**AXL JANSEN - ON COLLABORATION, THE POWER OF COMMUNITY AND HOW EGO IS NO LONGER IN FASHION**

*Interview Introduction and Transcript by Philippe Pourhashemi*

Talking about the fashion industry today without acknowledging its impact on our world is just impossible. With the rise of fast-fashion brands such as Shein, Temu or Primark, buying cheap fashion has never been as easy as it is now, but many of us are also aware of the damage such brands generate within our ecosystems. The biggest luxury groups, namely LVMH, Kering and Richemont to name a few, increasingly need to tackle sustainability in what appears to be a saturated market. In other words, we can no longer continue with the same system and practices, which means change must be implemented.

It turns out that the fashion industry can be rather slow in embracing change and welcoming news ways of operating. If the bigger brands want to continue to appeal to a younger clientele, they will have to be more sustainable and mindful when it comes to design and manufacturing. The recent boom of resale platforms has been revealing and quite encouraging. We no longer feel obligated to consume the latest fads and are looking for genuinely creative ways to make the fashion industry more humane and responsible.

Throughout his career as a photographer, Axl Jansen has always privileged the human dimension over fashion. His recent focus on the Berlin-based PLATTE collective, where he also lives and works, illustrates his growing interest in alternative ways to envisage fashion. Thanks to his contribution and striking images of a thriving collective, ‘Fashion Utopia: Berlin to Paris to Atlanta’ becomes a unique exhibition project, which will hopefully inspire communities and provide food for thought. Jansen is a true collaborator, who envisages overblown egos as a thing of the past. Thanks to his artistic vision, we can start to see a new type of fashion emerge, abandoning the cult of the designer to embrace the power of the collective.

*How did you find out about the PLATTE, which is this inspiring collective in Berlin?*

Axl Jansen: I actually knew Sevil Uguz, who is now a Founding Board Member of the PLATTE and one of its key instigators. The location the PLATTE has today used to belong to this avant-garde store in Berlin-Mitte called ‘Apartment’. It was quite a strange store, because you would enter and see nothing displayed there. You had to go down a staircase to access the clothing and accessories, which were sold in the basement.

*I loved Apartment, and visited it a couple of times. I remember finding it quite intimidating as there was no-one greeting you once you entered.*

AJ: It was a hidden store, and quite an exclusive one at the time. They carried brands you couldn’t find elsewhere in Berlin and it was in a part of town where nothing was happening then, between Alexanderplatz and Rosenthaler Platz. I think they opened around 2007 or 2008.

*Is this the space that the PLATTE is currently using?*

AJ: Exactly. What I find really interesting is that the PLATTE is a community, as well as a physical space where designers and other creative minds can work and carry out different projects. There is a great photo studio in the basement, too, which obviously made the space more attractive for me. Designers and photographers can rent it and shoot all the images they need there. I really like the design of the studio actually, and you can shoot using several directions and variations. You could do fashion editorials or more commercial work there. The store itself is very flexible in physical terms. This means the space can be changed or transformed on a regular basis, which makes it even more exciting in a way. I knew Arne Eberle well, who at the time was directly involved with the collective. That’s how I got to know more about the PLATTE and the people shaping it.

*I know Arne, too! He was a magazine editor, right?*

AJ: Yes. He was part of the Berlin Showroom team that took young designers from Berlin to Paris twice a year during Fashion Week.

*When did you start thinking that photographing the PLATTE would be a good topic for this exhibition?*

AJ: The PLATTE is a multifaceted -and therefore quite attractive- community. They organize events on a regular basis, such as fashion shows or dinners for example, underlining their collective strength as a team, as opposed to one singular voice. Very quickly, I had the idea to photograph them in groups, but also individual portraits. It’s a new form of community thinking, which I find very inspiring.

*It sounds like they actually get things done as well. It’s not just optics, or politics.*

AJ: That’s totally true, even though you can’t deny that fashion and art have become increasingly political these days. For me, PLATTE feels fresh and forward-thinking. It’s a bit like night-clubbing folks trying to get together and have their voices heard during the daylight (he laughs). These people have practical knowledge and gathered precious experience within their previous careers. I like this combination of practicality and utopia in a sense. And it’s a much more democratic way to function as well.

*Do you find that younger generations are much more into the idea of community than we were?*

AJ: Definitely. I think the world is too complex today to believe you could even face it on your own. It’s more about working as groups of people than pushing one single leader.

*Would that signify the end of ego in fashion? We know that our industry has relied on the cult of the designer for decades now. Is this coming to an end?*

AJ: I think this is the way the world has changed and there’s definitely some truth to it. Even for me, working on an exhibition is a collaborative effort and I’m just a part of it. You need to have the contributions of an entire team in order to make the images come to life.

*As a photographer, would you say that this collaborative dimension has always been very important to you?*

AJ: Absolutely. Artistically, I started with the music scene, instead of fashion. I would follow bands and photograph them, shooting their album covers for instance. In a way, that group dimension can be found in fashion, too, and it suits me perfectly.

*We have worked together in the past and you’ve always been gracious to your teams. I never had the feeling you were imposing anything.*

AJ: I just don’t have that kind of ego or desire to act like some sort of know-it-all or creative dictator. And I don’t believe you need to have a tense atmosphere in order to get good images either. The act of photography implies focus and concentration, but it can be done in a relaxed and playful way. I think that if you consider everyone involved on-set and manage to lead in a soft way, you will get much better results. Leading for me is also about opening-up more possibilities in order to explore different options. As a photographer, I need to create that kind of platform, which is based on respect and trust. Maybe that’s the reason why I truly enjoyed shooting the PLATTE and its members.

*How did the actual shooting go?*

AJ: I thought a lot about Andy Warhol’s Factory, and this idea of slightly eccentric and creative individuals getting together in order to create something new and significant. It was a pretty intense and long day, but it also felt like a lot of fun. Sevil and I had had a few discussions beforehand and soon found several directions that could work on the shooting day.

*You normally work with models or people who are used to the camera. Was this shoot a bit more challenging?*

AJ: I just needed to create an atmosphere where each person could play, perform and also act out if required. It’s mainly a question of trust, but I have to confess that most of the PLATTE members were fairly confident and at ease with themselves. I think they felt safe in front of the camera, too.

*As someone who has shot fashion for many years, what would you say your style is as a photographer?*

AJ: That’s a difficult one. Sometimes it feels as if I just started yesterday. I guess my ongoing focus -and passion- is people. I try to give them the space they need in order to express themselves. You know, models are not always used to being free and come up with their own proposals, because some photographers happen to be rather controlling. I guess I need to give the sitter some room in order to make the picture happen. I hope that I can catch parts of their soul, even though it can he hidden under the fashion layers. When I shoot high fashion, I never try to photograph someone as a model, but as an individual instead. I like to see their truth and humanity come to the fore.

*How many of your images have been happy accidents? Do you know exactly what kind of pictures you want before the shoot takes place?*

AJ: It’s funny, because I think there are two types of photographers. Some are cooks, while others are bakers. For the baker, all the ingredients need to be there in order to execute the recipe properly. Once you’ve put your cake in the oven, it’s kind of done. A cook goes into the fridge and makes something up in a spontaneous way. He or she gets inspired by the moment, which informs the cooking process itself. It means that I’m always ‘cooking’ while the shoot happens. I must say I’ve never been unlucky when there were unplanned coincidences.

*Do you know when you’ve got the picture?*

AJ: Yes. I can’t describe it with words, but there’s a huge emotion I feel, and I know I’ve got it.

*How has the fashion industry changed since you started?*

AJ: Everything is easier today, but it can also make people complacent and lazy, which is the danger. Building a mood board for instance can be done in a few minutes now, thanks to the Internet and the amount of images available for us at all times. This means that there is often less time spent on the preparation, because digital allows you to change many things during post-production. So in a way, it is impossible to shoot a bad image today, but how many of them are memorable? Let’s say that when I started shooting fashion during the 1990s, access to shows in Paris or London was much more restricted. You had to wait for the newspapers and magazines to come out to see the actual collections, unless you had attended the show yourself or been given a backstage pass. I mean there was no Internet and nothing was published in real time either.

*Besides the crazy speed of fashion today, what else do you think has changed style wise?*

AJ: I remember that every fashion capital had its own specific look. You knew instantly that you were in London, Paris or Milan, because people dressed in a totally different way according to the city they lived in. This has disappeared now, and you see more uniformity between fashion cities. Paris isn’t necessarily more chic or elegant than Milan or New York now. It’s become a big, worldwide community. In a way, this can be a good thing for fashion as a language, since there are fewer barriers present. There are more of points of view available, but there are also too many images floating around on social media.

*Everyone is a photographer these days, right? That’s the Instagram effect.*

AJ: True, but not everyone has an eye either.

*You are bringing the values, energy and atmosphere of the PLATTE to Atlanta. What attracts you in that city and which values do you wish to convey with this exhibition?*

AJ: This is going to be my first time there, so I’m looking forward to discovering the city, as well as finding out more about its fashion and creative communities. I hope the exhibition leads to interesting discussions as well and I can’t wait to share a bit of Berlin life with Atlanta’s creatives.