

Disruptions in the Cloud Cover

I get into a time machine one morning and punch in a destination date: March 14, 2012. Manhattan Island, New York. 14th Street. That'll make me six years younger. I leave the present with an ear-splitting whoosh and land in an office space on Union Square. The occupants recently relocated here from a shoe box on the Lower East Side. By day, their spacious rooms on the top floor of this old building are lit by antique skylights of almost perverse proportions. The new arrivals have installed teal carpeting on the floor. The rest of the place looks as sparsely decorated as ever: metal tables with adjustable swivel chairs, leafy plants, overflowing storage bins. Nothing is hanging on the textured wallpaper but a hand drawn diagram that divides the surrounding area among more or less scary brand names: Dr. Martens, Supreme, Volvo, and Instagram. Those forces of a growing standardization of life that still side with the lesser evils.

The map was drawn up by K-HOLE with Damon Zucconi, an artist and programmer also working on the floor. He's wearing an MA-1 inside the freezing office. There's something different about his black bomber. It isn't your typical mass product. Lifting it from its place on the back of his chair, I notice it's way blacker than a standard Alpha. When I put it on, I feel almost armored by its stiff padding. Only later do I learn that the jacket, a Buzz Ricksons, is a faithful copy of the 1957 MA-1. But something's not quite right about this replica. Gradually a copy without an actual original takes shape, a quasi-philosophical object that leads to the literary roots of the normcore report, a document K-HOLE is preparing at the table next to Zucconi's around this time in 2012.

William Gibson published *Pattern Recognition* (2003) ten years before my break-in. Written under the shock of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, it was the author's first novel set in the present. Gibson had gotten famous through cyberpunk. In the aftermath of those mind-boggling attacks, it felt like the future had been rendered impossible to describe.

Dream Experts

Cayce Pollard, consultant on signs *in the air*, moves at the epicenter of the novel's present-day action. She's a thirty-two-year-old human litmus test for the efficacy of logo designs, gauging by way of her own physiological reaction whether a design could be in sync with the group taste of the near future, or not. Her job is to say "yes" or "no." Sometimes it's enough for her face to contort, or if she starts wheezing. Cayce Pollard's sense stems from a psychosomatic disorder: she's been allergic to logos since childhood. She was six when she had her first attack at the sight of the Michelin Man. He looked like such a revolting monster that she started gasping for air and broke out in a rash. Her sensitivity compels her to wear logo-free protective gear, consisting of a black Fruit of the Loom t-shirt, minus tag, and black Levi's 501s whose metal buttons have been stripped of all branding by a Korean locksmith she hired. The crown jewel of her personal uniform, the most discrete display of individuality possible, is a black replica of an original MA-1. Color aside, the unusual article of clothing copies the US Air Force's very first bomber jacket flawlessly. The Buzz Ricksons is a little work of art its wearer treats like a fetish, and the novel stylizes it into a virtually animate being. It's so heavy because bombers were still lined with durable cotton instead of polyester in the 1950s.

Cayce Pollard isn't allergic to this handmade replica of an industrial brand product. The miraculous product points to an immaterial reality that stitches together a twofold fiction: the Air Force never had a black bomber jacket, and the Buzz Ricksons company only offered one in sage green. The label does exist, and they do produce copies of US uniforms. Buzz Ricksons is one of many Japanese outfitters specialized in adapting uniforms by the one-time adversaries who profoundly traumatized the country by dropping two atomic bombs on it. Unlike Bape (A Bathing Ape), another label that came out of the early nineties, who are known for comically exaggerating uniforms' characteristics, and Readymade, who specialize in refining original uniforms qua found object, Buzz Ricksons goes to great pains to produce copies of uniforms that adhere to every last military specification and end up feeling more authentic than the original.

Buzz Ricksons started out as production designers, borrowing their name from the 1962 Steve McQueen film *The War Lover*. McQueen played death-driven bomber pilot Buzz Rickson. At the end of a dramatic love story, the film's unlikable hero gets shot down by the Germans over Leipzig. The heroine of *Pattern Recognition* doesn't just maintain an external brand asceticism, her self-tailored uniform traces a line of flight from fashion: what she wears could have been purchased in that very form and combination at any point in time over the last forty years. Cayce Pollard puts her pared-down wardrobe together from US textile industry standards. She refuses to spend her time agonizing over options. She has what she needs. She knows no lack. Even when a foe burns a hole in her protective skin with a cigarette, the protagonist comes to her own rescue with gaffer tape and bandages the irritating hole.

Buzz Ricksons got pestered by curious readers for so long that, after consulting with the author, the company made the literary device a reality in a limited edition: for their anniversary, they brought out a copy manufactured after the US Army's original model down to the last detail, except in black, for the price of 675 US dollars apiece. Reconstructing the "crown zippers," which the army had already patented by 1953, turned out to be a particular challenge that cost Buzz Ricksons a fortune.

In exchange for his literary invention, William Gibson requested a special edition of the bomber jacket, enlarged by four inches. The custom piece has been hanging on the back of his writing chair, as an object from the other side of the bridge, an apparition that arose from the light of the text, ever since.

After reading the novel, I wanted a Buzz. I kept bidding on auctions until someone outbid me. Eventually I got lucky: one typo, and a Buzz slipped past my competitors on an online auction.

My son doesn't like it when I wear the jacket. He thinks people are going to be scared of me because the stiff cotton lining makes me so wide.

What started as a fictitious one-woman movement in the novel turned into an insider niche attitude that played out as the overture to what would later be called "normcore."

Web Without a Spider

Cayce Pollard makes an easy character to identify with. The way she acts feels symptomatic of the times. Her paradoxical personality builds a career on its own illness. She markets her allergy. A double agent of sorts, she advises the very companies she should actually have to protect herself from. But Cayce Pollard's sensitivity pinpoints an attack to which she is also party. The name of her job sounds like a capitalist-surrealist dream word: *coolhunter*. A sort of meteorologist for the desires that indicate *what's in the air*. She takes snapshots of the current cloud cover for her clients and speculates on a near future from which they can derive fitting products. In actuality, Cayce Pollard wants out of the machine of eternal self-betrayal. Life is too sticky inside the apparatus of self-differentiation for sale, an extension of a postmodern *différance* of which little more appears to remain besides purchasing the right shoes and reinterpreting the signs that raise those shoes to their moment of fashion.

Cayce Pollard's main client is an athletic shoemaker whose logo is derived from a stylized ejaculation in a 1960s underground comic strip. Multinationals no longer define *what's in the air*; they chase after currents of desire, and that's where Cayce Pollard comes in.

That the pursuit works the other way around, with prefabricated dictates of fashion, only feels like a wish held by those who want to be dominated, people clinging to the idea that the future is being planned in centers of power. What gets spun as fashion seems more like a web without a spider. For a while, it's hanging in one corner and then, before you know it, in another, and you can't quite say for sure what's behind the volatility, how many of them there are, or what might happen next. Fashion isn't so much planned as it just happens. Labels go to a lot of trouble observing the movements of desire and then calculating presumed demand from emerging patterns. The industry offsets its own cluelessness about what people want with oversupply. A dense mass of options should, so the thinking goes, be able to pick up any buyer somewhere. The price paid for deploying those tactics in the fight against customers' unwillingness to buy is an enormous surplus production. Aside from a glut of offerings, the industry is also trying out new technologies to reconnect. These include a web of feedback loops and certain pattern recognition techniques that sprang from artificial intelligence.