

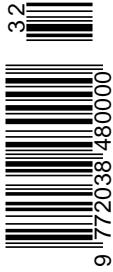
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TELFAR Country

T E L F A R

C O U N T R Y

In the footsteps of Rudofsky's functional uniform—seamless and mobile, genderless and utopian—TELFAR's fashion is described by MATTHEW LINDE as occupying an interstice between idealism and collective sickness, individualism and psycho-normalization, using mimesis, extreme branding and détournement as tongue-in-cheek strategies for hijacking the mainstream.



Photography: TORSO

Style: Avena Gallagher

Art Direction: Babak Radboy







The Emancipation of Conformity: The Telfar Citizen

I suggest a uniform, a national costume, or whatever you want to call it ... I know of nothing that would be more advantageous as the introduction of a costume in which dressed, fit and pleased everybody, but which was still inexpensive. — A.Z. (1790)¹

The New York-based unisex label Telfar is often described as the new radical interloper of the mainstream. Working backwards in time to understand this claim, I would like to offer a brief preamble to suggest the modern sartorial mainstream through the dialectics of fashion and *uniform*. In his 1944 MoMA exhibition “Are Clothes Modern?”, Bernard Rudofsky ridiculed the criminality of fashion and its spurious treatment of the modern citizen. An enlightened body contorted into abstract doppelgängers, restrained and subjugated by the mercurial irrationality of “vogue,” equally possessed by the creed of conspicuous consumption. Rudofsky, like so many other critics of consumer culture, understood fashion as the apotheosis of a sign detached from reality. The dozens of pockets on the men’s suit or the jeopardous heels of the women’s shoe were absurd rituals to be mistrusted. Included in his assessment of dress reformation were gender and modesty, two superstitious impositions for real modernization. Rudofsky neatly illustrates this through the humble button: from whatever Neolithic past the button emerged, its mysticism persists in industrial 20th-century society, in that its orientation on a shirt, either fastened from left or right, determines the gender of the cloth. The 1940s development of the slide fastener (what we now know as the zipper) abandoned the requirement for overlap—and with it, the imputation of sex. It was this pursuit to efface ornament and illogical frill, even that of the one-inch button tab, which lay the ability to realign fashion from an applied art to an ethical zero-point. The promise of this modernist fashion is envisaged in the design theory of Adolf Loos, the psychology of John Flügel and the social realism of Russian Constructivism. Fashion’s finality, Rudofsky understood, must be the functional uniform: seamless and mobile, genderless and utopian. The minimal, if not ascetic, militaristic uniform became the sartorial choice for so many totalitarian space films and Maoist fascinations of the previous century. Conversely, this idealistic vision of dress would have also satisfied the socialist democrat Thorstein Veblen, who in 1899 framed fashion as an apparatus of class distinction and social

status. By consequence, with the anticipated democracy of the 20th century, fashion would naturally atrophy. And while such a reductive analysis of fashion belies its transformative poetics (Veblen also relied on the misogynistic degeneration of women’s personal agency), perhaps this does explain in part fashion’s tenacity in the totalitarian-cum-democracy predicament we currently inhabit, in which neither doctrine is fully realized. Contemporary fashion is a paradoxical experience: it expresses both individualism as well as blistering standardization. While some fashion critics declaim the plurality of styles available today, the general population nevertheless appears mostly in uniformity. The mass-consumption cultural drone of athletic-preppy-generic sweats, jeans and polo staples of Abercrombie & Fitch is how the industrialized West has embraced conformity. If the uniform is utopian, the social psycho-normalization of dress, accelerating mass refuse, could equally be described in pathological terms. It is in this interstice between idealism and collective sickness that Telfar, as fashion designer, accesses uniformity.

Telfar Clemens, the designer of the semi-eponymous label, debuted his first collection in 2005, starring black, white and grey marle jersey jumpers and sweats. The low-budget collection involved tweaking the functional proportions and seam logic of everyday garments in democratic fabrics, an approach that has set the tone of his designs to this day. In his following 2006 collection, the grey marle sweatpant featured long slits finished with white binding on the side seam of the outer legs. This understated modification exposed ample breathability as it also co-opted conventional seams into new economic bodily allure. This design recurs in subsequent collections, like in the updated A/W 2018 cotton pants. The first look of the A/W 2007 is a white reductivist jacket and legging ensemble with black ovals masking the knees. This knee area would then be cut out of the pants in the S/S 2015 collection, mathematically isolating and unmasking joints in action, gesturing sportswear pragmatism—the great gender equalizer of dress—into denim pants. For his S/S 2010 show, Clemens expressed his method of uniformity in a process of eliminating seams and producing “sizeless” pieces. In A/W 2010, the brand dramatized the ubiquity of the jeans by elongating and folding the hems back up the exterior of the leg as high as the thigh. This outlandish adaptation was made rational in its formal indemnify of *jeanness*. Uniform experimentations also examined the banal construction of the overlock stitch (called “serge” in North America). Regarded

in trade schools as the antithesis of couture technique, the overlocker is an inexpensive and expedient engine to simultaneously join and finish seams of cloth and is found in the interior of essentially all mass-produced apparel. In A/W 2011, the overlock was inverted to the exterior, embracing its crass and jarring quality to logically demarcate the design lines of leggings, jeans, skivvys and tunics, all available in muted colors. In his A/W 2015 collection, pockets were covertly integrated into every element of the everyday uniform: belt loops, tags, cuffs. The allegorical redesign represented these instinctive features into functional superfluity. The “classic” Rudofsky uniform of a streamlined monochromatic plenary look is also iterated throughout his work, like in the knitted white jumpsuit with skirt overlay that closed the A/W 2017 show. Across all his collections, Telfar tilts the codification of the uniform, at times exteriorized as smart-casual Obi Wan Kenobi (A/W 2014) or sumptuary Ralph Lauren (A/W 2015), but always under a design philosophy of “extremely normal.”

The clothing’s formal qualities are critically oriented towards the brand’s psycho-normalization through its creative production and styling, achieved by Clemens’ longtime collaborators Babak Radboy and Avena Gallagher respectively. As one highly produced example of this constellation, *TCTV* animates the mediagenic exigency of a brand to perpetuate sales in strange malfunction. The advertorial video lookbook for A/W 2014 takes place in a futuristic emptied mall, rendered with the ultra-sleekness of a C.G.I. interface, somewhere between an automobile showroom and Apple store. Models present pieces from the collection with an A.I. polish, overloaded in commercial post-production that starts to buckle under its own alienation. Commercial-viability-as-absurdity is followed through Telfar’s other creative productions, most notably in his presence within various gallery contexts. As part of their work for the 9th Berlin Biennale, Telfar displayed clothes on mannequins of various body shapes, all radiantly sculpted with his face. This extreme branding continued in “Nude,” his recent exhibition (organized by KALEIDOSCOPE) at Spazio Maiocchi in Milan, where the mannequins were left unclothed and installed under a giant, dominating black-and-white billboard print of a naked Clemens looking down at you, his pose drawn from Jeanloup Sieff’s famous portrait of Yves Saint Laurent, the authority of a brand’s signifier literalized to the panoptic eye of the designer himself.

How are we to understand ourselves under the perpetual dominion of uniformity? In “Die Mode” (1905), Georg Simmel illustrates how

society’s generalization of dress rationalizes the population:

“Whenever we imitate, we transfer not only the demand for creative activity, but also the responsibility for the action from ourselves to another. Thus the individual is freed from the worry of choosing and appears simply as a creature of the group, as a vessel of the social contents. The tendency towards imitation characterises a stage of development in which the desire for expedient personal activity is present, but from which the capacity for possessing the individual acquirements is absent.” (pg. 232)

While Simmel argues a trickle-down theory of fashion, whereby individualism is derived from the upper class, Telfar illuminates how mimesis can in fact be a tongue-in-cheek game, suggesting both individualism and social equalization.

Have previous Telfar reviews invoked the work of Cardin as an anachronistic parallel? Or, perhaps more specifically, Rudi Gernreich’s “total looks”? These space-age designers produced tunic ensembles and knit bodysuits that, while not significant due to any technological development, were revelatory in their speculation of universality. Gernreich’s most famous piece was arguably the “monokini,” a women’s swimsuit in which the chest was left bare, save two stretch straps that followed the contours of a traditional bodice. Technical similarities can be drawn to Telfar’s use of stretch as a democratic fabric, but more interesting is the adaptation of a generic piece, economically sliced and opened. The “monokini” pursues the modernist streamlining of design as it equally renders abstract corporeal lines. Telfar’s investigations of the polo shirt, where backs are eliminated, graphic stripes furnished into functional pockets and collars attached to floating shoulder half-tanks, are all similar advancements. Another swimwear item by Gernreich was the unisex bathing suit, which features the same revealing cut across the derrière in both women’s and men’s. By showing his identical designs in gender tandem, he avoided a hierarchical “transvestism” (a quality that affixed Yves Saint Laurent’s Le Smoking suit); the reduction in design was commensurate across all bodies. Gernreich’s appeal for uniform equality shares an uncanny Telfar sensibility: “I see the conditions today as something like this: anonymity, universality, unisex, nudity as a fact and not as kick and above all reality. By reality I mean the use of real things: blue jeans, polo shirts, t-shirts, overalls. All of this translates into a new kind of enlightenment; enlightenment in a serious sense, but in a less serious sense as well...an anonymous sort of uniform of an indefinite revolution-

ary cast.” (Rudi Gernreich, *Michigan News*, July 15, 1971)

Cardin and Gernreich’s abstractions engineered fashion’s “pure form”. This geometric transcendence was nevertheless an achievement of its own meta-ornamentation, partly confirmed by its discordance with distribution. This is how Telfar updates the uniform dialectic, by addressing circulated generics, not geometry, to flirt with a contemporary universality, as polluted as it may be.

A dark irony surfaced when the *Vogue* fashion elite, housed in the World Trade Center, appeared in Telfar rapture upon the announcement of his CFDA/*Vogue* Fashion Fund award. As a publishing behemoth, Condé Nast bears a formidable responsibility in contouring the ideas broadcasted to its global citizenry. They wield this power, largely, to promote a type of inverted feudalism, lionizing a system of individuals in the entertainment industry whose traits are often awarded to them at birth. Likewise, the incongruity of a luxury industry and love for Telfar can be seen in the LVMH-esque system’s dedication to an unsustainable economic model of continual growth in the order of thousands of millions of dollars each consecutive year, consolidating rather than distributing power. The Instagrammed inundation of Telfar praise simultaneously released a collective steam valve of guilt, when it seems the only political action us liberal fashionistas champion is praising a casting agent for ensuring “diversity on the runway.” Telfar’s embodied system-jamming emerges in this context as détournement. I’m thinking here of when Fox News, the propaganda arm of the most aggressive Republican party in America’s history, reported that Telfar would be producing White Castle’s new uniforms, when all the while, Telfar’s capsule collection was raising funds for the bonds of minors held at Rikers Island, a hellish zenith of the US government’s prison industrial-complex. This subversion of spectacle reverberates how Telfar’s sensible aesthetic works as embezzler, hijacking the mainstream.

In one protracted SHOWstudio Telfar roundtable, panelists continually recurred to the same stratagem they would discuss a Prada or Comme show (or for that matter, Proenza Schouler); at one point, the art critic Hettie Judah expounded on the newness of Telfar’s necklines with confusing conviction. The quip is that viewing most of Telfar’s work as autonomous pieces, dislodged from its psycho-normative agenda, is a relatively unremarkable experience. (I’m personally disappointed by the rather unspectacular finishing of the embossed leather bags.) In this sense, Telfar already enters the world as diffusion line; yet unlike Comme PLAY,

which exists as semiotic adulteration, the brand snubs the original ideology of avant-garde scarcity.

After working for nearly 13 years, Telfar has had a jinxed advantage to be out of the fashion spotlight for so long. In eschewing the pace of media consumption, they have built a convincing body of work that has remained painfully fixed. With fashion’s rapacious eyes now glued on the label, it will be interesting to see how Telfar retains their steadiness with uniformity. So far, their Michael Kors-like approach of omnipresence has been only aspirational; can or should Telfar exploit the pervasive jurisdiction of design to extend beyond their specialized art world millennial customer? We can be thankful the designed dream of Rudofsky’s ethical zero-point, where all sartorial poetics would be considered corrupt, has not come to pass. This vision, however, has been abandoned for an enraged economy of consolidated power and devastating byproduct. The everyday uniform, the material subjecthood of our society, maintains its practice as wasteful massification. Telfar is an example of fashion at work with the contemporary uniform, running with its conformed accessibility even as it parasitically unpicks the psychological stitches of its rationality. **K**

1. A.Z., “Vorschlag zu einer uniformen Kleidung des schönen Geschlechts,” *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* 4 (December 1790), 636.























Telfar Fall/Winter 2018 Collection

Scenography: Hasbeensandwillbees
Production: Michelle Yoon
Transportation: CC Car Rentals
Jewelry: Telfar and Chrome Hearts
Shoes: Frye, John Fluevog and Florsheim

Models (in order of appearance):
Mahi, Jacuzzi, Chiki, Charlotte, Camille