

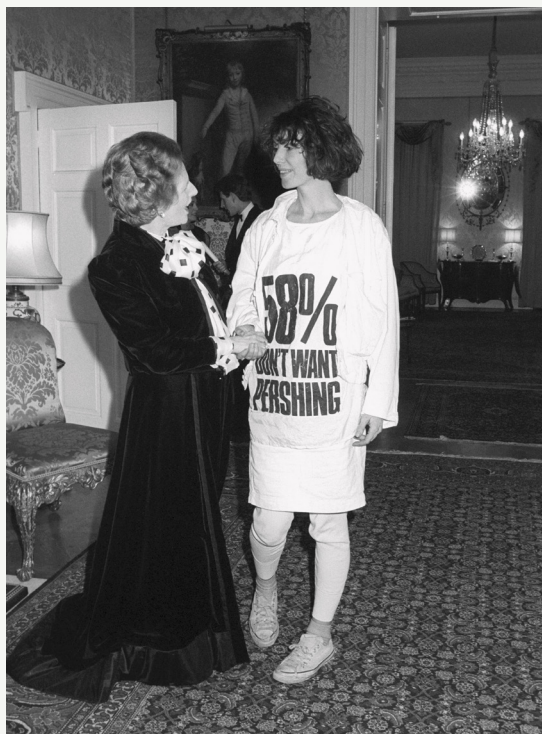


## KATHARINE HAMNETT

Words by Liucija Adomaite

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### Democracies Under Threat



More than thirty years ago Margaret Thatcher got seriously photobombed. Fashion designer Katharine Hamnett came to the reception for young fashion designers at Downing Street. As they shook the hands and got pictured smiling together, the world has witnessed the fearless moment of the subtle protest gesture. The plain white shirt '58% don't want Pershing' referring to the Prime Minister's decision to allow US pershing missiles be stationed in Britain despite the opposition of British citizens, could not be unseen. Just like Katharine Hamnett herself, who cannot be unheard after you have heard her, even if once.

Her bold, eye-catching designs and progressive fashion ethics brought her an international fame. Pop culture has been saturated with her slogan t-shirts, that been continually confronting the system and addressing its flaws as if torn straight from the picket sign and put on a blank silent garment. There's this belief in the iconography of words which claims that a written form has a power to change and to transform. Yet, Katherine seems to have become rather skeptical about it, as she confesses that "a stupid slogan" is too weak. Still, enthusiasm accompanied her first design, featuring the 'Choose Life' slogan. It was immediately picked by George Michael from the band Wham! in their hit music video *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go* (1984). 'Choose Life' also became the dark mantra of the movie *Trainspotting* (1996), but this time it was fused with the misery suffered by the fin-de-siècle generation who consciously chose not to choose it. Katherine's slogans are undoubtedly reactionary – they have been catching the imagination of generations that were all trapped in similar, if not the same questions. What can one say to crisis, right in the face?

Political activist, environmentalist and ethical fashion advocate, Katharine is more relevant than ever. I guess you can blame history, which takes heavy cultural artillery out of the treasure box during the hard times so that the ones who've already been there can lead a pack of miserable citizens. No wonder Katharine is a national British treasure. She fought against Brexit with her teeth out, but she admits that such fights, alongside feminism and many other initiatives we've seen in the past century, are nothing but failed projects. The lethal word 'failure' sends the chills down my spine. Can we afford to have any more failed projects after what we already had? Can we get over the fear of failure?

In the midst of an extreme right wing storm sweeping across the globe, Katharine has a plan to save our democracies. And it's based on believing in people. But if you want to follow that plan, you have to be strong – Katharine doesn't like chickens.

Liucija Adomaite: What was the fashion scene like back when you started?

Katharine Hamnett: Well, I started straight out of college so it was very different to what it's like now. We didn't know anything about the environment, we all wanted to be kind of rich and famous. It was much smaller. We were manufacturing in the UK. All of that changed hugely now. Manufacturing jobs have gone to China, the industry is huge. Most clothing is outsourced in horrendous conditions, but we didn't know anything about the environmental impact back then. It all looked pretty innocent. It's very different now. We know that the clothing industry is the largest industry in the world which is responsible for huge environmental destruction, and hundreds of millions of people – if you include cotton farmers and garment workers – are working in conditions of slavery. So from that very innocent industry in the 70s, it went to the living nightmare.

LA: Throughout your career, you have continually criticized the fashion industry for its destructive environmental impact and appalling working conditions, and yet you chose to participate in that very same industry as a fashion designer.

KH: When I went in I knew nothing. Nobody did. We thought it was very innocent. We didn't think of it as making guns or weapons, it was all harmless. What we learned since is that it's the opposite. If I knew what the fashion industry was like, I would have chosen a different career. But, you know, I love clothes, and people will always need clothes. I feel a moral obligation to make clothes in a way that doesn't harm the environment, pays people well, treats garment workers fairly, and tries to change the industry from within. From something so toxic to something more benign. In the end you need to educate consumers because they're our biggest allies. And people want to wear clothes without feeling guilty about it.

LA: Do you see your fashion designs as political activism, or vice versa – you dress your political agenda with clothes? Which one stands first for you?

KH: We have to have clothes. But it's hard to find properly made clothes that are not destroying everything and look acceptable, modern and cutting-edge. I've always been in love with fashion and textiles. And it's not all about wearing slogan t-shirts. A perfect white shirt needs to be made in high quality organic cotton and needs to be as sophisticated as if it was coming out from the top fashion houses. So they have to be beautiful and it's my job to make them so.

LA: If we go back to slogan shirts, many of them are embedded in our culture now. They share a universal message that surpasses cultural backgrounds and even time. So I was thinking, why are some things destined to go viral and others are dead before they even have a chance to be tested?

KH: Well, I was able to do them because they were very successful. We got more publicity coverage when we needed it to sell clothes. Because we were getting copied widely, I thought of it as an opportunity. It was wonderful that we were getting copied. So we thought that would be great if people would copy slogan t-shirts too, spreading our social and environmental messages across the world. But slogan t-shirts themselves aren't enough to affect the change.

LA: What is needed, then?

KH: There's a danger with marches and demonstrations. We think that because we got on a march or signed the petition, we immediately want a t-shirt. We believe that we have affected change, but we haven't. As we say in England, they have no teeth. The only thing that changes the behaviour of politicians is something that threatens their ability to get re-elected. Nothing will change until we threaten our elective representatives that we won't vote them the next time until they represent our views. High visibility is part of the process of change, but unless we employ co-activity demanding for our views to be represented – and that's what they're paid to do rather than take the decisions on their behalf – things will carry on. And not just as they are – things will go from bad to worse. So what we need is to up our game and to wake up as citizens.

LA: It seems that you put a lot of trust in people.



KH: No, but you can't trust them. You have to frighten them. They want us to cut fossil fuel and the government wants us to invest in renewable energy. So we have to change the laws and become politically active. We are very lazy since we had sixty years of peace which was brought by a very high cost – human suffering. This right wing in Europe at the moment means that we could be having to start wars again.

LA: The rhetorics of hate have reached new heights. The world seems to be enduring the post-apocalyptic state of being, post-Brexitian, post-Trumpian...

KH: Oh, it is horrible. I mean, we still can't believe it. We've done *Cancel Brexit* t-shirts. At least here in England it wasn't racist vote, it was the vote because people were promised that 345 million a day wouldn't go to Brussels, but would be spent on house service. And we were lied to. We prayed to God that Brexit fell apart.

LA: There were a lot of active endeavours that came from the art world. Your *Cancel Brexit* collection was huge and went viral. Many other artists like Wolfgang Tillmans and David Shrigley launched their own anti-Brexit projects, but in the end it didn't manage to change the course of events. Is there such a thing as a successful and a failed project?

KH: There are loads of failed projects. If you look at the environmental movement and the peace movement, even the women's movement... Having in mind how long it's been going on, how many people were involved, how much time was spent, I think that all these projects have failed. They haven't achieved as much as they should have. The pressure now is on people. We have to visit our elective representatives as groups and tell them, "This is what we want and if you don't give it to us, you will not be elected next time." We have to put the fear of God into them. And they're not representing the citizens at the moment, and they will be out. As soon as they're out they will have lost their power, which is all they care about. Our political system is not fixed in purpose, as we've seen in Spain, in England, in Italy. And what is happening in America?

LA: It's horrifying. But it feels that your work – and yourself as we are speaking – is inherently positive. No matter what.

KH: I believe in people. I believe that there's a way to fix it. If we all vote to our elective representatives telling them what position we want them to take on the key issues of our times, we will not vote for them the next time, unless they take that position. This way we'd change the world in a week. Because, while we still have democracies, we don't have a president for life. Well, except for China. If we carry on going in this extremely right wing dictatorial way... We have a window of opportunity and unless we act now, that window is going to close. After it closes, the only way to get back to democracies will be the wars.

LA: But these are the dangerous tools of power that we have to deal with. Do you ever have some kind of fear about these tools of power, namely politics, as you're working? Don't you sometimes think, "Oh, wait, someone might not like what I just said or wrote on that shirt and I might get into trouble"?

KH: I stepped too far on some occasions and got into trouble. We did those shirts on the war crimes – basically lying to British public and talking us into invading Iraq. But I am very lucky to be living in England because it is still one of the most free countries in the world despite its many problems, despite idiotic Brexit. I think we probably got better freedom of speech here than in other countries including Italy, France, possibly Spain, definitely Russia and China, and possibly even America. We are very lucky. But, you know, they say, "Evil grows if good men do nothing" and we have a moral obligation to stand up for what we believe in, even if it's a risk to ourselves.

LA: It takes us back to your encounter with Margaret Thatcher in the 1980's. The picture of you holding hands with her while wearing a '58% percent don't want Pershing' t-shirt is now iconic. You repeatedly said that you were sorry for her. After more than thirty years, what memories does that moment bring back to you?

KH: It was quite funny at the time, and it was nerve-wracking doing it, but I'm glad

it all worked out. My father was a diplomat so I had been to embassy receptions before. I knew what to do and what not to do, including that you have to smile in political photographs. I couldn't stand her but it was an opportunity to at least get a funny photograph out of it. I didn't know that the photograph was going to go so far and have resonance with so many people, I had no idea. I thought it was a practical joke, you know, English sense of humor kind of style. I think I've never been invited to Downing street again. I got a phone call of someone saying "No messages please" and I thought, well, that's a bit much, I'm a fashion designer and you can't tell me what I can wear and what I can't. But I wouldn't want to shake hands with Tony Blair – I mean, he's disgusting, he's got blood on it. I don't care about Theresa May, I think she's rubbish. I like Jeremy Corbyn – if he gets in, I'd be happy to go to Downing street.

LA: Don't you think that with the rise of media influence, accumulation of data and newly formed millennial and similar traditions, the forms of political activism have changed compared to those of the 1980's?

KH: I don't think they have. I think we're still marching, still signing huge petitions that are being ignored. Political activism is going to grow up. However, people marching on the streets are getting hurt. Look at what just recently happened in Barcelona, we have reports that 800 people were hurt. It's the case of protesting and surviving physically. People are getting murdered all across South America. They are getting murdered in Europe. When you think of the amount of time it takes you to go on a political march, and how many letters you could write in that time to your elective representatives... But don't do emails because they can be blocked. What you need to do is to write a letter, print it out and then you put it in the envelope and you hand address it and you send it to the elective representatives. They can ignore emails, but they have got to open every single letter. We even did a print on the back of the T-shirts with what to write on a letter.

*A circa 1984 ad photographed by Peter Lindbergh, Katharine Hamnett Archives*



KATHARINE HAMNETT

girls have to be strong enough not to go. If someone tells you "Have sex with me and you'll get a job", it needs to be reported to whoever is the superior. Say no. It's endemic across every area, from the poorest of the poorest agricultural workers right all the way through Hollywood, and it's got to stop. It's got to be taken very seriously, but the #MeToo itself it's a bit like those rather weak slogan t-shirts. The truth is – it's not strong enough. And it's also been kidnapped by extreme feminists, so now we are dealing with a new era of puritanism. The accusation is guilt – if somebody is accused of doing something, he or she immediately gets fired. In old days, the man was innocent until proven guilty. If someone makes an accusation, the process has to find out whether it's actually true or not. Now anyone can accuse anybody of anything, and they are getting fired. So, I think it's good, but it's a bit out of control. In some areas it's gone crazy and in others it isn't strong enough.

LA: But what is your plan? Do you really think that saying no is enough?

KH: Yes, just say no and report them to their boss.

LA: But in reality people tend to be weak and get manipulated a lot.

KH: You have got to be strong. Do you really want to have sex, or get raped by someone whom you find disgusting? Do you really want to put up with this kind of abuse? Today it's international women's day, so maybe women should all do martial arts. If you do martial arts training, people consent like animals. You have to be strong enough to defend yourself. What else you're going to do? Go and cut everyone's penises off? I don't think that's a good idea. Not all men are bad and not women are all bad. I know men who've been sexually molested in the movie business by female producers. You ask anybody. When I was younger I was offered jobs and was invited to diners by these guys, but that means you just don't go. And keep in mind if this is the job you want, it's going to be a shitty job anyway. A pure misery. Just count how many cleavages were there in Oscars.

LA: Some women seem to be trying too hard.

KH: It's meaningless. I mean, it's international women's day and it is time to sharpen up. Beauty is not enough. Get an education, because beauty doesn't last forever.