



Akeem Smith, Detail of "Altarpiece," 2020, Color photographs, salvaged metal, steel. Image courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts.

# Styling for Social Media



Akeem Smith, Detail of "Centerpiece (Matches Lane)," 2020, Vintage photographs, color photographs, clothing, salvaged building material. Image courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts.

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Historically, the role of stylists and fashion editors has been to sell luxury goods through storytelling; delivering visual fantasies that imbue meaning and romance into expensive clothes. Today, this still holds true, yet new forces resulting from the rise of social media marketing have shifted the meaning of good taste, and what type of images hold value. In the era of Instagram, what matters most is how something looks on a pocket-sized screen—and fashion editors have had to adapt. It's the reason why we see so many big and brightly colored accessories (like those created by Daniel Lee for Bottega Veneta) on fashion feeds, and why everyone in our filter bubble appears to have a similar look. In the era of social networks, aesthetics are created to please the algorithm—and the algorithm loves bold and quirky outfits, and images that appeal to the lowest common denominator of taste.

The social media sphere is an accelerationist taste apparatus: it circulates desirable styles and personalities at greater speed than ever before. On Instagram, everyone is a fashion editor, only rather than taste-making, we're more likely to replicate one another's tastes in a fast-paced game of *who wore it best?* This is not only a reaction to the subliminal messaging that surfaces when we become glued to our personalized feeds, but also the result of data metrics: we post what we think will get us the most likes and follows. For some, this is a positive thing. Consumers are no longer beholden to costly trends proliferated by out-of-touch editors, and it is no longer only corporate-backed gatekeepers who dictate our sense of style. But this bottom-up approach to fashion (spearheaded by influencers who know better than anyone how to algorithmically appeal to the masses) has also caused a sort of mass hysteria, wherein many brands and fashion houses are no longer sartorial authors in the traditional sense, but rather amalgamators of data—machinic enterprises who create clothing according to analytics and consumer trends.

For stylists, overwhelming pressures to produce mimetic, or at least viral content, has led many to trade creativity for attention-seeking. Companies want to grow, sell, and continuously reinvigorate their brands, and publications and stylists (working within an increasingly precarious and competitive field)



Styling has always been about taste: constructing it, reinforcing it, and capitalizing on it. But how do we define good taste in an era where anyone can play the part of fashion editor?

have to produce marketable fashion spectacles if they want to get paid. Of course, this is nothing new for those working in the fashion industry (where permanent freelancing is the rule rather than the exception). Pressures to sell have always flowed in tandem with creativity both on the catwalk and in magazines, and obligations to create stand-out cover stories that sell out on newsstands are comparable to efforts to maximize the number of eyeballs on social media posts today (as the recent digital-first strategies of contemporary fashion media behemoths like Condé Nast attest to). What's different is access, not only to consumer data metrics but also to information. The internet has gifted creatives with new channels for inspiration (Instagram, Pinterest, Vogue Runway), but when everyone is being fed similar images on social media feeds, impressing consumers is harder than ever before. Unless you're pandering to accessible, influencer-led trends, or promoting something bold, weird, and controversial, it's nearly impossible to get attention online—and no one understands this better than high fashion stylists.

Today's most impactful fashion imagery falls under the category of what I like to call "cringecore": memetic, near-satirical styling that simultaneously repels and draws in viewers. In other words: outrageous looks that stand out on Instagram. The most obvious iteration of this is the lasting phenomenon spearheaded by *DIS Magazine* (2010-2018) and their stock photography sub-site *DIS Images*, whose online editorials became notorious for their ironic yet earnest interpretations of late capitalist society—like a photoshoot with Madison Beer featuring a yellow croc as a cell-phone holder, and a bottle of ranch dressing on a leash. Stylists like Avena Gallagher (TELFAR, *Buffalo Zine*, and an early collaborator of DIS) carry this torch with a slightly more accessible spin, fusing couture and lowbrow culture to create a fitting formula for our hypervisual and hyper-capitalist world. "I try to obscure things so the "style" or "styling" isn't so visible or it's not so obvious," Gallagher told *Teen Vogue* in a recent interview. "Maybe it's more interesting when it doesn't look perfect or, like, you're confused about what this person is projecting. Then you linger more, you wonder about them more."<sup>01</sup>

Of course fashion embracing the weird isn't unique to the age of social media. Independent magazines like *Purple Fashion*, *i-D*, and *The Face* have long challenged normative styling, commissioning artists-cum-stylists like

01 Shriya Samavai Manian, "An Interview With Eckhaus Latta and Telfar Stylist Avena Gallagher" in *Teen Vogue*. → [teenvogue.com](https://www.teenvogue.com)



Akeem Smith, Detail of "Centerpiece (White Lane)," 2020, Vintage photographs, color photographs, clothing, salvaged building material. Image courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts.



Detail of Akeem Smith, "Centerpiece no. 4, Untitled," 2020, Vintage photographs, color photographs, clothing, salvaged building material, foam, wood. Image courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts.



Bernadette Corporation to fuse art and fashion, and elevating the everyday through editorials both edgy and provocatively mundane. At their earliest and most radical, fashion zine *i-D* used the slogan “create, don’t imitate” to go along with street style editorials of punks in hand-made clothes. Even mainstream publications like *Italian Vogue* have over the last two decades dabbled in the weird and outright inappropriate, receiving their fair share of both praise and criticism for “controversial” editorials (including those of supermodels in black face), yet their bizarreness can be read as thematic more so than semiotic (*An editorial about oil spills!* [August 2010] *Botched plastic surgery but make it fashion!* [July 2005]). Cringecore, rather, upends the very tools and vocabulary of fashion styling, moves sideways, or makes them implode. In the age of social media, when it’s hard to impress anyone with an original idea (however well-produced), controversy and quirky aesthetics are increasingly the norm, not the exception.

Today stylists work to provoke people by creating uncanny imagery, like bald models in black-out lenses on the Rick Owens’ Fall 2019 RTW runway (consulted by alien-like teen-influencer @salvjia), or models walking backwards on the catwalk at Colina Strada SS20 (styled and creative directed by Charlie Engman). This phenomenon is most loudly embodied by Instagram-famous stylists-cum-consultants like Lotta Volkova, who’s best known for creating Soviet-inspired streetwear with Demna Gvasalia at Vetements, and later imagining a dystopian corporate future at Balenciaga. For Volkova, taste is enmeshed in internet culture where mimetic silhouettes, SFX juvderm lips, and flooded runways contribute to the virality of her work. This is made clear on Volkova’s personal Instagram account (201k followers), where blurry selfies and high fashion campaigns are positioned next to photos of food and preternatural images, like one of a human ear photoshopped to look like the wing of a butterfly. All of these photos feed into the stylists oeuvre, acting as a chaotic stand-in for a portfolio while simultaneously positioning Volkova as a rarity in her field. Unsurprisingly, this strategy has trickled up to Balenciaga’s own feed, where photos of dogs in two thousand dollar boots shot by uncredited artists elicit anger from followers who expect to see glamorous images of high-priced handbags and Triple-S sneakers. This dichotomy between fashion followers who are “in the know” and those with more traditional understanding of good taste works to create controversy and buzz—the best PR tricks—and elevate the brand in



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Photographer Unknown, chromogenic print, date unknown, No Gyal Can Test Archive, Bequeathed to Akeem Smith. Image courtesy the artist and Red Bull Arts.

the eyes of those who have the money to indulge in luxury but want to feel like they are rebelling against it (the art world, for example, *loves Balenciaga*). Nevermind that there are hundreds of teenagers with a similar taste for and fluency in low-fi imagery (remember Tumblr?). Stylists-cum-consultants like Volkova are master curators, and know how to leverage the clout of a one-hundred-year-old company with the whims of the algorithm. For those less interested in the avant-garde, provocation comes through in more traditional—albeit contentious—imagery, like the stick-thin models strutting around a race track in sweatpants and boucle jackets for Heidi Slimane’s SS21 RTW Celine collection. The styling (by Slimane himself), appeals to the TikTok generation with clothes that look like they could be purchased on Fashion Nova, only this time the look is catering to a class of jet-setters very few of us can relate to, all while pandering to the idea of a more democratic sense of style. If fashion holds a mirror to the times, then brands like Philip Plein, Virgil Abloh’s Louis Vuitton, and Heidi Slimane’s Celine paint a nihilistic image of the present. Unlike Balenciaga’s corporate-backed “underground,” the provocation of these companies is the way in which they earnestly reflect the present by blatantly creating looks that appeal to the feed. If their work is interpreted as offensive or out-of-touch, it is intentionally so. In the era of social media, fashion is for everyone, and there’s no better way to appeal to the masses than by engaging in internet culture. That’s why Abloh puts fan-favorite Walter Van Bierendonck-inspired teddy bears on suits, and Slimane is willing to risk his reputation on overpriced fast fashion-inspired baseball caps and joggers. When sales are dictated by clicks and likes, the most valuable content is that with shock value, or images that appeal to the mainstream.

Fashion has always been an exercise in attention, the challenge being how to attract it without sacrificing taste. In an industry so reliant on web analytics, this task has become all the more difficult, particularly when most consumers are viewing editorials and runway collections on their phones. Today, the stakes are higher when it comes to earning clout or getting cancelled, and with tiny images and short, rarely read accompanying copy, nuance is often lost on viewers. For stylists, the struggle is to be loud, without creating

too much controversy. With this in mind, the cringecore-styling (including leather briefs and horned helmets) by Lotta Volkova for Matthew Williams’ first show at Givenchy, for example, wasn’t dissimilar to basic-bitchification of Prada leveraged by logofied blouses and kitten heels at the Raf Simons x Miuccia SS21 ready-to-wear show. Both proved to be highly mimetic, one for its absurdity and extravagance and the other for acting as the ideal product-pushing collection for the Zoom generation, but only one created a fantasy.

In the age of social media, the more grammable a look, the better, and stylists know how to play the feed. The best and most successful authors know how to pander to mainstream audiences while maintaining their voice and sense of taste, like artist-cum-stylist Akeem Smith, who is known for his revolutionary work with Hood by Air, and under-the-radar styling for major celebrities like Kim Kardashian. According to Smith, being a stylist is about world-building, and that means adapting to the times. “Now you have to think about if your image is going to look good on a phone,” Smith told me over FaceTime. “The technology has shaped the craft. I know other stylists in the same realm as me have to think about that. It’s just something I choose to be ignorant about.”

This is not to say that a stylist who once dressed the most influential fashion figure of the 21st century ignores the feed entirely, but rather that those who are responsible for the most iconic looks are those who are most aware of the system—and how to make it work for them. For Smith, not much has changed in terms of references or editorial limitations put in place by major brands. Rather, it’s one’s ability to continuously evolve within the ever-shifting frameworks that the fashion industry and consumer landscape places on stylists. “Fashion has always been about world-building,” Smith told me. “Only now it’s imagining the world how you want it to be, not how it is now.” ❄



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