

15TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

TANK



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HAROLD KODA TALKS TO ELETTRA WIEDEMANN

As curator in charge of the Costume Institute at the Met, it is no surprise that Harold Koda's knowledge of fashion is encyclopaedic. He is equally enthusiastic about historic couture pieces and contemporary street style. For Koda, who also has a graduate degree from Harvard in landscape architecture, fashion is a complex language that reflects larger social, political and economic dynamics. In the spring, he met Elettra Wiedemann at the Met's "Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity" exhibition, where they discussed the dresses and paintings on show and the connections between them, touching on how the French industrial revolution affected clothes and style, creating notions of "leisure time" and "leisure space" that resonate to this day.

ELETTRA WIEDEMANN: I was wondering, what's the first thing you noticed about the dresses?

HAROLD KODA: Well, for me, what's interesting is what survives and what doesn't. When we're trying to put together selections for the paintings curator, so many of the images which also appear in fashion plates, similar dresses, don't survive. So the first thing that comes to mind is that maybe these were extraordinary dresses. But that doesn't seem to be the case. They were just dresses that existed, that were popularly embraced. Once the styles changed they might be pulled apart: in the 1860s there was enough fabric that you could reconstitute something else, make a jacket out of the skirt, if the textile was still fashionable. People always say: "My God, the waists are so small", but usually the small things are the ones that survive. If you're a larger size, it's possible to pass it down to someone else and cut it down. If something is very, very small, it can't be reinterpreted for another person. Things like the shoes, they're tiny, but not all women had tiny feet.

EW: My answer was much more lowbrow! I thought it had to do with the pre-industrial food system, that people weren't growing as much because they weren't fed as well?

HK: No, in fact, in the 18th century, there was already a larger population expansion, precisely because there were larger food resources, with the slow progress of industrialisation, even in terms of farm equipment, seeding practice, all that stuff. As that was happening, you were getting more and more middle-class people – so people weren't necessarily tiny. What's interesting is this very clever thing that happens in the 1860s, which is the waistline is raised to the lower rib cage, and if you think about where you get fat, it's below that point. It also allows you to create the sense of a long, more voluminous lower body, so it makes your torso seem much smaller.

EW: Do you know where the hoop skirt originated? Why did this style endure for so long?

HK: In the 19th century there is all this technical innovation at all levels of production. Until the 1850s, the way you increased the volume of your skirt was either corded petticoats, where you had trapunto rope-like tiers so they held themselves out; or you wore layers of very starched ruffled under-petticoats. No matter how light it is, especially if it's starched cotton, it's still cumbersome and heavy. And so to expand that volume even further, someone made the innovation of a hoop. In fashion lore, it's Charles Frederick Worth. But in fact it's more likely that he had someone come up with the mechanism to create a very light, expansive silhouette. Once that happens, a lot of engineers go into designing hoops of varying sizes and



CLAUDE MONET *LUNCHEON ON THE GRASS*. MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS (1865–66)

material and presenting them at international exhibitions. Frequently you'll find a box and it says: "Grand Prix at the Exposition of 1867", or something like that.

EW: Another thing I noticed is that through the 1860s to 1890s, women's fashion started changing a lot. But men's stayed pretty stagnant. Even to this day, I would say, there is a huge difference between how women used to dress then and now, and men are... pretty much the same. Why do you think that is?

HK: Women's clothing is always more emphatically subject to trend. The one thing that happens with men is, no matter what culture, what period, especially in the upper classes, they have to be more mobile, more physically active, that's their role. Women on the other hand, upper-class women, are relegated to a less physical, leisure role, so they can be encumbered. Men have to go to court,

they have businesses, they're expected to go hunting. Women weren't required to. Their role allowed for them to be more decorative.

EW: And certainly women's roles have changed more dramatically in the last hundred years than men's...

HK: Yes. But still, now fashion is so eclectic and heterogeneous that you don't see these really strong gender typologies – men look this way, women that way. I'm seeing young guys on the streets with skirts. Which I've never seen before. It's been proposed so many times, and for the first time I actually see men who are wearing a skirt over tights or trousers. I mean beyond Marc Jacobs. It's rare, but it suggests that we're at a moment

unkept nature. In fact, it's cultivated nature that's meant to look like the landscape *à l'anglaise*, which was becoming a continental style. One can have very prosaic reasons for that happening: it's harder to maintain the French style, hordes of gardeners to clip it and constantly change the beds. But it's interesting that it occurs at the same time as industrialisation. As many agrarian workers are made redundant because of machines taking their place in the fields, they become more and more involved in manufacturing and concentrated in these urban centres. At the same time, you have someone like Rousseau writing about the intrinsic good of nature and innocence; there's a philosophy percolating through this whole trajectory of industrialisation that says: "Oh no, but we have to preserve nature as it is because that's good for you." What's interesting about the Impressionists is, when you look at what the academic painters are doing, they're also painting fashion, but they're using renowned models, professional models. What the Impressionists are doing is more like Instagramming. They're doing pictorial snapshots of their own life. It's their friends. In fact, when you look from that painting, right next to it you see characters in that painting wearing the same clothes in the other painting, because these are just – it's the fabric of their life.

EW: Is it fair to say that there are parallels between the social media revolution of our time and what's happening in this era, in the sense that they are ordinary people and ordinary activities elevated to high art?

HK: Yes, though when you have a handful of artists in Paris who are avant-gardist, it's different from photographing your dinner and sending it to your friends! (Laughs.) There's something about documenting what are considered the mundane aspects of your life that in a way celebrates that life, which really is the same impulse. What's different with what's happening now is that something we record on our own and share with friends can be broadcast in a way that is absolutely uncontrolled and huge. You have to understand that at the time these painters had their salons, they'd look at each other's paintings and an elite would see them, but it's not the same kind of immediate sharing of an idea or a narrative about yourself that you have now. In terms of fashion, what is similar is that these changes could happen so quickly because technological advances allowed for the production of the printed image on a wide scale. You had fashion publications, newspapers that could do really incredible engravings to describe a new style and disseminate a trend very quickly. Before that it was very much restricted and aristocratic. So suddenly you have a popular way of dispensing this kind of imagery. What's happened recently that I think is a similar kind of phenomenon is fashion bloggers. You can have someone who is not a professional, an engaged amateur, being able to edit the world and then broadcast that.

RAMI FAROOK TALKS TO SHUMON BASAR

Back in the first decade of the 21st century, Dubai accelerated towards a future that never came. One thing missing from the masterplan was culture. To the mercantile-minded powers of Dubai, culture didn't lend itself to fast monetisation. It was left to a young generation, in their 20s, who had grown up there and witnessed its transformations at first hand. They built the foundations for art, design and music that might match the aspirational malls and mansions. Few were trained to do this, so a core of amateurs quickly coagulated and became professional culture producers. Rami Farook is one of the few Emiratis in this pioneering group, and his presence over the last six years has been as significant as it is soothing. Editor-at-Large Shumon Basar talks to him about the phases of his creative curiosity, his contribution to Dubai's change and whether the Gulf can imagine a post-oil future.

Shumon Basar: In 2007, you set up Traffic, in what would be the first of its incarnations: you introduced high-end designer furniture by Zaha Hadid, Konstantin Grcic and others at a time when these names meant very little to all but a handful of people in the Arab world. Where did your idea come from?

Rami Farook: In 2006 I needed furniture and quickly realised that there wasn't much to choose from in Dubai. I went on a quest to learn more about the industry, fell in love with it and brought it home. That evolved in 2008 when we set up a multi-disciplinary studio for public spaces and installations, then in 2010 launched our design label, LOCAL.

SB: There was a strong sense that Dubai's immediate future was up for grabs. Especially when it came to art, design, fashion. Your generation were only in their 20s but very quickly managed to lay significant cultural foundations.

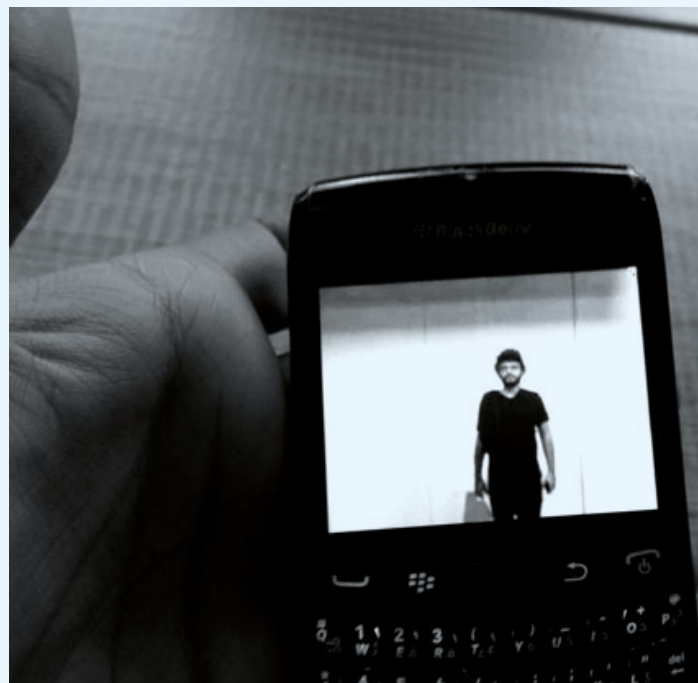
RF: Yes, I was fortunate to have pioneers around me, like The Third Line, one of the first contemporary art galleries here, and the event agency 9714. Most of us had grown up here, lived abroad and then come back to build the city we wanted.

SB: Traffic's next incarnation was as a commercial gallery. Around the same time you began to practise as an artist. What accounted for the shift from design to visual art? And, given that there were so many new commercial galleries opening just before the crash, why did this feel like the right thing to do?

RF: In the summer of 2008 James Clar, an American artist who had moved to Dubai the year before, approached me for a six-month studio residency at Traffic. His studio was stuck to my office, so we worked very closely. After the six months he asked me to "represent" him. As a gallery, Traffic

participated in Art Dubai 2010 with our only artist, and the response was encouraging. Other friends then approached me to represent them and I happily accepted. This required concentration, especially since I had just become a single father of two, so I decided to focus on visual art and pause design. In early 2011 I started practising as an artist and in late 2011 I quit dealing art. All these trips seemed right at the time. I was curious.

SB: You set up the Farook Collection and amassed a significant number of contemporary works from the Middle East, but also by western artists. Institutional collections are meant to represent eras as equally as they can. Personal collections reveal the character of the collector. Where did your



collection fall on that spectrum?

RF: It fell on the personal side. When I first started buying art it wasn't with the goal of building a collection. Three years into it there were around a hundred pieces that seemed to flow, and then for two years after that I went on a mission to build a family collection. I then started curating socio-historical exhibitions under the banner of "The State". The series ran from November 2010 to April 2012, alongside commercial exhibitions, musical performances and other pop-ups. Thematically, they dealt with post-9/11 fear, the economic crisis, insurrection and hegemony. Looking back at this experience, I think I attempted to use art as a form of mass communication when I could have just started a blog. I stopped collecting more than a year ago now, and carry a lot of guilt for the money, time and space that could have been better allocated.

SB: The clichés of art in the Gulf used

to be calligraphy and homages to beloved animals. There isn't – allegedly – an indigenous school of conceptualism. How would you describe your own work as an artist?

RF: My work deals with monitoring, the impulse to observe, report and intervene. It investigates the responsibility of a witness or knowledge bearer. I attempt to capture societies and cultures at a given moment and place in history by showing possibilities, developing proposals, and sending warning signals where needed, using words, sounds and images. In the past year I have exhibited around 150 short films and published two books. Inshallah, these and more will be available for free online soon. My son thinks I'm an artist-scientist but I'd like to be a journalist-psychologist.

building four nuclear plants, Abu Dhabi completing a 100-megawatt solar park and Dubai working on a 1,000-megawatt one. Reports say that Saudi will be running out of crude for export by 2030, and coincidentally they're building 16 nuclear plants with China, to be completed by 2031, and 41,000 megawatts of solar by 2032. OPEC's demand has also been falling because of America's shale gas. Let's see.

SB: Just three to four years after the global financial crisis destroyed Dubai's infamous dreams of being the world's "Number One", there's been a lot of talk about its strident return. Some say Dubai gains when other parts of the Middle East – Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Egypt – are in chaos. Have you felt this mood of a new beginning?

RF: It seems more like an adjusted continuation than a new beginning. Well-off refugees have made Dubai their home, stocks and real estate are doing well, paused projects and some new ones are on the go, tourism is king. Dubai 2020 Expo is in the air, banks are calling to offer debt for your debt, Ramadan tents were full during summer, 72 per cent of the youth of Arabia want to live and work here, humanitarian and community initiatives are popping up. It's all around us.

SB: You were the only place in the UAE to sell American and Continental theory (Baudrillard, The Invisible Committee). Can you picture theory beginning to influence life there, especially since so much of it is inherently anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist?

RF: I'm looking forward to how the kids react to our current UAE in the coming decades. I think theory can influence life here, but it might have to be summarised to Facebook-sized posts by high school kids first.

SB: You spent a considerable amount of time in Kerala, India, last year. What was it that continued to draw you there? And how did the rest of the world seem from that vantage point?

RF: My first visit was in June 2012 and was hosted by the Kochi-Muziris Biennale crew, who then took me to Bangalore and Bombay. For someone who lives in Dubai, travels a lot to Europe and studied in the States, India was a new frontier. Over the past year I've befriended and worked with people in advertising, art, mechanics, IT and NGOs. I felt so at home, especially in Fort Kochi, that I considered moving there. I also saw a lot of potential and purpose. We're currently developing our gravitational power plant there, so that keeps taking me back, but we also intend to set up a 24-hour emergency kids' clinic and other social projects.

SB: If P.E.A.C.E. is an acronym, what do you think it could stand for?

RF: Please Endure Aggravated Conspiracy Evocations.