



# THE NEW YORK OBSERVER



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"It would be so hard for me to wear a brand," said Ken Tanabe, a 27-year-old designer with a slim build and friendly eyes. Like so many twentysomething Parsons grads/frustrated musicians/Williamsburg residents, Mr. Tanabe makes a living "making brands." He's designed logos for WorldCom and animated Web movies for MTV and MAC cosmetics.

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But Mr. Tanabe's body is brand-free. The D.C. native, who is of Japanese-Belgian descent, buys sneakers by the obscure Italian label Fessura, clothes from the East Village store Ohmash, and swears he hasn't worn a brand since the Doc Martens era of high school. "My wardrobe," he said, "is actually pretty *Pattern Recognition*."

*Pattern Recognition*, now two years old, was the first straight fiction novel by renowned sci-fi author William Gibson, about a "cool hunter" named Cayce Pollard who is allergic to fashion. Her authenticity radar—precisely what makes her an apt marketer—also renders her woozy at the sight of brand logos, particularly the Michelin Man or a Tommy Hilfiger rack. To protect herself, she dresses exclusively in what her ex-boyfriend dubs "CPUs" or Cayce Pollard Units: unbranded, unadorned and ageless items in black, white and gray with all the labels and logos torn, razor-bladed or rubbed off. The book sold decently, but its real influence lurks in the minds and consumption patterns of its readers: Many of the same people who disliked Mr. Gibson's attempt to strip the "science" from his "science fiction" also surreptitiously use *Pattern Recognition* as a fashion Bible.



NEW YORK WORLD

**'Is there any way to rent a double-decker bus in New York? Is that feasible?'— Hunter S. Thompson**

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"I do wear logoless clothes as my default," said Seth Stevenson, a *Slate* and *New York Times* magazine contributor who studies marketing. Mr. Stevenson wasn't a fan of *Pattern Recognition*; nevertheless, he readily admits to cutting the labels off clothing, most recently from a North Face jacket given to him as a holiday gift. The Gibson novel, while ultimately in his eyes a "failure," made him think harder about brand choices (though he decided against removing the New Balance "N" from his sneakers). "The idea of her character," he said, "was actually brilliant."

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Mr. Stevenson is one of many writers, designers, marketers and generally over-observant city dwellers who have come to view "coolhunting" as a significant, if unfortunate, part of their job descriptions. It all started with Malcolm Gladwell's 1997 *New Yorker* story, "The Coolhunt," about a couple of marketers paid by clothing companies to keep abreast of "trend-setting" teenagers in urban high schools. Last year Scott Westerfeld, a science-fiction writer, published a young-adult novel, *So Yesterday*, about a 17-year-old coolhunter named "Hunter," who's employed by a giant sneaker company but finds himself relating to what he calls the "Logo Exiles"—kids who are, like Cayce, turned off by logos and marketing.

Such teens and twentysomethings are increasingly common in New York, said Matt Marcus, a 32-year-old "trend strategist." In fact, the students of his "Cool Hunting" class at Parson's School of Design last semester started noticing so many fastidiously inconspicuous types, they gave the consumer class a name: "Easy Street."

"They know what's up, they just choose not to participate," Mr. Marcus said. "The American Apparels of this world exploit that image."

John Harvey, a Jersey City painter and sometime filmmaker with a day job animating promotional spots for the Soho firm EyeballNYC, has found himself taking the "Easy Street" in recent years. As with Cayce, a near-autistic awareness of trends in fashion, design and marketing are part of Mr. Harvey's vocation, and arguably his genetic makeup. He seeks solace in unbranded gray and black clothes. But the impetus to boycott color and logos should not be confused with some sort of Naomi Klein-inspired anti-corporate rebellion, Mr. Harvey cautioned. Rather, it's mere exhaustion.

"When you're in design and your whole life is coming up with this stupid crap, floral patterns and whatnot, you just can't handle it—you need to cut it out," he

said.

Mr. Harvey, 32, admits he couldn't help but make a fashion muse out of Mr. Gibson's fictional Cayce. "After I read the book, I remember Googling her jacket," he said, referring to the Japanese Buzz Rickson's military jacket that Pollard wears throughout the novel. "I wanted that jacket."

Mr. Harvey has fallen off the anti-brandwagon before; a few weekends ago, he shelled out \$190 for a pair of pony-hair-adorned sneakers at the new boutique in Soho that sells clothes by the Japanese label A Bathing Ape (or Bape, for short).

"I don't really wear the Bape shoes," he said. "You can't just wear them around."

Josh Rubin, the Soho-based designer behind the Web site Josh Rubin: Cool Hunting, said that *Pattern Recognition* didn't so much change his behavior or buying habits as it provided a "label" for his madness. Mr. Rubin said he experiences a "gut response" to logos.

"I'll be razor-blading off a label and think, 'That's so Cayce Pollard,'" he said. "Like the other day, I cut out the embroidery of a logo off my snowboarding bag. It was just this small company's name in cursive with a little swooshy thing, and it looked so bad, it just offended me."

Mr. Rubin's personal nemesis is the revived logo Von Dutch, recently popularized by the likes of Paris Hilton and Justin Timberlake. "I'm not sure I've gotten physically ill or wanted to vomit ... but I don't understand it," he said. "It doesn't resonate or make sense to me in any way. I definitely have the recoiling thing with Von Dutch."

Like many such coolhunters, New York trend watcher Faith Popcorn, who prefers the title "futurist," was struck by the similarities between Cayce and herself. "Not only does she have an intuitive reaction to bad branding, her father was in the C.I.A.," she said. "And my father was in the C.I.A.!"

Ms. Popcorn, who calls *Pattern Recognition* her "favorite book," even employs a Cayce Pollardesque dress code at her trend-forecasting firm, BrainReserve: There are no visible brands, patterns, colors or loud jewelry allowed. BrainReservists are allowed to dress out of code on Fridays, but Ms. Popcorn (real name: Faith Plotkin) said they usually show up in code anyway.

"People just feel better in black—and when that's all they have, it becomes comfortable," she added.

A former Reservist, who requested anonymity, was hesitant to laud the BrainReserve dress code, but agreed that being so intimately involved in evaluating and carrying out guerrilla marketing campaigns had made her appreciate the purity of clothes that hadn't been marketed to her.

"Once you know how the whole branding machine works, you just hate it," the former Reservist said. "I'm totally allergic."

Ms. Popcorn herself has no need to sandpaper the labels off her clothing: Her wardrobe consists entirely of black Issey Miyake and Giorgio Armani (her dog is named Miyake). But she rattled off seven trends that *Pattern Recognition*-style dressing was consistent with, among them "icon toppling" and "rip and stitch," before finally concluding: "People are just sick of it."

What people are sick of, said Mr. Marcus, the Parson's professor of coolhunting, is Malcolm Gladwell—or at least Malcolm Gladwell-inspired marketing campaigns. Mr. Marcus traces his own "subdued," mostly monochrome sartorial tendencies to the day he first heard a word to describe what he did—the day he read Mr. Gladwell's *New Yorker* article.

"Malcolm Gladwell defining the way trends start and spread destroyed the whole thing, because it created companies and pundits and people, like myself, who are paid to create trends that way," he said. "Now it's everywhere. Even the President, when he paid that guy to write about his 'No Child Left Behind' policies—that's whisper marketing. So you naturally no longer want to be a part of it." Mr. Marcus added that his wardrobe these days tends toward anonymous black H. and M. pieces.

To some, of course, the appeal of the code of Cayce isn't so complex.

"There's a reason black is black," said Chris Garvin, a design professor and *Pattern Recognition* fan. "It's easier to take care of. It goes with everything. Cayce Pollard had taste."

Not every jaded designer who eschews colors and logos is reacting to something; for some, the act of dressing colorlessly and brandlessly is simply common sense.

"I dress like Einstein dressed: gray sweater, gray pants. It is a sign of intelligence," declared Zoran, the mononymic designer whose zipper- and button-free black-and-gray collections have been cult hits at Saks for 30 years. In Zoran's view, Madame Jiang Qing, the late wife of Mao Zedong who imposed the navy blue "Mao suit" uniform upon the People's Republic of China, is the quintessential fashion icon.

"She got a billion people to dress in that outfit, and they looked great! Now you go to China and they are all so confused," he said from Milan, where he keeps one of his four houses. To Zoran, simplicity of dress denotes security, whereas colors and pattern indicate that a person—particularly a woman—is insecure and confused, that her priorities are out of order.

"Just look at the subway," he said. "Look at all the women on the subway dressing for each other, dressed like *Sex and the City*, like Barbie dolls. They look great, and then they go home and they eat spam for dinner!"

Indeed, Ms. Popcorn-Plotkin concurred, "I've noticed the *Desperate Housewives* all wear very glitzy clothing—maybe because they're not very Zen."

Of course, these days it can involve as much aggravation to dress in Cayce Pollard Units as it does to look like a desperate housewife. While most amateur and professional coolhunters had taken the simple brand-removal step of switching their iPods' white "earbuds" for black ones, no one had gone so far as to sandpaper the buttons of his Levis buttons, as Mr. Gibson describes Cayce doing.

Alex Wipperfürth, a San Francisco-based marketer and author of the new book *Brand Hijack*, who confessed to a "huge crush on Cayce," bemoaned the effort it required to sandpaper the G-Star logo off his new jeans. (To be sure, though, his girlfriend was sandpapering them for him.)

Really the only way out of the brandosphere, said Mr. Rubin the coolhunter, is "buying your own goat. Or moving to Amish country."

—Maureen Tkacik

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## Memories of Mr. Thompson

It was 1996; I'd heard about a party on the Upper East Side celebrating the 25th anniversary of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and I decided to crash. I bumped into the movie star Johnny Depp and his date, the glamorous supermodel Kate Moss, at the coat check; I followed them up a staircase, but the bouncers told me to scram. I spotted rock star Mick Jagger whooping it up with *Rolling Stone* publisher Jann Wenner and the dapper best-selling author Tom Wolfe.

I loitered outside. All of a sudden, Hunter Thompson (banana-shaped canvas hat, aviator shades, blue blazer, satanic-looking medallion, shorts, sneakers, drink in hand) appeared. I introduced myself. He smacked me on top of my head with a

wooden mallet, then climbed into the back seat of a Mercedes-Benz with a floozy for awhile. When they exited, the floozy yelled at me, saying I couldn't come inside and that I was "going to burn out!" Eventually, I was allowed in and tried to interview Mr. Thompson. A security guy appeared and gave me a warning.

"He's O.K.—he's from Kansas!" the actor Matt Dillon said in my defense. But then a bouncer confiscated the batteries from my tape recorder.

"Paranoia!" Kate Moss said with a smile.

In 1997, I attended a party for Mr. Thompson's first collection of letters, *The Proud Highway*. *NBC Nightly News* anchor Tom Brokaw told me a Hunter story: "Hunter used to come to Washington and go on all these all-night drinking binges with Pat Buchanan. And he called Buchanan the greatest right-wing propagandist since Goebbels."

Sexy chanteuse Phoebe Legere had been chatting with the guest of honor. "I told him, 'Hunter, this is your shining hour, this is your great moment—this is wonderful,'" she said. "And he said, 'But why do I still feel so miserable?'"

Ms. Legere had just spent three days at his ranch in Woody Creek, Colo., and had a peacock feather in her hair as a souvenir. "I think he has some nerve damage in the muscles of his mouth, but I don't think the mind has been affected," she said. "He's the smartest person I know and the most perceptive, and so sensitive and so articulate that I'd go anywhere to just talk to him for 10 minutes."

How did she get to know him so well?

"I give a very good blowjob."

Mr. Thompson got onstage, said he was overwhelmed by the reception and that the publication of his letters was tantamount to "eating a bunch of acid ... So here I am," he said. "Hanging more or less together, right now. But you never know—tomorrow's always a different day."

In 1998, I talked to Mr. Thompson on the phone before he gave a reading in New York from his novel, *The Rum Diary*. His friend Earl Biss, the famous American-Indian artist, had just died at 51.

"Went out easy, that fucker," Mr. Thompson told me. "He was a wild boy. He's been under arrest ever since I've known him, and so have I. The last time, he punched out the teeth of a cop. Earl was wonderful when he was alive, but now that he's dead, he's really caused us a lot of trouble."

I said I was sorry about his Indian pal, then asked him if it was a good thing that my girlfriend had just purchased an electronic 'Lady Bug' to use during intercourse. "Absolutely—it's a *very* good thing," he assured me. "I know the Lady Bug. You happened to have stumbled across a subject I know very well. I guarantee the Lady Bug is good for you, me, your girlfriend, for mankind in general."

I asked what would happen after his appearance at Barnes and Noble.

"Let me ask you something," he said. "I'm just about to call Plimpton to see if he can arrange this. I was thinking that is there any way to rent a double-decker bus in New York? Is that feasible? I would think so. I think it would be a very visible target, and therefore we'd have to have some entertainment on top—maybe some live naked dancers. Simon and Schuster will pay for this. We'll force this on them. There *will* be a double-decker bus."

I found a rentable double-decker bus and called him back. But he'd decided perhaps it wasn't the best idea.

In 2003, I went to Mr. Thompson's suite at the Carlyle Hotel. He'd just finished a week of promoting his latest book, *Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Final Days of the American Century*. He looked worn-out. Chinese food was everywhere. He was drinking an Italian liqueur, a "hangover remedy" he said he'd heard about from Sean Penn. Facing him on a table was the head of a pretty mannequin.

"C'mere, you little beauty," he said, kissing "Lisa" on the lips. His pretty wife Anita laughed.

He said he wouldn't be coming back to New York for a while. "The no-smoking law is bad enough," he said. "Did you say you could possibly get me some weed? Speaking of that, Anita, where are those joints? It's just the same old story: I've been eking out a joint or two a day, but Jesus Christ, it's really annoying. They always say, 'Don't travel with drugs! Are you nuts? Don't worry, we have plenty—all you need. You can get *anything* in New York.' This is probably the first time I've been here I had to think more than once about any kind of drug. Speaking of that, I've had an incredible time buying a pipe in this town."

Mr. Thompson put some pot into a pipe and took a long hit. "I know, not moderate," he said.

Then an old friend, the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer William Kennedy, showed

up.

Mr. Thompson turned to me and said, "Time's up."

—George Gurley

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### Protesting at *The Gates*

For years, my friend George has been complaining: "Why doesn't anyone protest the treatment of the detainees at Guantánamo Bay?"

One day I answered, "Why don't we do it?"

George hesitantly agreed.

So on Monday, Presidents' Day, George and I met on the F train and rode to Columbus Circle. George had a sign, RESTORE DUE PROCESS, and I made a sign: GUANTANAMO SHAME. I had printed out an essay from the Internet written by Vanessa Redgrave called "Guantánamo's Torture Regime Is a Shameful Disgrace" to show to anyone who was curious. This was our Celebrity Endorsement.

We got out at Columbus Circle and stood around the tent selling souvenirs of *The Gates*. A man with a 10-year-old son walked up to us: "How long did it take to make your signs?"

We told him.

"What was the last sign you carried?" he persisted.

George couldn't remember if he'd had a sign while protesting the Republican National Convention. All I could remember was that mine was in French.

Our questioner continued asking about signs and finally said: "Thank you for letting me stand in your radiance." Then he and his silent son left.

"Was he an undercover cop?" George asked me.

"No, he was a right-winger who was charmed by us," I answered.

"But is that enough—to personally charm the right?" George replied.

"Yes," I said.

A young African-American woman stopped. "Do you have a Web site?" she asked.

"No, we're just two friends," I explained. Then I showed her the one copy of our flier: "But if you want to see this essay, just Google 'Vanessa Redgrave' and 'torture.'"

She thanked us and left.

"It's time for us to begin our march," George announced.

We began walking uptown, through *The Gates*. Almost immediately, we met a man dressed in a bright orange cap, orange coat and orange pants. "Is this your *Gates* outfit?" I asked him.

"Yes," he replied, modeling it for us.

He told us he was born in a village in northern Burma but now lives in the Bronx. "Do you support Aung San Suu Kyi?" I asked.

"Of course, of course," he answered. "She won the Nobel Peace Prize!"

I explained our demonstration to him. "What do you expect when you elect a stupid cowboy to be President?" he observed.

George and I continued our march. When people stared at us, I would explain our mission. One man shrugged his shoulders and gave a helpless look, which reminded me of the joke one sees in jokebooks for 12-year-olds:

Teacher: "Who signed the Declaration of Independence?"

Student in back row: "Not me!"

We met one political adversary—a man with two small sons.

"We have to fight!" he said in a thick Eastern European accent. "There are bad people, and we have to fight!"

"But we must stay within the law," George replied.

"There is no more law!" the man countered.

"Yes, there is," said George.

George and I came to two men holding poles with tennis balls attached to the end. They wore *The Gates* sweatshirts.

"What are those sticks for?" I asked.

"Those are to untangle the curtains if they get twisted."

"We're waiting for a wind," said the other one.

"Are you making \$6.50 an hour?" I asked.

"Actually, \$6.25," one of them answered.

"We started at \$5.75," the other volunteered, "but they raised it, because the city raised its minimum wage."

"Are Christo and Jean-Claude assholes?" I wondered.

"No," they're very nice," one of them said.


"That's what I heard," I said.

George and I turned to leave. "Wait a moment," I said. "Do those tools have names?"

"No, they're just poles with balls at the end," one of the men said.

George and I ended our protest. We agreed that we might have a second demonstration—and this time invite other people. (See this space for details.)

—Sparrow

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