

The eleventh commandment for contemporary fashionistas is made of RAW Dutch denim

by Arold Jansen

The Arc of G-Star

G-Star's epic Elwood and Arc jeans are Goods Of Desire that befit the mindstyles of today. So it's only obvious the Dutch denim brand continuously tries to convert new believers. Its devotion to RAW reframes the global denim arena. "The energy we put into our brand is the driver that enables us momentum all around the world," says G-Star's global brand director Shubhankar Ray.

Consider G-Star RAW as a faith, a true urban belief in denim. It is a metropolitan uniform that encodes our way of thinking. Not a fashionable retro bodice that aims to endorse a narcissistic bonfire of vanities, but cotton cool presented as an open ticket into an energetic, global denim democracy.



Once you buy an Arc it is for better or for worse. Maybe. You do not buy jeans, you consciously choose G-Star. It is a product you simply belong to, or not. Like a family tradition, employees at G-Star receive exclusive gifts, like a bottle of RAWSECCO packed in denim or a Mini Elwood when a baby is born. Hand-crafted to perfection, the jeans add value to the one thing it is all about: the luxury of denim. G-Star is their collective manifesto. Nothing in life can seriously evolve without it – an unpolluted devotion.

So it's only natural that G-Star's established campaign photographer, Anton Corbijn, is the son of a priest. In a sense, Corbijn's grainy black and white images of 2012 RAW icons add a clean Calvinist emotion to the communicative quality of a raw denim Arc pant. Just the product, carrying a confident person with a naturally strong character. It's a disruptive approach mixing unexpected elements that defy traditional definitions of beauty, style or luxury fashion. To G-Star, lifestyle is a mindstyle, energized by a philosophy of pleasurable contrasts. It is a belief that perfectly interconnects with the brand's motto 'Not the image, just the product' – a tagline that has represented the G-Star identity for more than 20 years.

It is as intriguing as the remarkable predilection of CEO Jos van Tilburg for RAL 7016 anthracite, a tribal tattoo or stamp that is painted on every major distribution centre or office in the world. It signals awareness of the value of uniformity, which runs through every corporate detail - from the size of the buttons, colors on hang tags, stitches on a new denim prototype, to the quotes doled out to the media. It is G-Star's way to stay upfront, to connect, and to match the eccentric combinations in the G-Labs to van Tilburg's essential baseline. He is still very much on top of the denim pyramid, the one who ensures every single corporate detail exceeds expectations and the original G is in the jeans when it is finally draped around mannequins.

3301:1 | G-STAR

In the beginning of G-Time, there was Jos van Tilburg. Together with Frans Zantman and Frans Scholtes, he introduced the brand Gapstar to the Dutch market in 1989 as part of the Zantman Fashion Group, later Secon Group. In 1994, they changed their brand name to G-Star to avoid rights issues with The Gap. By 2001, the young brand had already reached a turnover of about 240 million euros. Since then, the number of employees has quadrupled to around 1000. And in 2009, G-Star's expanding international activities pushed its turnover to more than 750 million euros, with some 60 percent of revenue coming from its main markets in Europe. G-Star is now sold in more than 70 countries. The brand's goal for the next four years is to build a global franchise network of 750 mono-brand stores.

Democratizing design

G-Star earned its international acclaim by being unorthodox and true to itself. Matching each and every culture as a style of all times, it constantly adapts to social change and consumer trends. It lets the people take control, opening up channels for them to interact with G-Star. That was the case at the 2011 RAW World Chess Challenge with grandmaster Magnus Carlsen: people from all over the world decided together each chess move against him.

Inspiring people to connect with G-Star is a daily work of art under global brand director Shubhankar Ray. Together with G-Star's creative team, he created G-Star RAW pop-up galleries in Tokyo and Los Angeles and introduced the RAW Icon concept starring Benicio del Toro and the late Dennis Hopper. "Becoming part of culture is forcing the rules of production," he says. "The brands that define the next century are the ones that are part of culture. Apple is a reference. As a brand it has become part of culture. Denim is more difficult, but clothing at the end is communication. It has to do with signs and semiotics. It means that this type of



brand can become part of culture too. Creating that kind of social relevance has something to do with the condition of business.”

“People in the near future will not buy anything but ethical brands,” Ray continues. “So everybody has to be respectable to environmental and social factors. We at G-Star simply have to have clear and transparent corporate responsibility policies, from the cultivation of cotton to the preparation of holes in an Arc. As a part of these efforts we emphasize our ethical view with the RAW sustainable collection. Those elements together shape a basic condition for doing business, like having a good product. They are a standard.”

For Ray, it all comes down to adding social energy to a brand to create that sought-after bond with people. “The change of context in campaigns adds in a level of energy. I think it can define a very interesting G-Star DNA over and over again. It is an organic mentality that truly connects you,” he says. “We at G-Star are simply transferring our DNA into things we love. Very fan-like actually. We loved boats so we restyled an antique canal boat from Amsterdam into a RAW Ferry. We did the same thing to Land Rover Defender and a Cannondale. Now it’s furniture. Some years ago our senior designer Pierre Morriset turned out to be a big fan of French modernist Jean Prouvé (1901–1984). We contacted Prouvé’s daughter Catherine, who held the licenses. We got on well. It eventually enabled us to reinterpret a collection of 17 Jean Prouvé furniture classics in close collaboration with Vitra and the Prouvé family. Some originals would cost you about 50,000 euros now. The ones we reintroduced at Art Basel in 2011 cost a lot less. So this can be seen as democratization of high minded to a street accessibility. Our effort is to democratize design and make it accessible to larger fan groups. We are able to do that because we are operating in a mainstream mass market. We have the ability to experiment and initiate crossovers between G-Star and other brands aiming at innovation or technology.” Our biggest challenge is going to be how to retain



G-Star 3D denim design

an independent-minded brand,” adds Ray. “The challenge for G-Star is how to stay distinctive in a marketplace where we are not the first. We deliver a good product, use fine materials and guarantee a nice finish, but in the end it all depends on the energy we put in our brand. That’s the driver that is enabling us momentum around the world.

3301:2 | RAW

G-Star introduced its famous RAW denim concept in 1996. That same year, French designer Pierre Morriset (le professeur du jeans) developed the famous Elwood – straight, baggy-style jeans inspired by motorcycle pants with kneecaps that improved both comfort and fit. This new, 3-D approach to denim would elevate the brand to European stardom over the next few years. Supported by the primary color ‘anthracite 7016,’ the industrial look of G-Star attracted innovators, early adopters and followers of all ages. Also in 1996, the first RAW ESSENTIALS franchise store opened in Paris. 3301, the original style number of the first RAW Jeans, swiftly became the new 501 to youngsters who wanted to create some distance between their ‘baby boom dad’ and their ‘post-modernist hippie mum.’ G-Star felt urban, eccentric and real, always with that memorable number 96 on the back patch – a celebration of the brand’s heritage. Elwood sold over 13 million pants worldwide. Morriset is still head of design at G-Star, mainly operating from its styling office in Saint Rémy, France.

West + East

After years of showcasing RAW on the catwalks of New York Fashion Week, G-star presented the last NY Raw Collection (NYRC) in 2011, which featured an experimental laboratory approach to couture styling. To ease its entry into the U.S. market, G-Star invited American celebs to sit on the front row. “You cannot divorce celebs from fashion in the U.S. There is no more powerful sales force. They drive ideas, fashion styles and branded products,” says Ray. “Where it gets interesting is that Charlize Theron is picking up our Lynn skinny and wearing it privately while shopping in a grocery store. That is a genuine relationship. It is a good vindication that G-Star is an organic reality in America. We are becoming part of culture there.”

Indeed, RAW Icons have helped anchor the denim brand in American minds. The feminine Low T worn by Liv Tyler, the slim, tailored jacket sported by Jay-Z at the MTV Music Awards 2011, and the eloquent RAW look of Benicio del Toro all carried the industrial G-load, enabling the brand to go from a relatively small denim specialist to a player in the mainstream American market.

“Today G-Star is available in dozens of stores in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Miami and <fill in number> of outlets in the U.S. There, in Europe, Japan and even in China, G-Star is beginning to carve out its own, natural territory in the global denim business,” says Ray. “In the last five years, there has been a strong focus on defining our point of difference in terms of product. That’s changing. Since 2007 we have the Arc pant. That 3-D denim design is beginning to define our image. In new, emerging countries, G-Star is being conceived as a modern, metropolitan brand. In the denim market, this



represents a unique position. Levis and Wrangler reproduce ‘nostalgia’, ‘retro’ and ‘heritage’ – all coming from the countryside. G-Star is born in the city and will stay in the city. Our organic growth in the U.S. is solely being concentrated in major cities. We have three stores in Soho, New York, guaranteeing people quick access. This means our vision of being a metropolitan denim brand for urban people actually works.”

3301:3 | ARC

In 2008, G-Star introduced the Arc, a dramatic, new denim silhouette. Its innovative, tapered shape represented G-Star’s evolution since the Elwood was introduced. The jeans, with exaggerated details such as a low crotch and low and long pockets, created another G-Star language. By extending the 3-D element to the whole leg, the design seemed to result from an almost architectural approach. The seams appeared to ‘rotate’ the leg and follow a more natural form of the human body, sculpting any male or female to triumph. Advanced techniques of cleaning and processing created new dimensions such as the Coal Denim Rugby Unstructured, which has been applied to the Arc Loose Tapered to restore a vintage, black denim look.

Future of G

While India, Brazil and other emerging countries remain prospective markets, G-Star has already made inroads in China, where it has 37 stores and more than 150 points of sale in shopping malls and other outlets. Last February, G-Star opened its largest global flagship store in Hong Kong’s Causeway Bay. The impressive building features a rusted metallic hull that resembles the structure of the Ka’bah in Mecca. The opening ceremony was an eclectic night of G-styled performances mixing art, music, fashion and attended by local celebrities. Shubhankar Ray shows us a few snapshots of the party taken on his mobile phone. “There were 3000 people attending. Models were roping down a vertical wall, using the outer walls of the shop itself as a catwalk. Great DJs and a superb party,” he says.

Ray is just as enthusiastic about G-Star’s upcoming fall/winter collection. G-Star RAW, its luxury sports line by Marc Newson, will continue as a signature collection. It uses industrial techniques to simplify the construction that is at the core of every garment design. Recent ideas include seamless arms and hidden pockets, made from G-Star’s trademark biomorphic denim.

G-Star is also working to build up its Correct Line, which combines the classic G-Star RAW appearance with refined tailoring. Traditional, single-breasted jackets are constructed from unexpected materials such as satin, with a 3-D silhouette inspired by the Arc pant. Mix and match the denim for a night out in a G-Star tenue de ville. Add the final touch with an exclusive handcrafted piece from the RAW Essentials collection, which mixes authentic detailing and vintage influences from G-Star’s past with modern, metropolitan style elements. “People want mass customization. Being super specialist in a mass market, offering jeans at high and low prices at every type of retailer imaginable is a bit strange to us. But it is there,”

says Ray. “The rules of engagement are in need of a multilayer platform. Media, communication and shopping are all going to become a connected multi-platform. It is logical. People want permanent right of entry; they shop on their mobile phones. The success of G-Star in the future is the return of attention-making custom-made solutions.”

G-Star’s Tomorrowland is looking bright: more countries to be ‘denimized’, more shops, more lines, bigger volumes. G-Star RAW is the Dutch dragon following the rise of freedom and wealth in emerging markets. The brand is on a global quest and its unique RAW idiom is the unifier. “Because we are a relative young denim brand we can only look forward. What lies ahead is the creation of a multi-usable denim product. If we are able to create that product we can start offering a denim wardrobe that facilitates you from the moment you step out of bed till you hop back in,” says Ray. “It is a powerful proposition allowing an organic growth in denim and all denim-related products, with an innovative 3-D view on the product built from the

influential industrial design ideas of Le Corbusier, Dieter Rams and architect Oscar Niemeyer.”

These modernists will undoubtedly influence the re-tuned Bauhaus identity G-Star is rolling out into the world. That includes its RAW Tailor Concept that allows wearers to customize their G-Star Red Listing denim. The concept was trialled in London, Tokyo and Los Angeles and is now available in Amsterdam.

3301:4 | 2012 CAMPAIGN

Dutch cinematographer and photographer Anton Corbijn is responsible for the look of G-Star’s advertising campaigns. He is most famous for his eloquent black and white portraits of Depeche Mode and U2, and his films Control (2007) and The American (2010). Corbijn has been shooting portraits of RAW Icons since 2008. The spring/summer 2012 campaign will feature actors Clémence Poésy and Vincent Gallo. Poésy reflects the female G-Star archetype while Gallo represents the brand’s cultural diversity: the film director and actor is also a musician, painter and motorcycle racer.



G-Star flagship store, Hong Kong