergic.com/251034/why-im-amassing-an-army -of-fake-facebook-followers/ .

29
For “algorithmic imaginary,” see the work of Sam Kinsley http://www.samkinsley.com/2016/04/26/upcoming-talks-an-algorithmic-imaginary/.