



# The Legacy of Katharine Hamnett's T-shirts. Fashion as Activism

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**Abstract.** For a long time, fashion was only a novelty, an aesthetic pleasure, a means of individual self-expression, a possession (Veblen 1899), and a means of separation (Simmel 1904). In the last more than thirty years, following a change of attitude, fashion has also become interpretable as a medium of social activism. It no longer seeks to shape only wearable products and the style of their wearers but also the world (Fuad-Luke 2009). This essay interprets the career of British fashion designer Katharine Hamnett and her 1984 media scandal as the starting point for a shift in attitude, when fashion and social engagement became organically linked and dress became a means of bringing social and ecological issues into focus, beyond itself. Drawing on case studies, the essay explores the changing narrative around clothes, raising current issues such as the importance of using organic cotton as a raw material, the role of the active citizen, the limits of growth, or the meanings constructed by marketing. Although Hamnett's work has received undeservedly little discussion, she has an undeniably important role to play in changing this narrative. Today, thanks to her activist design, social responsibility has become a fundamental principle in branding. We can never talk about fashion in the same way as before Hamnett.

**Keywords:** fashion, activism, marketing, contemporary trends

## Introduction

Does fashion have a role to play in changing the future? It certainly does, as there are few media in the world with as much influence as fashion. As Keszeg (2022: 207) argues, the creators of contemporary fashion have now admitted that fashion must give up “the role of dressing up the body and covering it with textile in the physical sense, and it should interpret itself as a medium not only through the

medium of the physical body". To change our throwaway society, which knows no limits (Sedláček 2012), huge communicative power and speed are needed. My hypothesis is that fashion has a unique opportunity to play its part in creating a more liveable society and preventing ecological disaster. Lipovetsky (1987) argues that all cultural industries are driven by the struggle for novelty and diversity, and follow the logic of fashion, with the goal being nothing less than immediate success. Fashion as a medium lends itself to activism that seeks to change the world, to speak out and address various social problems, to stand up for important causes, and in addition to be a great vehicle for information, it has plenty of problems and issues of its own to solve.

As Jean Baudrillard (1997) put it, pleasure in fashion is a cultural phenomenon, but we pay a high price in terms of waste, a price that everyone seems to accept. I will use the career of British fashion designer Katharine Hamnett, who has been a major activist beyond the world of fashion, to demonstrate that Baudrillard's pessimism is unjustified, that fashion and activism are now intrinsically linked, and that the involvement of the wider society has just begun. Designers who actively reflect on public affairs, and active citizens who follow their example, can shape not only fashion but also our society.

In any case, we are changing, and the question is whether for the better or for the worse. Are we pursuing or creating ideals that are liveable or unliveable? According to Lipovetsky (1987), it is up to us because fashion spreads both bad and good things, and it is our responsibility to exploit the interest that is bound to be generated by the emergence of new fashion trends, and we decide what to spread with it. Lipovetsky (1987) thinks that it is a mistake for thinkers to stigmatize fashion and consumer society because, in his opinion, only desires can help improve society.

## **How Far Does Fashion Extend?**

Overruling Barthes's (1999) view that the semiotic system of fashion is arbitrary and therefore cannot be taken seriously, Svendsen (2006) argues that the situation has changed, and fashion is now considered important enough to be given the attention it deserves, or, on the contrary, it has become so important because of the attention it receives. In the interpretation of the field and the definition of its social role, we have long gone beyond Simmel's (1904) definition that fashion is produced by the desire of the higher social classes to separate themselves from the lower classes and, as a result of the democratization of fashion and the success of the ready-made garment industry, beyond the unidirectional mechanism of action whereby new fashions can only come from the upper social classes. An analysis of contemporary trends shows that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fashions, modes,

and hype from marginal groups and subcultures are just as important in changing our habits and the fashion industry as a whole (Maróy, 2020). Conspicuous consumption, as described by Veblen (1899), which drives the constant renewal of fashion and allows fashion products to appear interesting and attractive only for a short period of time, shows this phenomenon from only one aspect, that of the demonstration of social status, but today's moderate consumption and non-consumption are just as trendy, which is precisely the opposite of the stigmatizing view of fashion as having no message or effect other than to inspire consumption (Press 2018). This approach ignores the fact that dress, the wearing of clothes, is a socially embedded necessity with multiple meanings and effects.

According to Lars Svendsen (2006), academic discourse also follows the logic of fashion, for example, in terms of which topics and authors are considered currents and which are less so. In his opinion, it would be naive to believe that only rational considerations are driving these intellectual trends, since they are based on changing tastes as much as garments are. Svendsen (2006) does not see much difference between fashion and philosophy in this respect although, as he puts it, philosophers react much more slowly to change than those working in the fashion world. We should also take into account what Simmel (1904) said, claiming that fashion as a social fact is a non-cumulative change of cultural characteristics – it arises from the basic tension of the social condition of human beings. He says there is a strong link between fashion and identity, and we all accept this claim. It can be seen, therefore, that for several reasons, it is not useful to exclude fashion from the range of socially defining factors; in fact, it is a mistake not to include it in attempts to resolve current social problems.

## **The Surfeit and the Turn**

Žižek (2008: 27) argues that in our “post-ideological” world, the basic attitude is one of cynical detachment, of denial of capitalism, that based on this basic attitude we continue to consume fetishized goods and see money as omnipotent, and that capitalism is essentially based on denial. How can we overcome this deadlock?

It is pretty much clear to everyone that T-shirts costing a few euros, clothes that can be worn only twice are not in our long-term interest. Influencers and celebrities have never been seen in the same outfit twice in the past few decades, sending the message: you need something new, everything is disposable. Here is the “Eden” where we are slowly drowning in our own textile junk. In the early 2000s, fast fashion companies changed the rhythm of fashion, replacing the traditional two-season (spring-summer, autumn-winter) collections with thirty to fifty collections a year (Siegle 2012). This has led to a level of overproduction that has inflated the values of fashion.

In her *Anti-Fashion Manifesto*, Edelkort (2015: 4) explains why she believes that marketing is to blame for the expansion of manufacturing in fashion and uses the powerful phrase that marketing spreads products like viruses. In her view, marketing is to blame for the fact that, as she writes, “saturation is slowly turning travelling global consumers away from too much sameness and overexposure”.

Veblen’s (1899) law of conspicuous consumption describes a social compulsion to display status, to put the “I can afford it” on display for the public. In this case, that is precisely the goal in showing status: to wear very expensive pieces, and as this trend becomes widespread, to show that we can always buy new garments. Social expectations therefore influence the pace of development in fashion. In Veblen’s time, the opinion on the master of the house was the main compelling force. In a mediatised world, the desire to relate to and resemble the stars, along the lines of the parasocial interactions described by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956), have become the driving force behind fashion in the golden age of television. In this digitalized world, it is the amount of Instagram likes and the pressure to communicate that have caused fashion to move at an unsustainable pace, where the pressure to post, influencing the recipients, the followers of fashion, and the endless opportunity to show ourselves have become a driver of waste.

Gernot Böhme (2016: 16) identifies the state in which we live as the “discontents of prosperity”. He explains that, although the current standard of living is much higher than previously, no one is satisfied with what they have achieved. In his opinion, our lives are determined by the pressure for growth in capitalist societies, and he believes this claim is relevant not only in the field of work but also in leisure and education. In his view, desires are the guarantee of growth in aesthetic capitalism. He says that because of this pressure – that nothing is (good) enough, nothing can stay the same, we always need something new, we always need more – we are now living our lives as a kind of stress. This feeling is making more and more people in affluent societies think and want to live differently, want to change. Byung-Chul Han (2019) speaks of a meritocratic society replacing a disciplinarian society, where we have gradually got rid of negativity and switched to an all-powerful positivity. In his opinion, unlike in previous societies, our present society is characterized not by prohibition and restriction but by infinite possibilities, and he points out that this kind of freedom does not mean freedom from constraints and limitations but that the momentum of freedom actually disappears here because it does not derive from negativity but from infinite positivity. In other words, people have not become freer, they have just made themselves part of a performance-oriented society by choice. In Han’s (2019) view, we pay for the compulsion to fully realize our potential, to increase productivity at all costs, with depression and burnout.

There is no doubt that we have reached a turning point in many ways in our lives and in fashion as well. Since the late 1980s, the unsustainable fashion

industry has been dominated by a kind of activism that not only wants to offer aesthetic experiences and new looks to people but that also inspires a rethinking of the norms of our society.

### **The Connection between Fashion and Activism**

Fashion is not just about what we wear and how we wear it but also about the values we live our lives by. Fashion activism, as Hirscher (2013) puts it, is related to political activism, a participatory approach, empowering the consumer with knowledge and tools. As Von Busch (2008) argues, a designer, or, using his term, a “hacktivist”, is not a design genius in the classical sense but rather a facilitator, an envoy of collective change. Heller and Vienne (2018) draw our attention to the problem that designers coming from mostly minority groups, without any financial support and significant income, make their designs for the sake of a particular cause, driven by the desire to solve problems, and that very rarely do they receive recognition or active participation from dominant groups. The authors also summarize what design activists think could help responsible design to become more widespread. Prominent among these proposals is the need for a change in the way our society interprets success. The authors also highlighted the need for a social movement for right action instead of capitalism.

This is in line with the idea expressed by Stella McCartney, one of the most successful design activists, at the launch of her Spring/Summer 2022 collection, arguing that designers should not only redesign clothes but also reshape people’s mindset. This collection also marks the debut of Frayme, first ever mushroom leather on the catwalk, a bag made from the now perfectly viable alternative to animal leather, which is expected to revolutionize the fashion industry.

Heller and Vienne (2018) define transformational design as people-centred, interdisciplinary processes that aim to bring about sustainable, behavioural, and formal changes in individuals, systems, organizations, often for progressive goals. An activist designer is also an active citizen, who is not distanced from public affairs and social issues. Hirscher (2013), referring to Fuad-Luke (2009), explores the concept of fashion activism as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of activities, whether inspired by political, social, environmental causes, the fashion industry, fashion consumption, or design. Von Busch (2018) also identifies various forms of fashion activism such as open design, fashion hacking (which involves appropriating and redesigning what already exists), co-design, slow fashion, craft, DIY, upcycling, and modular design. Looking ahead to the future, following activist designers, a much more active fashion audience is also seen emerging.

## Consumption and Activism

It seems to be a rather controversial relationship, but can the power of consumerism be used to address important issues? Does fashion have critical potential? There was a time when politics was considered taboo, and fashion brands avoided taking any kind of position, but the situation has changed quite a bit by now. There is a sense of pressure from customers who want companies to stand up for important causes. Today, a brand is eroded if it has nothing more to say than itself, if it does not address important issues. As Young (2018) puts it, whether or not brands are determined to be on the right side of history, this is no longer an issue that can be taken lightly, and while there will always be those who cannot reconcile themselves to the controversial idea that brands, with their inherent capitalist mission, are entering the realm of social justice, the situation is already given.



*Source: Courtesy of Katharine Hamnett*

**Picture 1.** *Hamnett's T-shirt encouraging environmental activism*

At times, successful designers such as Stella McCartney, Vivienne Westwood, or Katharine Hamnett, who have championed social and ecological causes, are labelled as hypocrites in an attempt to discredit the otherwise very positive work these designers are doing to change the fashion industry and, more importantly, the way people think (Young 2018). Eco-consciousness is becoming increasingly popular. Hamnett, for example, realized early on that she needed to use the specificity of fashion to get her message across, the fact that her T-shirts would be copied everywhere. If this is how the industry works, copying designer pieces,

she thought she should take advantage of this, using her designs to spread socially important messages such as raising awareness of the ecological disaster.<sup>1</sup>

Žižek's "antagonistic tension" describes the current social conditions well:

man as such is "a wound of nature". There is no return to balance, in harmony with nature's milieu. To accord with his milieu, the only thing man can do is accept fully this cleft, this fissure, this structural rooting pot, and to try as far as possible to patch things up afterwards; all other solutions – the illusion of a possible return to nature, the idea of a total socialization of nature – are a direct path to totalitarianism. (Žižek 2008: 33)

Analysing the current situation, Böhme (2017) criticizes the pressure on growth, citing an important textbook in the industrialization of agriculture, Justus von Liebig's *The Application of Chemistry in Agriculture and Plant Life*, as an example. In his view, the transformation of agriculture is an example for everything we have to worry about today: the capitalist transformation of the mode of production, the move away from the land, the proletarianization of the former rural population, water shortages, the toxic effects of pesticides, desertification, famine, which is a frequent consequence of cotton production, and so on. Along the lines of the landmark book *Limits of Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), Böhme goes through the last fifty years, highlighting aspects that were not yet visible to the authors (although they later updated their prognosis), and concludes that if everyone in the world aspires to have a Central European standard of living, and if developing countries are to catch up, the developed countries should stop growing, but it is just the opposite that is apparently and perceptibly taking place. Growth, as Böhme argues, helps to maintain social stability, balancing the constant tension between capital and labour, but referring to a recent publication by the Meadows group of authors, he considers it important to note that if we are to overcome the growth imperative for ecological reasons, we need a non-capitalist form of economy. We need to change at the level of social behaviour, and in this we can be inspired by artists who can lead the way.

There is an alternative to inaction in fashion, even if it sounds naïve: to try to improve, to keep filling in the gaps, to make the mass production of fashion less damaging to nature, more transparent, more controllable, to keep questioning political systems, to demand answers, to participate in shaping our lives. Designers can make a difference through their creativity, and customers as wearers of garments can contribute to change using the surface of their bodies and making conscious choices for purchasing goods.

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1 See: <https://tinyurl.com/5n95d7fr> (last access: 10.07.2022)

## The Beginning of Change: Katharine Hamnett's Revolution

Susan Strange (1986) uses Keynes's (1936) term "casino capitalism" to describe financial markets. She claims that everyone is affected by what has happened, as the financial system of the Western world has been transformed, which is mostly driven by factors similar to gambling. Unlike the casino, which you can stay away from, in the financial casino we are all unwitting participants, with inflation and unpredictability affecting all our lives. In Strange's view, the social and political turmoil between 1965 and 1985 was caused by this uncertainty. It was in this era that Katharine Hamnett, who soon became critical of the fashion industry and capitalism, became a designer in an industry where overproduction and inflation in the value of products were already causing serious anomalies. Fletcher (2008), while stressing that fashion is at the heart of our culture and has a major impact on our relationships, argues that, at its worst, it creates insecurity, peer pressure, uniformity, and a disconnection from real values, hence using Lee's (2003) colloquial term McFashion. Egri (2019) draws a parallel between fashion and capitalism. She argues that the former creates an illusion of novelty, while the latter, following Walter Benjamin, creates an illusion of progress.



Source: Peter Lindbergh, Getty Images

Picture 2. Katharine Hamnett advertisement, circa 1984



Edelkoort (2015) notes that one of the root causes of the problems in the fashion industry is that education and institutions train catwalk fashion designers, individualistic stars who are discovered, promoted by luxury brands and turned into pop culture icons. According to the trend researcher, this era is over because this method places designers outside society, and as such, it is an outdated approach. Keszeg (2022) draws our attention to the fact that, according to Varga Somogy's 2012 summary, it is the system that makes it difficult to achieve this degree of personal freedom although capitalism has the potential for the moral supply of authenticity encoded in it.

Katharine Hamnett's career as an activist designer clearly shows that the great realm of fashion is not defined by theorists but rather by fashion designers. It is very important for fashion designers to define themselves and what fashion means to them, as they can influence people on a wider scale. Hamnett is also a perfect example because she first followed traditions, the necessities of the system in which she was socialized, and then she was able to look at design as an activity in a different way, and over time she changed what had to be modified to become an active part of our ultra-modern society.

### **Success, Fame, Money, Glamour**

Hamnett went to Cheltenham Ladies' College, a boarding school attended by upper-class children, where girls were required to wear double underwear, as described in a 1990 *Vogue* article following a conversation with the designer. "You may come out of a school like this as a rule-breaker, but you never forget the rules", she says (Woods 1990: 120).

She originally wanted to be a film director, but her parents said there were no female film directors, so she studied at the prestigious Central Saint Martins fashion school. She did make a few films for her own brand though during her career. In 1968, Katharine found the mini student uprising – which resonated with the events in Paris, where a strong critique of capitalism and consumerism was being expressed – upsetting. She felt she was in the right place, she knew what she wanted to learn there, and she did not want to be hindered by such disturbances.

She founded her brand in 1979, and her first collection was sold out at Joseph's. Admittedly, she spent the first period of her career wanting to become a famous fashion designer and rich. She wanted to make her clothes available in as many parts of the world as possible. That was the definition of success for her. "I was riding high, driving around a Mercedes all the time, it was parties all the time..." (Mower 2017). When Katharine was on her way to fame, there was no social media, but you could dress up actresses and rock stars who were seen as goddesses and gods. Her creations have been worn by Elizabeth Taylor,

Mick Jagger, Princess Diana, Madonna, and George Michael, among others. The reputation of some of her pieces has certainly surpassed the most-liked post of any social media star today. Yet today, the British designer's name is unfairly little known, even among fashion-savvy groups, and even fewer know that the T-shirts with slogans were her brainchild.

But it got to this point in the late 80s and I had won designer of the year and all that, and it seemed like you just couldn't do anything wrong. We were very badly behaved. Our skill was staying out of the newspaper, which I would really congratulate myself to my grave that we did. Because we were really naughty and the worse we were, the more they loved us. In the end, I just thought this is too fucking easy, this success is actually boring. (Bumpus 2017)

### Choose Life

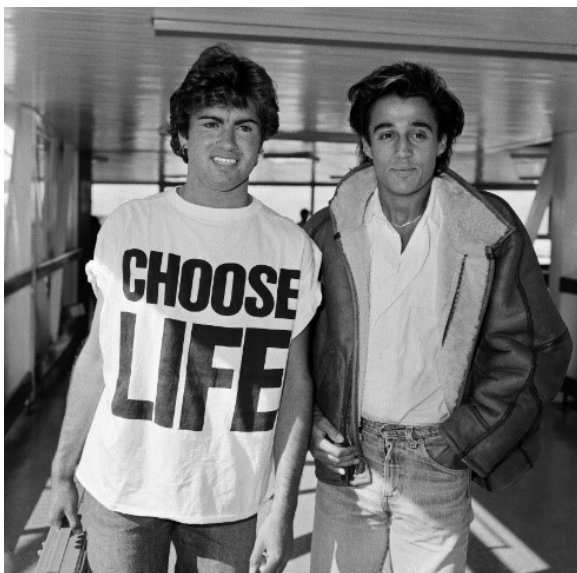
Nothing would have stopped her from building a brand with stores in every major city if she had not changed her worldview. Her awakening to environmental awareness is also due to the birth of her sons. "Before I had kids, I was a selfish bitch from hell" (Eyre 2008). This is how she described herself even more harshly, including a swearword. However, with the arrival of her sons, her approach to fashion changed, and she no longer thought that her work as a designer was unrelated to important social issues. Hamnett could have been a celebrated fashion designer, bemused by her own creativity, releasing more and more ambitious collections one after another, like so many others. She was, after all, the first recipient of the British Fashion Council's British Fashion Designer of the Year award, and by the 1990s her brand was a multimillion-dollar business. At the beginning of her career, she adopted the familiar dynamics of the fashion industry, and gradually, not overnight, she moved away from this pattern, but she was ahead of everyone else. In a 1985 appearance on Thames Television, where she showed some of her outfits on models, she said this when reporter Michael Barratt made jokes about the clothes: "The clothes will be relevant in six months, you can't expect them to be relevant now" (Barrat 1985).<sup>2</sup> So, even here, she believes the constant *tabula rasa* principle should be observed. Over time, however, a moral sense kicked in.

Hamnett became an activist as early as 1983, with her Choose Life T-shirts (Choose Life is a fundamental tenet of Buddhism), each of which had an environmental commandment written on them in the eye-catching block letters of tabloid covers: Stop Acid Rain, Save the Rain Forest. George Michael sang the Wham! hit Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go in a T-shirt with Choose Life on it, drawing even more

<sup>2</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/bdzzskae> (last access: 10.07.2022)

attention to Hamnett's work. In a 2017 article on George Michael (see *Picture 3*), Hamnett mentions that the maxim "Choose life" is borrowed and hacked by the author Irvine Welsh, who turns its meaning into irony (Flynn 2017). This would later appear in the film *Trainspotting*. Here, the consumer society is presented as an alternative to a heroin-addicted lifestyle: "Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose a washing machine, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin openers. Choose good health insurance, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose the future. Choose life" (Boyle n. d.).<sup>3</sup> The slogan "Choose life" later became a hashtag on Twitter in 2017, standing up against Donald Trump's policy.

The pop culture references to the T-shirts with slogans are rich, with Duran Duran, Queen, and Boy George wearing them to convey political messages to their fans, and there was also a T-shirt in the TV series *Friends*, worn by a character called Ross. "Slogan T-shirts are designed to put ideas in your brain. They make you think, and hopefully do the right thing", Hamnett said in a press release.



Source: Getty Images

**Picture 3.** *George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley, 1984*

Two types of activism can be distinguished: participatory and demonstrative. In this essay, I will focus only on demonstrative design and will not mention the variations of design that involve the audience in creation, such as "craftivism".<sup>4</sup>

3 <https://tinyurl.com/2s35m8ud> (last access: 10.07.2022)

4 A concept created by Jayna Zweiman, one of the founders of the Pussyhat Project.

The 1983 work of American artist Jenny Holzer is a good example of demonstrative activism, which involves design within art. New York graffiti artist Lady Pink, one of Holzer's collaborators, is shown wearing a T-shirt with the words "Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise" (see *Picture 4*). The image is part of Holzer's Truism T-shirts series. The photo, taken in 1983, became an Internet meme in 2017, when it was widely shared online in response to the #MeToo movement.



Source: *Elephant.art*

**Picture 4.** Jenny Holzer, *Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise* from the series *Truism T-shirts*, 1980, worn by Lady Pink, 1983 Lisa Kahane, NYC

Bartlett (2022) describes three creative methods linking creation to politics in her work *Objects, People, Politics: From Perestroika to the Post-Soviet Era* using the object typology concepts of "austere", "fragile", and "unruly". One of these, austere, is the closest to Hamnett's creative method. Bartlett (2022) uses a piece by Sergei Anufriev, a leading member of the Conceptualist Art Movement in Moscow, as an example, which is on display at the Pompidou Centre. The artist wrote Gorbachev's first speech on both sides of a uniform men's shirt, representing socialist simplicity, puritanism, and low quality, in felt-tip pen and displayed it on a hanger (see *Picture 5*). In fact, Anufriev's work is a call to "implement Gorbachev's words", promising radical economic reforms and market socialism, a change of our world.

**Sergei Anufriev**  
(1964, URSS)  
*Premier discours de Gorbatchev*  
1986

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>Domain</b>        | Œuvre en 3 dimensions   Installation                        |
| <b>Techniques</b>    | Fente sur tissu   |
| <b>Dimensions</b>    | 90 x 73 cm<br>Dimensions avec le centre (largeur : épaules) |
| <b>Acquisition</b>   | Don de Vladimir Potanine Foundation, 2016                   |
| <b>Inventory no.</b> | AM 2016-739   |

Écriture: Gorbatchev Mikhaïl (1931+) Russe (langue)  
Union des Républiques socialistes soviétiques (URSS)

Source: Pompidou Centre, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/ Georges Meguerditchian  
**Picture 5. Sergey Anufriev, Gorbachev's first speech**

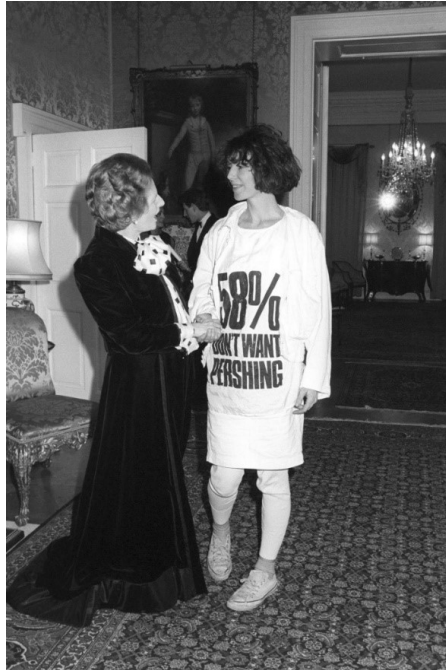
Katharine Hamnett's T-shirts reflect current political events in a similar way, but her aim is clearly social criticism, promoting the role of active citizenship. While Anufriyev's shirt with Gorbachev's words on it is "just to look at" in the museum, Hamnett's T-shirts take part in the everyday life of society, in a T-shirt and jeans set on Monday, in a party set with lurex trousers on Friday. Hamnett has never sought to cross the boundaries between fashion and art and does not aspire to have her work displayed in museums, although her clothes have, of course, been exhibited, most recently in *T-Shirt: Cult – Culture – Subversion* at The Fashion and Textile Museum, London, in 2018. Rather, she wants people to carry these messages in their everyday lives and to bring them to the attention of others by wearing them. Hamnett's space is the street, not the museum, and she wants to set the fashion.

### The Media Scandal

One of the most memorable moments in the fashion history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was certainly in 1984, when Hamnett shook hands with then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher wearing a T-shirt printed with an anti-gun protest sign (see *Picture 6*). Obviously, all photojournalists on duty took a picture of Thatcher posing for a performance protesting her own policies. The image has spread throughout the world and has since been featured as a statement on the designer's website, alongside a photo of her receiving the Order of the British Empire from Queen Elizabeth much later in 2011. It is interesting that the *Vogue* magazine of the time does not mention this, although it does mention the reception Thatcher hosted, but the main question of the article is how to promote British designers in America, the names that are already known overseas (*British Vogue* 1984/July: 160).

But how did Hamnett become a sophisticated design activist? In 1984, after winning the Fashion Designer of the Year award, she was invited to a reception celebrating British designers at 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister's residence. "Jasper Conrad (also a major British designer) told me: 'Why should we go and drink white wine with that murderess?' and I agreed. But then I had this idea. I went quickly to a photographic studio and had the lettering done on linen, which I had to stitch on the T-Shirt, so it wasn't far off a proper sandwich-board outfit" (Eyre 2008). When they arrived to the reception, she was asked for her jacket, but she said she was cold and would rather keep it on, so when she arrived to shake Thatcher's hand, she unzipped her jacket and the letters became visible: 58% Don't Want Pershing, i.e. 58% disagree with the deployment of missiles (currently in the Falklands), i.e. with the further build-up of arms. At the time, the United States was deploying a ballistic missile in British territory, which was directed towards the Soviet Union. "...which was totally undemocratic. Wearing that on a T-shirt was the best thing I could think of at the time" (Eyre 2008). Almost immediately, Thatcher noticed from the increasing flashes of the cameras

that there was something fishy going on, so she said: “You seem to be wearing a rather strong message on your T-shirt” (Hamnett 2018).



*Source: Getty Images*

**Picture 6.** *Katharine Hamnett and Margaret Thatcher, 1984*

The concept of a T-shirt with political slogans was born, and Hamnett continues to this day with timely designs such as Use Condoms in 1987, World Peace Now in 1988, Cancel the Third World Debt in 1990, and her latest, highly successful collection, Vote Trump Out in 2020. These T-shirts are written in very simple language, and they are for everyone, capturing the spirit of the times. “The tragedy is that they are even more relevant now than they were when I started making them forty years ago”, says Hamnett (2018). There is no doubt that all over the world, every week, we could be protesting with new T-shirt slogans against injustice, inhumanity, and political decisions that threaten our future.

## **The Importance of Raw Materials and Organic Cotton**

For decades, Hamnett’s collections have been raising awareness about pollution (Save the Sea), social responsibility (Clean up or Die), and the overriding truth that life is the greatest value (Choose Life). She says that when she was rethinking

her own fashion brand, she looked at how her company was doing related to the basic tenets of Buddhism, such as “do no harm”. It was a realization that changed everything for her. She is a fashion designer who quotes Aristotle in her interviews and draws inspiration from Buddhism. “Aristotle asked: What is good life? You can live a good life and have a good death but what good is that you damage generations to come”, asked Hamnett in a *Vogue* interview, in response to a journalist’s question (Mower 2017).

During her change of perspective as a designer, she became concerned about the large number of people dying from poisoning caused by pesticides used in cotton production. She no longer thought she had a choice but to demand transparency in cotton production. She no longer thought that the overproduction of the fashion industry, with its severe environmental pollution, was not her business, and that she was only interested in shop windows and profits. Rather, in Hamnett’s opinion, fashion should get involved in communicating social and political issues, so she could not remain silent and could not keep an “elegant” distance. Her T-shirt with the slogan “No more fashion victims” is a reference to the fact that farmers in Africa and India are forced to sign contracts that require the use of toxic pesticides or to the inhumane conditions of workers in the fashion industry. According to Aristotle (1997), good is the best and most perfect virtuous activity of the soul. The fashion industry, operating for only profit and nothing else, in no way falls into the Aristotelian category. “It’s shocking that it’s not a vital part of the [fashion education] syllabus. The actual design and conception of product – it’s the fate of millions of farmers in agriculture”, she says (Bumpus 2017).



Source: Getty Images

**Picture 7.** Katharine Hamnett in a *Protect and Survive* T-shirt designed to show solidarity with health workers during the COVID-19 outbreak, 2020



The damage caused by the fashion industry could, in Hamnett's opinion, be most effectively reduced by the careful selection and modification of raw materials. In a 1990 *Vogue* article, she gives her opinion on all the raw materials and the problems related to their production. In summary, the big problem in cotton production is caused by pests and the chemicals used to control them. In the case of viscose, wood pulp is produced in the third world under toxic conditions, and forests are cut down. She is against wearing fur and leather, as it requires much more land to keep animals than to produce other foods (Woods 1990: 114). Hamnett considers the switch to organic cotton to be the most important, as it would eliminate pollution and poisoning, and it would also allow cotton to be grown in a rotating system, which would enable farmers to produce food, making them self-sufficient and helping to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere. In 2008, in a film promoting organic cotton, she says that the fashion industry is not interested in this problem because it is more insensitive than customers (Swarup n. y.).<sup>5</sup> According to Hamnett, the environmentally conscious production of cotton is just as good as the pesticide-treated version, so we no longer have to sacrifice our high aesthetic standards if we want to buy ethically made clothes. The Katharine Hamnett brand uses only organic cotton and is transparently made in Italy, but Katharine makes a strong statement: "I don't want to look 'eco'. People don't buy things out of pity. People buy the things that make their pulse race, the things they love. Ethical clothes have to be beautiful and they have to be mainstream. The big companies can drive demand, they need to go organic to make a difference" (Eyre 2008).

The difference between today and 2008, as Hamnett argued, is that customers want fashion companies to offer eco-conscious, responsibly produced products. Public opinion has changed, and there is genuine, constructive interest, with a growing percentage of customers turning to more sustainable shopping and expecting companies to operate transparently. According to Linda E. Geer of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, it is a useful force, but it will also cause a lot of frustration (Kent 2021).

Companies can get consumers bamboozled by information that doesn't actually mean anything, or which is meant to be a kind of PR exercise, as almost anything can be called sustainable or having a lower impact etc. I think we are at a moment when we have a danger of doing that, and when it will breed tremendous public cynicism, and a kind of backlash against the companies that do this. It will also be very frustrating to government efforts to try to straighten these things out. The reporting of what really matters here is actually not that mysterious or difficult, so I could see a

5 <https://tinyurl.com/mr4tdkvz> (last access: 10.07.2022)

clear future path for what data needs to be collected and what data needs to be reported (by a fashion company), and I can imagine a world where we could all agree on that fairly rapidly.



Source: Courtesy of Katharine Hamnett

**Picture 8.** *Fashion Hates Brexit T-shirt, 2019*

## **An Active Citizen Is the One Who Is Fashionable**

Hamnett’s career has been characterized by her opposition to dysfunctional systems and power or to those that do not serve the people. However, she also spoke out against Brexit, saying the post-Brexit trade deal would be disastrous for British fashion and could destroy the “Made in Britain” brand, now synonymous with the best quality in Japan and Southeast Asia. In her opinion, this trademark is apparently dead. As Hamnett puts it, some British brands have already given up exporting because high tax rises and foreign shipments do not allow them to compete on the international scene (Newmann–Cordell 2021).

One of the most defining pieces of Hamnett’s career is the slogan T-shirt. In her view, there is nothing left but our bodies to write messages on. In 1984, in an article in *American Vogue*, Marshall Blonsky summarizes Hamnett’s activities: “Her clothing and imagery express the concept: Protest the system with the only thing inalienably yours – your body” (Blonsky 1987: 468).



Source: courtesy of Katharine Hamnett

**Picture 9.** Hamnett calls for participatory democracy

Hamnett calls for action, to cause trouble and social upheavals instead of maintaining the “spectator democracy” described by Byung-Chul Han (2020). With her “Make Trouble” T-shirt, she says the following to us, the citizens wearing garments: “Wake up. Be informed. Question everything. Stand up for your rights and the rights of all living beings. How? Take action. Vote. Protest. Boycott. Write to your MP. Ask those questions. Push the boundaries. Make good choices” (press release by Hamnett).

Can fashion, as opposed to “like capitalism” mentioned by Han (2020: 26), help “dislike capitalism” to come into action? Will people’s realization of the power of their purchasing power and their ability to use that power to control and manage systems make a difference?

## Activism as a Marketing Tool

There is also a theory that brands and activists step into the vacuum created by political leaders because they cannot remain silent when those who should be doing their job do nothing, when those who are responsible are not doing their job. A striking example of this is Nike’s campaign, featuring American football player Colin Kaepernick, who was the initiator of the U.S. National Anthem

protest. The essence of this act of social protest is that athletes do not stand during the national anthem but kneel down on one knee, protesting against racism and police brutality. Kaepernick said: “I cannot stand in salute to the flag of a country that oppresses black people and people of colour.” Nike’s sales rose dynamically after the campaign (CNBC 2018).<sup>6</sup> We should also mention the other side, who say that fashion and sport, or other cultural fields, have nothing to do with political issues. According to journalist Sly Tang, we should see a significant minority of US consumers who find it uncomfortable for a brand to raise political and social issues. In his view, this is a dystopian future in which big businesses take on the role of moral policing (Young 2018).

Nike’s campaign even led to a book on why sport should not be concerned with politics. As the author of the book, Clay Travis, puts it: “Sport was our national connective tissue, the place we all went to escape the serious things in life. It didn’t matter if you were a neurosurgeon or a janitor, everyone’s opinion was equal” (Travis 2018: 25).



Source: Getty Images

**Picture 10.** Colin Kaepernick in the Nike campaign: “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything.”

An important question is how to keep messages without losing their essence when something from the subcultural medium is absorbed into mass fashion? According to Svendsen (2006), these meanings, these extra contexts, automatically become empty and disappear at the level of the masses. How can we make the

<sup>6</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/bdcrz66m> (last access: 10.07.2022)

question of our future part of people's thinking, part of the present, in a culture where, according to Mark Fisher (2020), we focus only on the present and the immediate? Does fashion have a choice other than to be very consistent in trying to make its audience with distracted attention aware that they need to change, that they need to become activists themselves, that they need to use the power of their consumption to change the world?

In my opinion, it is not the crippling criticism of consumerism but the activation of consumers and the introduction of and the emphasis on the concept of moderation that can bring about a change from the current unsustainable situation. As Klein (2015) puts it, change is something we cannot do individually but as part of a huge, organized, active movement.

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