

PART THREE: THE NOUGHTIES

THE ERA OF ÜBER COOL

1. (New) Underground Ideology and Aesthetic Sensibilities

'Of all the clothing crimes committed in the name of fashion in the early seventies, the tank top was arguably the most heinous. [...] Of course I wanted one, of course I'd already spent far too much money on clothes, and so my mum suggested that she would show her prowess with a pair of needles and knit me one. I rather liked the idea of a bespoke garment, so went along with this plan. Certainly it was a mistake.'

Robert Elms, *The Way We Wore*

SHOREDITCH, APRIL 2001

I was fascinated by Rachael Matthews before I even met her. I found out about her accidentally, on a long walk from home in Islington towards the Bethnal Green Road in London's East End. I was on my way to meet friends at the warehouse home-cum-office of the founders of the seminal but now defunct *P.U.R.E.* magazine. I followed Old Street where the road forks with Great Eastern Street, a nondescript stretch now marked for change: as I write, developers are awaiting approval to convert The Foundry, a venue that occupies a prominent position on the junction, into a hotel (submitted to residents as 'Project Art Hotel'). If...

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MANY SMALL MOVEMENTS

Cast Off: the Knitting Club from Shoreditch

We were often asked to define Cast Off, which at the time was not easy because we were in the middle of an experiment for which we were seeking a direction, making it up as we went along. I feel better equipped to account for its social impact in retrospect. Simply, Cast Off, the brainchild of Rachael Matthews, was a collective of similarly minded people who, through knitting – albeit with an edge – found a medium for creative expression.¹ By doing the knitting in public places, the club also provided a meeting platform. In more complex terms, Cast Off is much more than that – it was a multifaceted phenomenon that emerged at the right time and right place, making a significant impact on the art establishment as well as the style and communication industries.

Occasionally, Cast Off became politically engaged. Here I would highlight the revival of ‘Knitting on the Circle Line’ after London was hit by terrorist attacks in July 2005. In the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings, many Londoners were reluctant to take the tube. Liverpool Street station, Cast Off’s local tube station, had been targeted. Cast Off went in as soon as the station re-opened, with the message ‘We are not scared’. However, it would be wrong to suggest that Cast Off was an underground political resistance group. Cast Off’s true heritage lay in DIY punk subcultures. Its politics were the politics of punk, which is about providing a self-made alternative to homogenised mainstream consumer culture. How can we explain this phenomenon? I suggest we do so by exploring three of the avenues that constituted Cast Off’s journey: fashion, arts and communications.

Being very much embedded in the second-generation Hoxton scene, where there were many new fashion designers operating on the margins of the mainstream, it was only natural for Cast Off to start experimenting with this world. It even did a season at Off-Schedule London Fashion Week in 2003, which was a platform for an emerging new breed of designers. It showcased knitting patterns (as opposed to knitwear). Although unconventional to say the least, Cast Off’s presentation began to generate the interest of fashion buyers. This included, notably, the British high street brand Top Shop, which was among the first to capitalise on the Hoxton trend. Top Shop was interested both in selling Cast Off-branded knitting kits and staging knitting events at London’s

flagship store on Oxford Street. Preliminary discussions made us realise that Cast Off was neither equipped nor willing to comply with the demands of Top Shop's production deadlines. In addition, the Cast Off collective decided that the association with a mainstream brand such as Top Shop would simply be wrong, as their speedy mass production and disposable fashion went against the ethos of the collective. As a result of being independent-minded, Cast Off's brief courtship with the fashion retail industry met a dead end; but we were learning. Instead of branded stores, we opted to forge connections with a limited number of emerging independent boutiques, including the new 'concept' stores (more of which in the 'new mavericks' chapter).

Predictably in the fickle world of fashion, chunky knitwear became the new black for a season or two. Cast Off knitting kits also provided the prototype for the commercial revival of knitting patterns by high street brands, mainly for easy-to-knit items such as scarves (Marks & Spencer sold such kits for a season), but Cast Off's influence was more relevant within haberdashery than ready-to-wear. Haberdashery in mainstream retail, which encompassed yarn sales, was dying. Department stores were literally closing down those sections, which was bad news for wool manufacturers. The knitting revival generated by Cast Off and the like reversed this downward trend. For example, the West End's flagship John Lewis store reported a 60 per cent year-on-year increase in sales of balls of wool in 2005. Hip haberdashery boutiques started to mushroom in upmarket neighbourhoods. For comparison, we also worked with the brand *Bergère de France*, a French family wool company, who sponsored a few of our events in Paris. For this brand, an association with Cast Off was the necessary trigger for their revival as well as rejuvenating an interest in knitting in France. Even though the volume of wool sales had been declining in France overall, the French consumer was nevertheless prepared to pay a higher price for funky yarns and innovative patterns as well as the enjoyment of the convivial experience of knitting (a trend attributed to the hip knitting phenomenon).²

Statistics about the growing popularity of knitting that were published in the press were often accompanied by publicity shots of 'celebrities' knitting. 'Celebrities' were not spinning wool but using the trend to spin their image by jumping on the bandwagon of a growing craze dubbed as cool. Let me give you one concrete example of how the bug spread from underground incubation into the mainstream. The American singer Kelis started to knit when it was hip to do so and was therefore effortlessly cool, if we were to believe the hype. It's possible

that Kelis was genuinely intrigued by knitting, but the point of my story is that the origin of her interest can be traced to a genuinely enthusiastic knitter rather than being some first-hand ‘authentic’ discovery by the singer herself. The link can be established by connecting Kelis to a member of staff at BBC Radio 1 who was a keen knitter, regardless of whether it was fashionable. She found out about Cast Off and began to attend events. She also started to knit publicly at Radio 1 around the time knitting was being hailed as the new rock ‘n’ roll. This led to other Radio 1 DJs dropping hints about knitting into their shows (in an ironic fashion, more often than not). Kelis spotted our keen knitter during a promotional visit to Radio 1, asked if she’d teach her how to do it – and she obliged. Subsequently Kelis even flew her ‘knitting instructor’ over to the States to attend her wedding to rapper Nas.

The knitting trend therefore originated at grassroots level and flourished under ongoing press coverage generated by the communities of DIY crafters, before being picked up by ‘celebrities’ (or their publicists) on the lookout for something cool. This meant that besides knitting, other crafts became funky, contributing to a general crafts revival. In fact, within Cast Off itself, among the products most favoured by emerging hip retail outlets were the embroidery kits for record sleeves. These kits followed the same format as the knitting kit, providing all the elements for a DIY project. This idea was later emulated by established brands and new designers tapping into the embroidery world. Between 2004 and 2006, when the DIY craft trend – with knitting at its heart – was reaching its peak, Cast Off had done a series of high-profile public events in a number of countries. This had included a hugely publicised knitting extravaganza evening at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum in 2004, which set a ‘hip’ precedent for their monthly audience-participatory event, ‘Late’.

This leads me neatly to the arts avenue. After a stint in fashion, Rachael realised that she was first and foremost an artist, albeit an unconventional one, who used knitting as a vehicle for artistic expression. As a pioneer of this medium, she became one of the leaders in this field when ‘knitting’ became recognised by the arts. The new knitting wave – which is how the arts world began referring to artists who challenged the established rules of needlecraft – became *the* welcome innovation in a sector seeking fresh blood. New craft artists started to blur the boundaries between art and craft. They used the traditional craft medium but extended it into art disciplines. For example, in the case of Cast Off events, the knowledge and skill-sharing that had been part of the knitters’

community for centuries was now taken out of its original context of garment-making and into a new dimension; you knitted things other than clothes, and the act of knitting itself could become performance art. The arty knitters used unorthodox materials such as exotic yarns, plastic bags or even cassette tape (as in the case of Rachael's 'Analogue Amnesty' project in 2008). There is a large amount of debate and literature on the subject of how this new wave challenged established art norms, but I shall leave it here, as it is beyond the scope of this book.

The most relevant route in my story of being first in the know is the communications one. In this context, the Cast Off event was unwittingly vying for its own place in an established industry where event organising followed a set of standards. Claiming a legitimate position for Cast Off was a voyage of discovery. The world of corporate events was positively alien to us. A challenge that I regularly encountered when trying to communicate the idea of Cast Off outside the inner circle – be it to the owners of a venue, a brand (other than wool manufacturers) or their associated communication agency – was having to explain the concept, which didn't fit neatly into any established precedent. In the early days, it was all about breaking down boundaries: arts, crafts, fashion, event promotion and DJing had previously all been separate worlds, whereas...

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THE FIRST CIRCLE IN HIP'S CONTINUUM

The New Underground Ethos

It is essential to unearth the new set of values that governed the second-generation Hoxtonites in order to understand the sense of unity between the different bubbles that made it a larger movement. That set of values, in turn, was the point of identification for emerging maverick businesses. They would adopt subcultural idioms to challenge the status quo and unleash a new market of early adopters, just as MTV and other cool brands had a decade earlier. At the same time, tracing how the ideological shift occurred will unravel the conditions that led to a sea change in cool marketing. If cool in the 1990s was all about being street, cool in the noughties instead became rather chic.

Forget Irony

Around the time the knitting hype was gaining ground, I got a call from a planner

working for one of the most successful cool advertising agencies to emerge from the 1990s creative boom. He wanted Cast Off to take part in an advertising campaign for a famous (inevitably cool) shoe brand. He was looking for unusual (read strange) clubs. The knitting club was among the chosen ones. There was another underlying motive: if you were a cool communication agency, to have some connection to knitting had become essential. It showed your clients that you were at the frontier of trends, the compulsory attribute that set apart a cool agency from a more conventional one. Before seeking our agreement, and assuming that we would accept the offer, the agency had already invested creative time in producing knitting-related storyline templates for their forthcoming campaign. Their pitch to us was that we should feel privileged to have been chosen by this (admittedly) successful advertising agency to feature in an advertising campaign for an (admittedly) iconic brand. This was a hint of a problem, though, as we saw it as a sell-out. If Cast Off was going to do it, 'it' had to be the right message – and Rachael and I did not feel that the agency's viewpoint was right for Cast Off. It is not so much that we were hostile to the idea of Cast Off being in an advert per se, it is just that we didn't like the creative direction of this particular one; it was an ironic take.

Implicitly, the shoe brand was being positioned as hip because, of course, it was not 'us' (the brand + the customer) who were weird, in spite of the odd choice of people featured in the adverts. Rather, the weirdos were the ones in those clubs. We (the brand) were just being ironic. Weren't we cool (and by extension you if you purchased our shoes)? Well actually, no – irony was passé. We refused to take part in this advertising campaign because irony went against the ethos of Cast Off.

Forget irony. That tone no longer reflected the new underground ideology. The corporate cool sector was still using irony as a selling tactic but the hipsters who would drive future style and communication (of which Cast Off was part) were forming a new ethos. If we go back to the time before irony became a marketing tool, you may remember that irony was initially a device used to assert new ideological principles against the dominant rock ideology of authenticity. Emerging in the era of rock hegemony and inheriting beliefs founded upon the truism that anything that was not rock was naff, the new subcultures needed a clever tool to bypass that hurdle. A particular form of irony – based on self-mockery, self-deprecation and parody – proved to do the trick. This fad among the various post-punk subcultures subsequently became a brilliant marketing tool

that went on to define the communication tone of the 1990s cool marketing era...

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Jones and Katherine Hamnett; musicians Chicks on Speed and DJ duo Queens of Noize. Musically, it would also pay homage to the contemporary but increasingly irregular Kashpoint, and to its predecessors: Blitz, Taboo and Kinky Gerlinky, a 1990s club staged on the cusp of the dressing-down era. Matthew Glamorre DJed at Richard's club nights on a few occasions. In fact, a lot of the Kashpoint crowd moved over. Boy George also occasionally spun records. However, there was not much excitement over DJs, at least not initially. You just turned up at the club and someone played records. In spite of the surprise element, a few resident DJ names began to be associated with the Family night, such as Jerry Bouthier and Princess Julia. These guys – Jerry in particular – would begin to shape the aural identity of the club, which was eclectic but very much grounded in the elektrokash ethos.

Family was not promoted. Even so, the distinct looks of the punters combined with the calibre of famous guests frequenting it started to attract publicity. That is how Richard joined forces with Mandi. When Richard felt he needed to screen the press, who were getting very curious about this new sensation, he turned to Mandi for help. She would send the odd newsflash here, put in a good word there, nothing more, and this proved very effective. By the summer of 2006, when Kokon To Zai joined forces with Family to celebrate the store's anniversary, it was evident that something big was about to happen. As was customary, Kokon invited their own 'family', which consisted of names such as Björk, who flew in especially to DJ, and the regular supporters of the label. Mandi also sent a newsflash to her network.

Word about this party spread like wildfire. A huge crowd of people – far more than anticipated – congregated outside the venue on Curtain Road, making it impossible to get to the entrance. It could have turned sour for me, as I arrived quite late, having travelled back from Paris where I was working on a project, especially for the occasion. The mentality was still about attending a party to support your friends, and not because the party itself was fashionable. I found myself utterly desperate when I realised that there was simply no way of getting through the crowd. It was by pure luck that Sasha spotted me from the inside. He got the security to somehow pull me (and my plus one, the curator Wilhelm Finger) through the crowd into the venue. It proved to be a night to remember.

At the height of its popularity, Family ceased to be. The thirst for more, however,

was insatiable. There was no doubt that the scene had reached the 'tipping point'. The incubation phase was over. It was time for the epidemic to spread. Before long, Richard, along with Mandi, would create a monster. Family would give way to the phenomenon of a club night: a hip storm that swept all fashion capitals...