

Hype Nation

It's a warm Friday evening in Berlin, the late-summer sun still shining. I'm on a stationary wooden barge that juts out into the River Spree, at the back of the Arena Berlin convention centre. Around me, people are idly drinking beers, with the exception of two boys who can't be much older than 15.

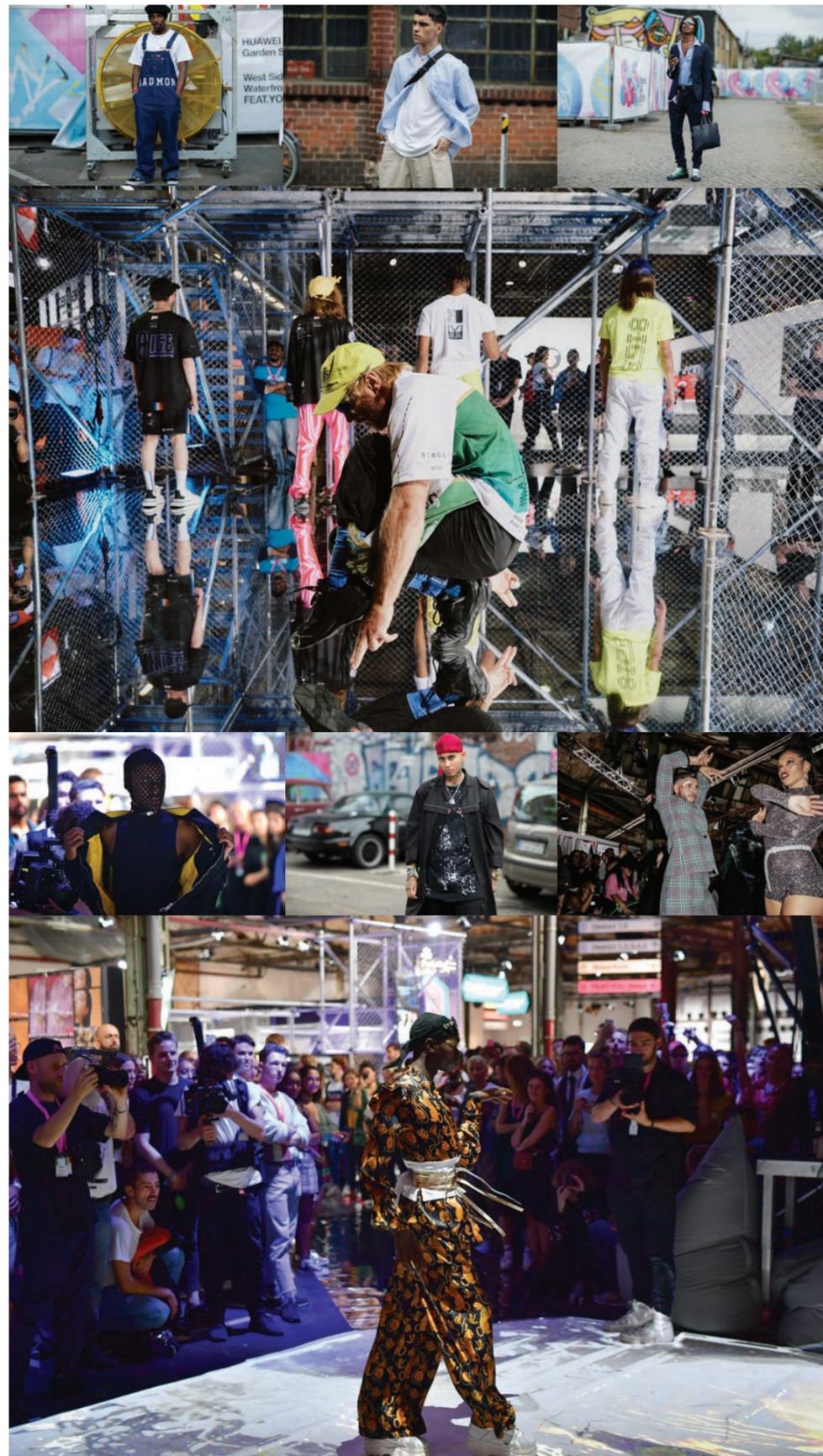
► The are both dressed, head to toe, in streetwear – the brands we can easily reel off, such as Supreme, Palace, Nike, but also more obscure labels, which, despite being only 25, makes me feel old. The pair squat and pose, taking turns to capture each other on their iPhone 7s, the Berlin skyline and Spree providing a particularly clout-y backdrop for this evening's Instagram posts. They are perfectionists. The insouciance they project has been perfected. Their eye for detailing is equally as strong: at one point, one of them lifts himself over the barrier, onto the outer edge of the barge, to get a cleaner shot (are these the art directors of the future?). A steward sees and strides towards them, to tell them off, I presume. Instead, he offers to take their picture, as both of them throw up signs with their hands. I have no idea what they mean, and nor should I – they're ostensibly still kids.

All in, it's not a jarring sight, not one that inspires an avuncular shake of the head or a tut about this generation and its love of rare garms and social media. No, it's actually quite sweet. Innocent, almost. They've probably spent some time looking forward to this weekend, when the three-day event titled Bread&&Butter is hosted in Berlin by e-commerce fashion giant Zalando. It is a behemoth trade-show-like event that is open to the public, where their favourite brands will have stalls, with exclusive product drops, customisation and DJing workshops, and live performances from grime acts such as AJ Tracey.

This event – and the many others like it in Los Angeles, New York and Dubai, which see streetwear-heads flock to them, their pockets bulging with cash ready to be spent – may well be a visual manifestation of the wanton excess of late capitalism. But it would be wrong to sneer at the kids who attend, who lay out their hypest clothes the night before, who snap pictures and video selfies, who immediately upload them for all to see, who hand off a bag of coke to each other when they're done posing by the barge. Wait. What?

A trip to the toilet confirms this is not an isolated incident. This is like a music festival where everyone has turned up for the merch stalls rather than the live acts. Buzzing teens abound, dressed to the nines, with full sensory overload apparently the guiding aesthetic. Inside the arena it's hot and busy and everything is illuminated with headache-inducing brightness. This makes sense: the brands who have paid to be here – among them, Puma, Levi's, 032c, Aape, Nike and Converse – want their products to be seen, and their stalls, conceived for "spontaneous Instagram moments", to be well lit, in the old-fashioned sense of the term.

Instagram: @calumgordon_



HYPED: WAITING FOR THE DROP AT BREAD&BUTTER, BERLIN 2018

TOP: EVA LOSADA. SECOND ROW: FILZ SERINVEL. THIRD ROW: GETTY, EVA LOSADA. HARALD SCHACK. BOTTOM: GETTY

At the Adidas section, there's a motorbike and a screen behind it, with a moving landscape projected onto it, so you can re-enact the awful Kanye West Bound 2 video with your Kim Kardashian of choice, presumably. Meanwhile, 30yd away, at Fila, there's a snaking queue for a game-show-style money booth, where you have to try to catch as many floating notes as you can in the allotted time period (to presumably then spend on Fila). This is full-frontal brand engagement. This is the future of fashion. Possibly.

It all started with ComplexCon in 2016. Hosted by Complex, the media giant that started out reporting on rap music but has since become a one-stop shop for anything that's trending, the event was basically Comic-Con for people who nerd out about rare Jordan sneakers rather than pristine Superman comics. It was intended to be a physical manifestation of everything enveloped by streetwear culture, from exclusive product releases to panel talks and live performances by the likes of Kid Cudi and Travis Scott. The following edition, in 2017, boasted an even more impressive line-up of brands and performers, and was chaired by Pharrell, the artist Takashi Murakami, Virgil Abloh and Sarah Andelman, formerly of Colette.

Founded in 2011, Sole DXB in Dubai technically came before it, but it did so in a cultural vacuum, where trying to sell a brand by its subcultural legacy, in the way that you might with Adidas or Stüssy, is not so simple. ComplexCon's inaugural event, however, was in Los Angeles, arguably – or weirdly – the modern-day equivalent of Constantinople or Renaissance Florence. It's a breeding ground for cultural production: movies, music, art, porn – a staggering amount of it is conceived here. And in the gated compounds of Calabasas, so too are your Yeezy sneakers. ComplexCon, in this sense, could be interpreted as a pre-emptive move – a proposition for a customer that values IRL experiences but who does most of their shopping online and brand research on Instagram. This event was an Instagram feed brought to life.

Others, such as Bread&&Butter, launched around the same time. Earlier this year, in New York, another new-media giant, Hypebeast, launched its own version, Hypefest, which was also chaired by Andelman, alongside the so-called “godfather” of Japanese streetwear, Hiroshi Fujiwara. The line-up was impressive, but also one that included an indication as to the future of these events. Hypefest not only boasted streetwear-mainstay exhibitors such as Richardson and A Bathing Ape, but also a number of what would traditionally be labelled high-fashion or luxury brands: Marc Jacobs, Sacai, MCM and Rimowa – the latter now under the stewardship of 26-year-old Alexandre Arnault of LVMH.

Back in Berlin, another proposed festival – which was postponed to April this year – further outlined this format as one that could see luxury brands attempt to meaningfully connect with consumers in a digital age, whether by performances, art installations or workshops. Titled Reference – a collaborative effort between the cult German fashion magazine 032c and Berlin-based PR firm Reference Studios – the 24-hour event, to be held in an as-yet-undisclosed location, will include contributions by Gucci, Stefano Pilati and GmbH, the youthful, rave-inspired brand that shows at Paris Fashion Week.

Fashion mimicking streetwear is nothing new. In fact, it's something that has become increasingly common in recent years, with the dawning realisation that luxury brands cannot simply ensconce themselves in ivory towers, that those down below, the kids, are their consumers of not only tomorrow but, as the lines that accompanied the Louis Vuitton x Supreme drops of 2017 showed, the consumers of right now. Fashion has often sold the idea of youth, but rarely has it had to contend with the idea of actually selling to youths.

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Festivals such as Bread&&Butter or ComplexCon are, in theory, a good way of doing that. You can host DJing workshops, like the workwear-inspired brand Carhartt WIP did at Bread&&Butter, with people from the independent online London radio station NTS. You can put on creative workshops, like Virgil Abloh did at the London launch of The Ten collaboration with Nike in 2017, with an event that took similar form to many of these bigger festivals. You can host panel talks that address real issues relating to creative work, where kids can learn from those who have been there and done it. Also in 2017, at Bread&&Butter, model and activist Adwoa Aboah hosted an iteration of Gurls Talk. You can also literally just give money away in the hope kids like you.

Ostensibly, these are things where the consumer will “engage”, engendering a sense of loyalty to the particular brand by providing a memorable experience – and in the case of screen-printing workshops and the like, a memento of the occasion. In theory, at least. Whether it actually works like that is another matter. At 2016's ComplexCon, there was a well-placed eBay stall, where kids could take their newly purchased, event-exclusive products and immediately proceed to flip them online for a ridiculous mark-up. At these events, no matter which musician is playing or what activities there are to do, the product is still king. People queue, excessively. In the hypebeast world, queuing is a sort of rite of passage-slash-communal bonding session. All of it is in collective anticipation of the drop – the term coined to describe Supreme's weekly Thursday releases, where product is drip-fed to consumers, rather than the traditional seasonal method of one season arriving to replace the last.

The brands are the star attraction here, and the consumer is allowed to examine them up close, judging them on not simply their clothes, but their booth presentation, their music choices, how they choose to “engage”. It is, for most in attendance, the kind of peek behind the curtain that, up until now, had typically been reserved for buyers and press. But this hyper-demystification may have some adverse effects in the long term for brands – there's a thin line between engaging with a new consumer and coming off as desperate. And the cultural experience that these events are often sold as often seems more cold and calculating. It's notable that Supreme, the one brand that still inspires the greatest amount of devotion in this world, thanks to its achingly aloof approach for the best part of three decades, has chosen not to attend any of these festivals. Neither has Palace, the only brand who can arguably rival Supreme in the hype stakes.

Back at Bread&&Butter, the one queue that was not for a brand's product or “activations” was for the Friday's guest performer, Lauryn Hill. But it was one that began two hours before the performance, and while, for many seasoned queuers in attendance, this was nothing, I instead chose to leave. I walked round the side of the venue and out onto the main street, where a crowd of about two or three hundred had gathered. The fence that was supposed to obscure the view of Hill's live performance was only 6ft tall; everyone could watch, even those who hadn't paid or queued for the privilege of getting up close and personal to the enigmatic songstress. She moved on to Ex-Factor, from her 1998 debut solo album, and at once the crowd outside began to bob and sway. We felt like we were sneaking a peak when we shouldn't be, catching a glimpse of Hill's magnetism rather than queuing to examine it up close. Of an event engineered to provide spontaneous cultural moments, this felt like the first real one. And somehow, it felt more special to be on the outside looking in. ●

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