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ALMANAC OF
CONTEMPORARY
AESTHETICS
ISSUE 43 FW23
FEATURING

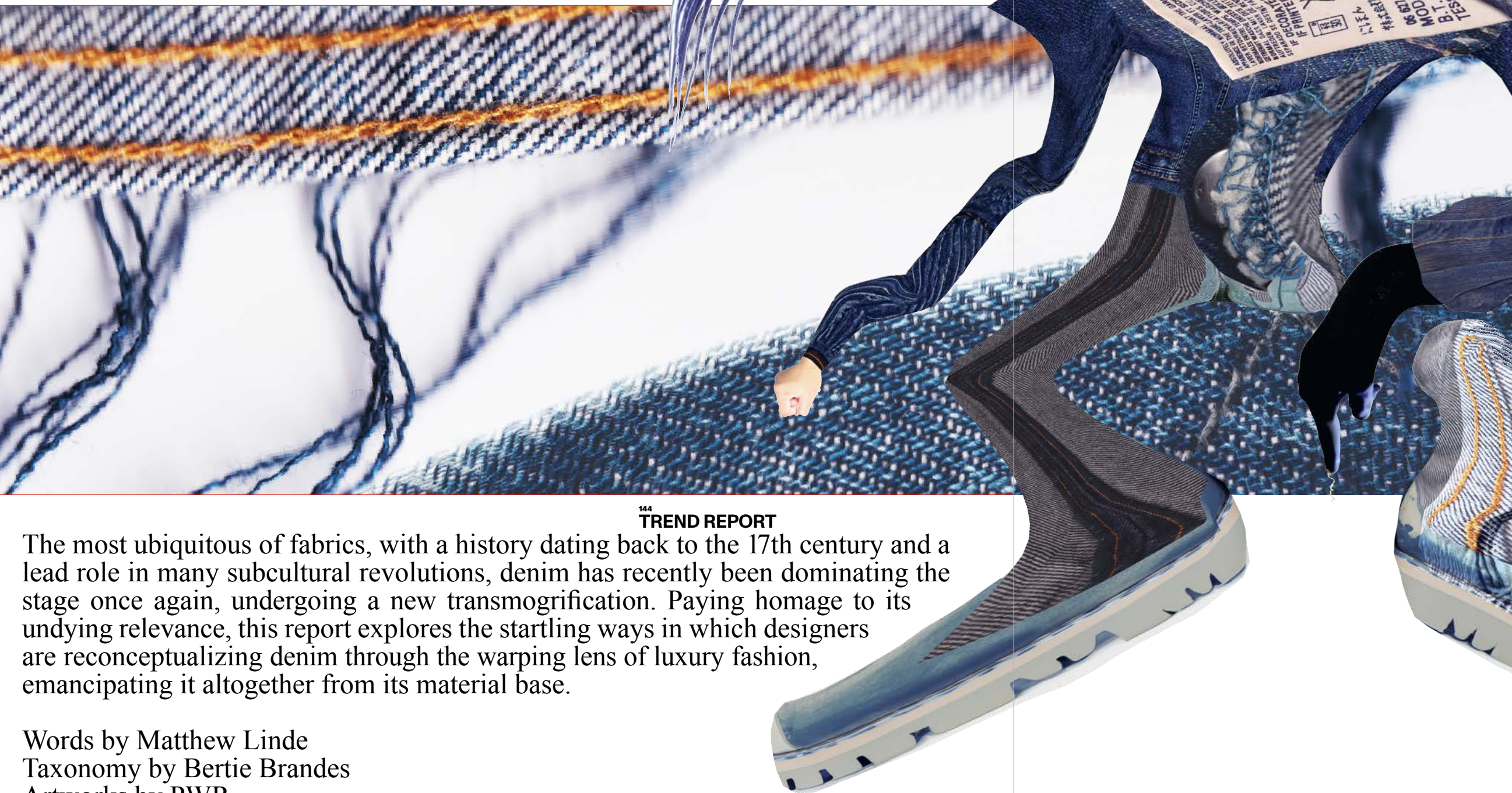
ESCAPE TO MIAMI
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DENIM SAGA

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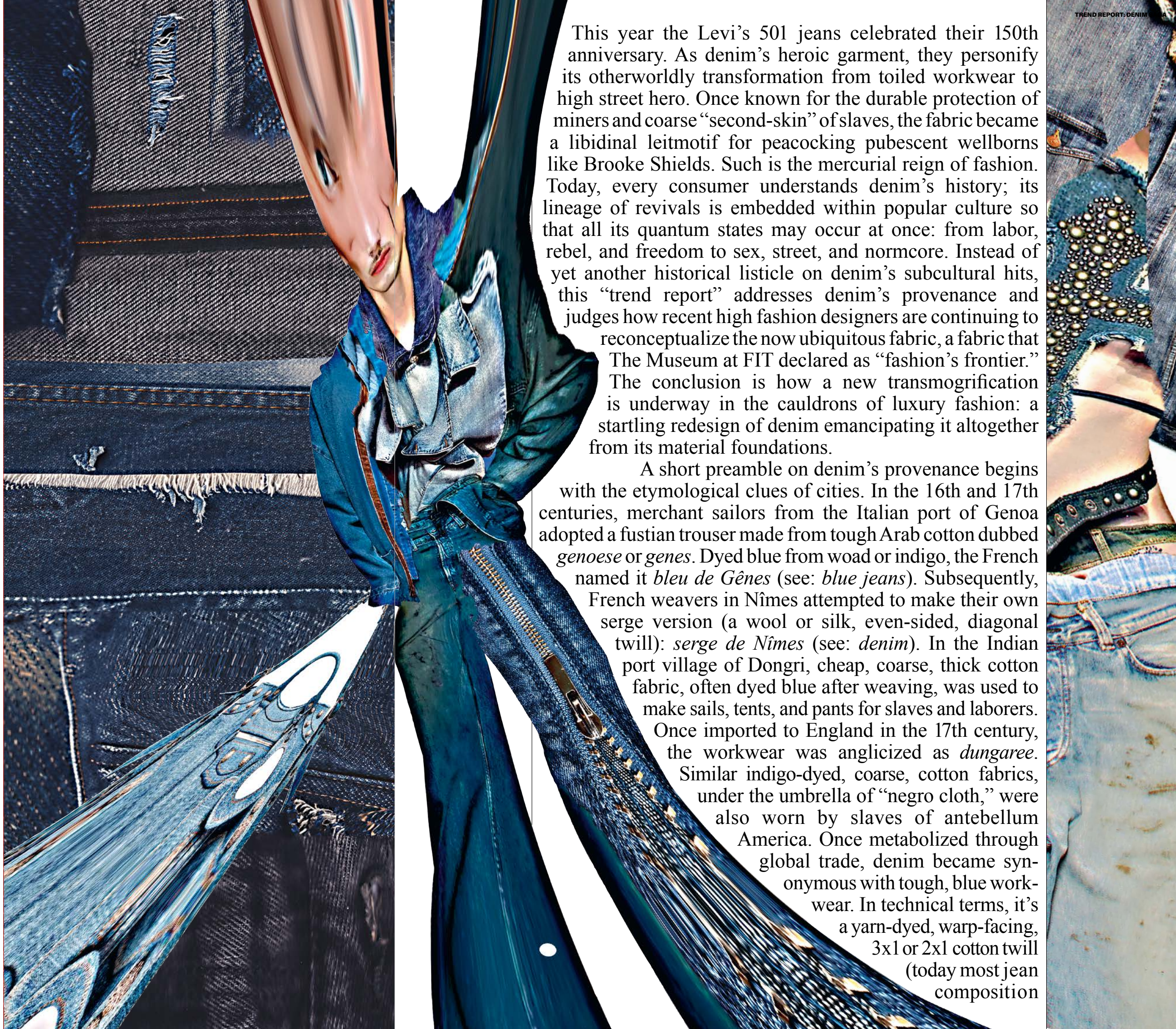


144 TREND REPORT

The most ubiquitous of fabrics, with a history dating back to the 17th century and a lead role in many subcultural revolutions, denim has recently been dominating the stage once again, undergoing a new transmutation. Paying homage to its undying relevance, this report explores the startling ways in which designers are reconceptualizing denim through the warping lens of luxury fashion, emancipating it altogether from its material base.

Words by Matthew Linde
 Taxonomy by Bertie Brandes
 Artworks by PWR

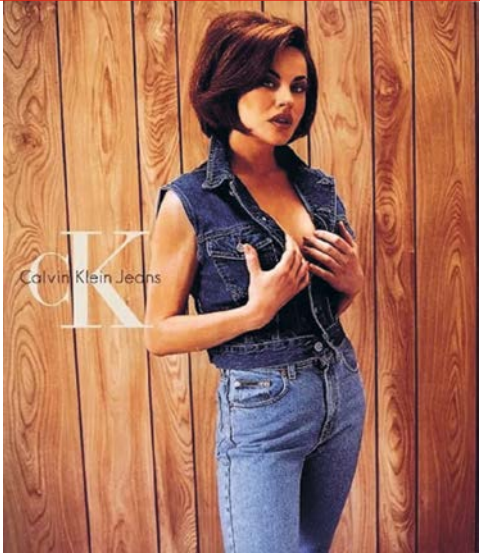




This year the Levi's 501 jeans celebrated their 150th anniversary. As denim's heroic garment, they personify its otherworldly transformation from toiled workwear to high street hero. Once known for the durable protection of miners and coarse "second-skin" of slaves, the fabric became a libidinal leitmotif for peacocking pubescent wellborns like Brooke Shields. Such is the mercurial reign of fashion. Today, every consumer understands denim's history; its lineage of revivals is embedded within popular culture so that all its quantum states may occur at once: from labor, rebel, and freedom to sex, street, and normcore. Instead of yet another historical listicle on denim's subcultural hits, this "trend report" addresses denim's provenance and judges how recent high fashion designers are continuing to reconceptualize the now ubiquitous fabric, a fabric that The Museum at FIT declared as "fashion's frontier." The conclusion is how a new transmogrification is underway in the cauldrons of luxury fashion: a startling redesign of denim emancipating it altogether from its material foundations.

A short preamble on denim's provenance begins with the etymological clues of cities. In the 16th and 17th centuries, merchant sailors from the Italian port of Genoa adopted a fustian trouser made from tough Arab cotton dubbed *genoese* or *genes*. Dyed blue from woad or indigo, the French named it *bleu de Gênes* (see: *blue jeans*). Subsequently, French weavers in Nîmes attempted to make their own serge version (a wool or silk, even-sided, diagonal twill): *serge de Nîmes* (see: *denim*). In the Indian port village of Dongri, cheap, coarse, thick cotton fabric, often dyed blue after weaving, was used to make sails, tents, and pants for slaves and laborers. Once imported to England in the 17th century, the workwear was anglicized as *dungaree*. Similar indigo-dyed, coarse, cotton fabrics, under the umbrella of "negro cloth," were also worn by slaves of antebellum America. Once metabolized through global trade, denim became synonymous with tough, blue workwear. In technical terms, it's a yarn-dyed, warp-facing, 3x1 or 2x1 cotton twill (today most jean composition

Denim was cloth *du jour* for prospectors, laborers, military, and prisoners. What followed was fashion's frontier into a Baudrillardian



hysteria of symbolic upheavals: bad-boy greaser, American West valor, patchworked hippie, lascivious youth, and universal leisurewear.

is complemented with 2% elastane). Only the warp yarns are dyed indigo (as a cost-cutting measure) but, thanks to the twill construction, they float over three or two weft yarns for the illusion of solid blue.

In 1870, the American tailor Jacob W. Davis innovated jeans with copper rivets to reinforce seam and pocket points for superior durability and, in 1873, he patented the already in-high-demand American design with businessman Levi Strauss. Denim was cloth *du jour* for prospectors, laborers, military, and prisoners. What followed was fashion's frontier into a Baudrillardian hysteria of symbolic upheavals: bad-boy greaser, American West valor, patchworked hippie, lascivious youth, and universal leisurewear. Amidst these subcultural revolutions, in the 1970s, "status jeans" arrived by way of mid-market designers. Whether you subscribe to trickle-up or trickle-down fashion theory, the chicken-or-egg question of denim's fashionability was now equally envisioned by a new designer class of denim propagandists, such as Fiorucci, Gloria Vanderbilt, Ralph Lauren, Mac Keen, Calvin Klein, Armani, Adriano Goldschmied, and Marithé + François Girbaud. They became so popular that, by 1978, the *Washington Post* declared it the "year of the status jean." In 1979, the *New York Times* foretold the designer jeans "craze" would "peak within the next two years." The paper quoted an apparel industry executive: "While the new styling and fabrics can sustain the look a little longer, we expect sales to peak by the end of 1980. You can only sell so many pairs." A stunning false prophecy in hindsight. In 1999, *Time* magazine garlanded the Levi's 501 with the title of *the* 20th-century garment. So great is the protean success of denim that anthropologists today muse, "At any given time, half the population of the Earth is wearing jeans." Between 2022 and 2026, denim's global market is expected to increase from \$57.3 billion to \$76.1 billion. An interminable production line realizes a global uniform. Amidst denim's postmodernist platter of meaning and stubborn ubiquity, fashion today is coalescing consumers around two major trends: the bedazzled return of Y2K and couture imitation.

The recent renaissance of fashion's Y2K era has done wonders in lifting denim's stock. Think Blumarine, Dsquared2, and Diesel, who, with the help of stylists such as Lotta Volkova and Haley Wollens, have seen their rhinestoned gewgaws, box-pleated uber-mini-skirts, and patchworked low-rises resurrected amid denim's appeal via social media virality and image-ready circulation. The original aesthetic—brewed in

BLUE JEAN BABY



Photography by Reto Schmid
Styling by Damese Savidan



ACNE STUDIOS
PENICILLIN-DISTRESSED OVERSHIRT,
SUPER BAGGY FIT JEANS,
SILVER CAN-PULLER NECKLACE

BOTTEGA VENETA
PRINTED LEATHER STRAIGHT DENIM,
COTTON WHITE TOP,
TEX MULE



BALENCIAGA
DECONSTRUCTED DENIM JACKET,
DOUBLE-FRONT DENIM TROUSERS,
FETISH SOCKS BOOTIES



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RETO SCHMID
STYLING BY DAMESE SAVIDAN
CREATIVE DIRECTION: ALESSIO ASCARI

MODEL: KASPER KAPICA

PHOTO ASSISTANT: GREGOIRE COLSON, QUENTIN
FARRIOL, HERNANDO MAZUERA
STYLING ASSISTANT: NOJANE NOEL
SET ASSISTANT: GAËLLE SELLIN
HAIR: CHIAO CHENET
MAKEUP: MAËLYS JALLALI
NAILS: ERI NARITA
PRODUCTION: ANNABEL FERNANDES



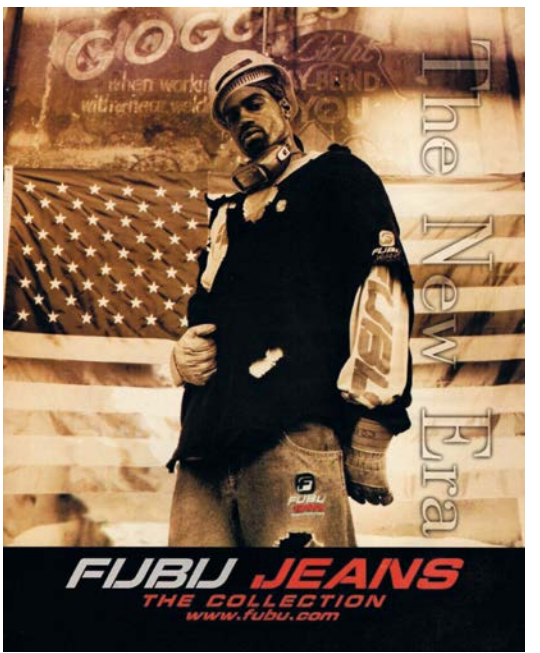
the primordial soup of Britney, Paris, Guess, Baby Phat, Miss Sixty, et al.—was most vividly revamped in Diesel’s Spring/Summer 2023 collection. With Glenn Martens of Y/Projects now at the helm, the label mined the vendible 2000s vintage. For this 71-look collection, a host of vintage denim treatments and washes were lavishly redeveloped—acid wash, reverse-sun-fading, organza-lacing, flocking, and fringed denim. It was as if depop bestseller prompts were inputted into AI, reimagining denim to higher and higher resolutions, generating that patina of oleaginous unreality: the Gen X denim label updated for a TikTok sales pitch. The recent Acne Studios denim campaign, starring their new face, Kylie Jenner, behaves similarly. Here, baggy distressed denim ensembles dripped in oil and dirt have immediate 4K impact, made only more viralized by Jenner’s body seen dripping in the same painted effect. The pieces will be big sellers. The young London-based designer Mowalola Ogunlesi has also been trafficking in nineties denim designs. Her namesake brand’s Spring/Summer 2023 featured matching jackets and jeans, with the lowest of low-rises, made from waxy metallic black denim and stonewashed blue. The Spring/Summer 2024 season also reaffirmed denim’s dirty panache across the soiled treatments of baggy cargos, full-length flared skirts, and strappy minis.

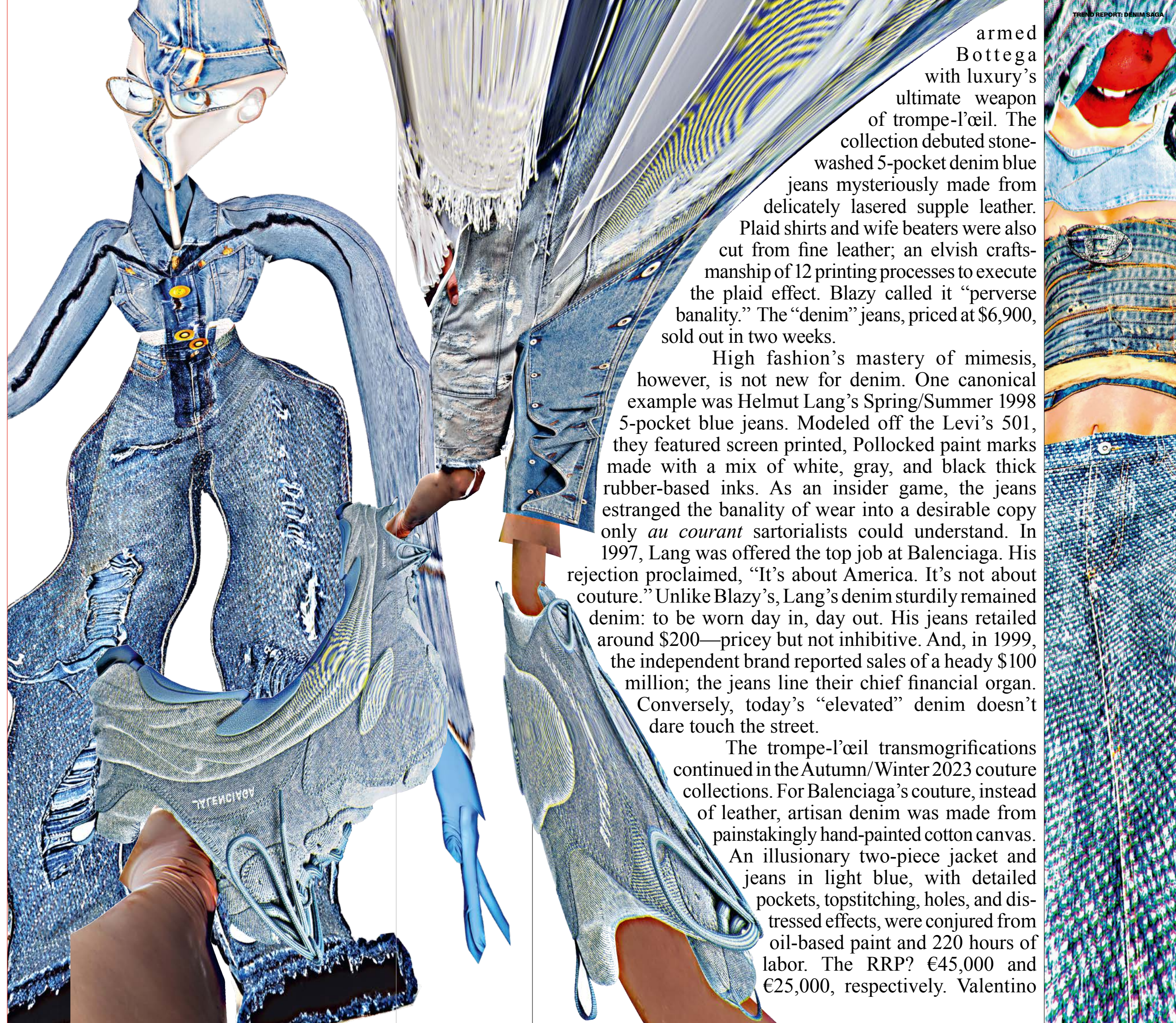
Less lurid are the nineties, dad-inspired, normcore jeans by another London designer, Martine Rose. Established in 2007 as a menswear brand, Rose has repeatedly explored the more subtle renditions of 20th *fin de siècle* denim, across bootleg, skinny, cargo, and flare. Her treatments—heat-pressed permanent crinkles and bleached stripes—provide contemporary delight, but, for the most part, her denim remains true to the halcyon looks of London raves and hip-hop, most notably her king-sized gabber styles. Rose’s collaboration with Hilfiger in 2022 reiterated her penchant for nineties reinvention. The “unapologetic collection of Tommy’s 90s staples—reconstructed by designer Martine Rose’s Miami-inspired vision of modern Americana,” as the copy described it, featured indigo denim innuendo “chaps” with the voided crotch evocatively constructed in white denim.

Over the past few seasons, discussions of “couture denim” have percolated the punditry. It started with Matthieu Blazy’s standout Spring/Summer 2023 inauguration at Bottega Veneta. The Italian house, traditionally a maker of leather goods, was refurbished in 2016 by Daniel Lee as the new “woman-friendly” ashram for lost Phoebe Philoites, providing a luxe work-play wardrobe for the exec matrician. In 2022, Blazy

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armed Bottega with luxury's ultimate weapon of trompe-l'œil. The collection debuted stone-washed 5-pocket denim blue jeans mysteriously made from delicately lasered supple leather. Plaid shirts and wife beaters were also cut from fine leather; an elvish craftsmanship of 12 printing processes to execute the plaid effect. Blazy called it "perverse banality." The "denim" jeans, priced at \$6,900, sold out in two weeks.

High fashion's mastery of mimesis, however, is not new for denim. One canonical example was Helmut Lang's Spring/Summer 1998 5-pocket blue jeans. Modeled off the Levi's 501, they featured screen printed, Pollocked paint marks made with a mix of white, gray, and black thick rubber-based inks. As an insider game, the jeans estranged the banality of wear into a desirable copy only *au courant* sartorialists could understand. In 1997, Lang was offered the top job at Balenciaga. His rejection proclaimed, "It's about America. It's not about couture." Unlike Blazy's, Lang's denim sturdily remained denim: to be worn day in, day out. His jeans retailed around \$200—pricey but not inhibitive. And, in 1999, the independent brand reported sales of a heady \$100 million; the jeans line their chief financial organ. Conversely, today's "elevated" denim doesn't dare touch the street.

The trompe-l'œil transmogrifications continued in the Autumn/Winter 2023 couture collections. For Balenciaga's couture, instead of leather, artisan denim was made from painstakingly hand-painted cotton canvas.

An illusory two-piece jacket and jeans in light blue, with detailed pockets, topstitching, holes, and distressed effects, were conjured from oil-based paint and 220 hours of labor. The RRP? €45,000 and €25,000, respectively. Valentino

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success of denim that anthropologists today muse, “At any given time, half the population of the Earth is wearing jeans.”



15 APR 2005 Amsterdam, NL
12, 10 - 15, 10



couture, designed by Pierpaolo Piccioli, also roleplayed the democracy of denim. Staged at Château de Chantilly, the opening look, modeled by Kaia Gerber, featured slouchy Levi's-inspired jeans that were constructed entirely of glass-bead-embroidered silk gazar. The atelier created 80 individual hues of indigo-dyed beads to recreate denim's scratchy texture with devastating glamour. Piccioli described it as "a simply paradoxical trompe-l'œil." For a denim slightly more tethered to reality, there's Loro Piana's luxurious *CashDenim*. For their Autumn/Winter 2023 collection, the LVMH-owned Italian textile house released jackets and jeans constructed from a specialized 60% denim and 40% cashmere combination. They collaborated with artisan manufacturers from Japan's Bingo region, whose looms specialize in the worshiped selvedge denim. Retailing at \$1,350, these jeans provide an "accessible" price point for the latest unreal denim.

Considering these developments, is tricking the eye perhaps luxury's best and last defense for survival? That extreme wealth requires a conceptual disguise, a rebus-like challenge we play to affirm our taste. Fashion's frontier—melting all that's solid into air—marches on.

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Bertie Brandes is a writer living in London. She recently launched *NUTS* magazine, a new biannual print publication.