

| STYLE |

Forsaking fast fashion?

Four Berliners of different ages and backgrounds tell us why they've turned their backs on fast fashion and show that there isn't just one way of doing it. *By Wanda Sachs*

Accounting for an estimated 8-10 percent of global carbon emissions each year, the fashion industry is one of the biggest polluters in the world, even surpassing the combined CO₂ emissions of air travel and shipping. Fuelled by constant availability in online shops and new trends touted by influencers emerging almost every week, the growth of fast fashion is out of control. On the bright side, the pressure is rising, and awareness is spreading swiftly. Four Berliners talk about their relationship with fashion and their approach to the pressing issue that is climate change, with the prevailing question: How sustainable can fashion really be?

The Gen Z paradox

Helene Harnisch wears predominantly vintage and second-hand clothes, but this didn't start as an attempt to save the environment. Born in Massachusetts and raised in Berlin, what really got her interested in vintage fashion was her early infatuation with Berlin's street style. "I started looking at people and just got really inspired. And then I started taking pictures of them. At first, I pretended I was doing a school project because I thought I needed an excuse," she laughs, "but they were always really excited." The people she chose all looked very different. "It would be an aspect of their outfit, their overall vibe or how they carried themselves that inspired me. I would then ask them where they got a certain piece, and most of them said vintage or sec-



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Photo: Iinaaroosa Viitanen / Helene Harnisch @ IZAIO Management



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second-hand, and so I started looking at places like that.” Does she still take these photos? “Unfortunately not. Sometimes I miss it. But I do still look at people that way.”

Helene looks as though she’s come straight out of a fashion magazine: beautiful features, bleached eyebrows, blonde buzzcut. When she first got the cut four years ago, she realised that fashion is crucial to her self-expression. “All of a sudden, this big thing that represents your femininity is gone,” she explains. While other teenage girls held on to their long hair for dear life, Helene went contra-mainstream at only 15-years-old when she reduced her magnificent head of waist-long hair to mere stubble. That this was not a sign of indifference towards fashion becomes clear

when Helene talks about her body image. “I had to figure out how I wanted to present myself. Whether I wanted to lean into being more androgynous or try to compensate my hair by dressing super feminine.”

She has found that the lack of hair actually helps her style, with a lot of outfits “weirdly” looking a lot cooler, not despite but rather because of her short hair. But what about her clothes? Is it even possible to be fashionable if you limit yourself to a single outlet? “Yes, of course it is, obviously!” Helene retorts. “I honestly think it’s easier to be fashionable if you buy vintage or second-hand, because you get more unique things. You can find so many things you never would’ve considered and that aren’t all following the same trends.

Vintage stores are so random that I feel like it’s way easier to develop your own style.” Still, Helene knows she’s not immune to the influence of social media, and TikTok in particular, with micro-trends emerging on a weekly rota. The constant stream of content makes it difficult for her to discern if she actually likes something or whether she’s fallen for a trend. “If something is really trendy and you’re shown it all the time, then obviously you like it more and more. That’s how we work, unfortunately.”

At 19-years-old, Helene belongs to Gen Z, the generation that gave the term fast fashion – first coined in 1990 by the New York Times – new meaning. E-commerce giants like Shein, which use fossil fuel-based synthetics that are cheaper and release new styles even more quickly, have achieved great popularity especially among young people, making fast fashion even faster. But the trend-fuelled addiction to affordable clothes is just one side of the fence: on the other there’s Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future protests, tipping the scales and pushing for climate-consciousness. Many youngsters now embrace veganism and second-hand shopping as common ways to deal with the climate crisis.

When asked how she thinks two such extreme opposites could have sprung from one and the same generation, Helene has a theory: “I think it’s really just one movement, and that’s overconsumption.” Because while these solutions are undoubtedly practised in good will, they often only seem to be mitigating the guilt factor, as some Gen Zs adopting them have fallen into the hypocrisy trap. “When the whole thrifting and second-hand trend started, it also went into overconsumption,” Helene says, “and I’ve been noticing that, with the thrifting wave, people are now overly shaming *any* consumption of fast fashion, even though they’re over-consuming themselves.”

When is the price right?

Olivia Logan’s approach to clothing is different. For the student and freelance writer, fashion is only partially to do with self-expression and mainly with practicality. “I want to like the clothes and be comfortable in them, and I rarely sacrifice one of those things,” she says. Since it’s not so much about keeping up with trends, she’s happy to wait a while until she can have something. She would “rather spend six months or a year looking for something and then find it for a fiver.” This is why Olivia has been buying second-hand exclusively since 2017. She makes clear that this is less to do with a patient character and more with the fun of



Gianluca Quaranta

the game: “Everyone who is into second-hand shopping talks about that: the thrill of finding a gem. And it’s true, it’s a real thing.”

Despite being one of the 2.6 million vegans in Germany and a passionate thrift-shopper, Olivia’s main motivation behind her lifestyle choices is not the climate crisis, and she struggles with moderation. “I’m quite bad at that. I buy a lot of clothes even though they’re second-hand,” she confesses. As for saving the climate, she doesn’t have high hopes, she says, so why is she still so steadfast when it comes to her shopping style? The answer comes promptly: “Because what’s the alternative? You know it’s bad and do it anyway?” Unfortunately, the 26-year-old is right to be sceptical about the efficacy of good thrifting. It’s an admirable individual effort, but the reality is that resale retailers reject most of the clothes they’re offered for sale due to the poor quality of fast fashion garments. These make up a large portion of the clothes in circulation, with companies like H&M selling billions of items a year. This means that even though many clothes are given a second chance, most still end up in landfills.

Olivia makes no bones about the real reason she’s decided to dress herself in second-hand clothes only: money. “I’m a cheap-skate, and I want the thing, but I want it for a tenth of the original price,” she laughs. “But it’s also about not wasting your money on clothes that don’t last.” In fact, poor quality is a common and even desired aspect of fast fashion. The goal is to sell as much as possible, so, logically, clothes are not designed to

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last. And why would they be? Since popular retailers, such as H&M and Zara, release new collections up to 24 times a year, there is no need for clothes to last because the desire to get your hands on the newest statement piece makes longevity redundant. Before you even find a hole in that beloved blouse, it will have been surpassed by a newer or cheaper version anyway. But the lack of quality also means that even if you’re happy with a purchase, you’ll be forced to go out shopping again soon because it’s not made to last. After all, how often have you taken a needle and thread to holey tops, torn-off belt loops or laddered tights?

Make do and mend

For Andreas Grau-Fuchs, sustainable fashion means repairing clothes and buying less. Much like Olivia, the 49-year-old diplomat has a practical approach when it comes to fashion, but he doesn’t shop second-hand: “It’s difficult for men to find good second-hand clothes. The choice is very limited. There’s much more for women.” Indeed,

thrifting can be difficult for men, especially when your aesthetic isn’t ‘street style’ or ‘pensioner-chic’. However, Andreas isn’t shy about the fact that his financial situation allows him to ignore the eclectic racks of second-hand shops and spend his money at the often expensive but well-curated eco-fashion shops instead. “Of course, it’s about what you can afford,” he says. “Green fashion is definitely more expensive than H&M or Primark.” But the originally promising rise of climate awareness has also given way to a practice less noble in the fashion industry: greenwashing.

Coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, greenwashing linguistically captures the corporate practice of making sustainability claims that can’t be substantiated, especially in the use of terms such as ‘organic’, ‘vegan’ or ‘carbon neutral’. But does Andreas really believe in the alleged green-ness of the labels he shops? “Well, unfortunately, as a consumer, you don’t really have a choice but to trust it,” he sighs. “I do try to do research and look into it, but at the end of the day you have to be able to rely on it.” But this is difficult, especially in the world of fashion, in which – due in large part to globalisation – few brands actually know where their materials come from in the supply chain.

On top of these concerns, sustainable fashion remains something for people who can afford it, either in terms of money or time. Families with children might be less inclined to rifle through Berlin’s Humanas and flea markets for a year before they get

cept of exclusivity. That's when Ylenia knew she couldn't support this system. "There's tonnes of examples like this, and I don't want to be a part of it," she says sternly. Instead, she started looking for alternatives and found her vocation in re- and upcycling. Now, she also gives sewing classes and films tutorials on her YouTube channel, Softskill Atelier, showing how to transform a bed cover into a bag or make a denim jacket from scraps.

As a professional, Ylenia has the skillset to create amazing things from old stuff. But how can amateurs be sustainable and still look good? Before taking to the sewing machine, she says, the first thing you should do is take a good, hard look at your existing clothes. "I'm pretty sure most of us already have a full wardrobe, and you may rediscover what you already have. And if you can't find something, there's always your parents' wardrobe," she laughs. "My way of looking at it is the less you consume new things, the more sustainable you are." But if you still want something new, she advises, you should consider buying upcycled pieces from a small fashion designer such as Ylenia herself – uniqueness and short production chain guaranteed. And if you're really keen to get creative, crop, paint or iron on patches. "It's really cool, it's about creating your own aesthetic."

Sewing, however, has become a lost skill, Ylenia points out. "Back in the day, people used to know how to make basic alterations," explaining that clothes were often designed to be changed, if needed. Garments, especially ones that were tailored, used to have seam allowance: excess fabric that allowed you to alter clothes easily. Clothes don't have that anymore because alterations and durability in general have become undesirable as they meddle with the concept of fast fashion.

The EU has recognised the problem and recently called for the end to fast fashion by 2030. Part of the eight-year-plan is to enforce full disclosure about the amount of clothes being binned by big companies, as well as eco-design rules for new garments that would ensure a certain degree of recyclability. This would deal with an issue that has Ylenia concerned. "Many of the clothes in the landfills are not biodegradable because they have these weird fibre mixes. If you buy something that's 30 percent wool, what's the rest? It's actually worse buying a 30 percent wool garment than one that is a hundred percent polyester because wool and polyester need to be dealt with in entirely different ways." The new regulations are a prayer heard, but they only take us halfway. To fight fast fashion and reduce its impact on the planet, we have to stay critical of our own consumption behaviour. ■



Yonathan Frantz

what they need, as Olivia does. Others might not have the funds to shop eco, like Andreas. And in terms of availability, it's also difficult. Originally from Edinburgh, Olivia praises the quality of the many charity shops dotted across British high streets. "One of the best charity shop purchases I ever made was when I was living in Scotland. Generally, I find better stuff there," she admits. And Andreas points out that his green labels of choice, such as Ecoalf, still have a long way to go: "I think buying only sustainably produced clothes is near to impossible. The range is way too small; they don't do underwear yet, for example."

Do it yourself

There's another way of avoiding murky supply chains and ever-growing landfills in African countries: getting hands-on. This is what Ylenia Gortana does. The 32-year-old is a fashion designer who focuses on re- and upcycling projects in her studio. Having taken a degree in the subject, Ylenia has a

burning passion for fashion, yet she is painfully aware that there are two sides to this coin. "If only there weren't all that exploitation and pollution," she sighs, "but fashion itself is super exciting to me: the history of it, the subcultures, how one trend leads to another. But then, trends are a big problem because they fuel the desire for more. If something is hot and interesting, everyone wants to have it, and then here we are: not everyone can afford expensive things, so cheaper versions get made." And that's how fast fashion is born.

Ylenia left Switzerland for Berlin when she was 18 to study fashion design, ready to take on the glitz and glam world of fashion. When she landed an internship with a luxury fashion brand, she soon realised that the fashion world has its dark side. "I had to destroy new pants because they were prototypes and wouldn't be sold," she recalls. "It was so painful." Many big names resort to slashing, burning or bleaching their products when unsold, because discounting them doesn't rhyme with the luxury con-