

Tech Bro Uniform Meets Margaret Thatcher. Disruption Ensues.

A new exhibition in San Francisco makes art out of the Patagonia vest, the former prime minister of England and ... Salesforce?



Left, Dara Khosrowshahi, the chief executive of Expedia at the Sun Valley Conference, 2016. Right, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, circa 1990. Drew Angerer/Getty Images; Tim Roney, via Getty Images



By Vanessa Friedman

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The death knell of the Patagonia vest, at least as a symbol of utopianism co-opted by the tech and venture capital world and transformed into shorthand for a certain kind of unbridled corporate power, was [much predicted](#) last summer.

That is when the outdoor recreation company put its puffers where its principles were and said it would no longer make vests branded with its own name and the names of companies that did not share its environmental commitments.

“Woe to the bros!” cried customers and commentators alike, in both glee and horror.

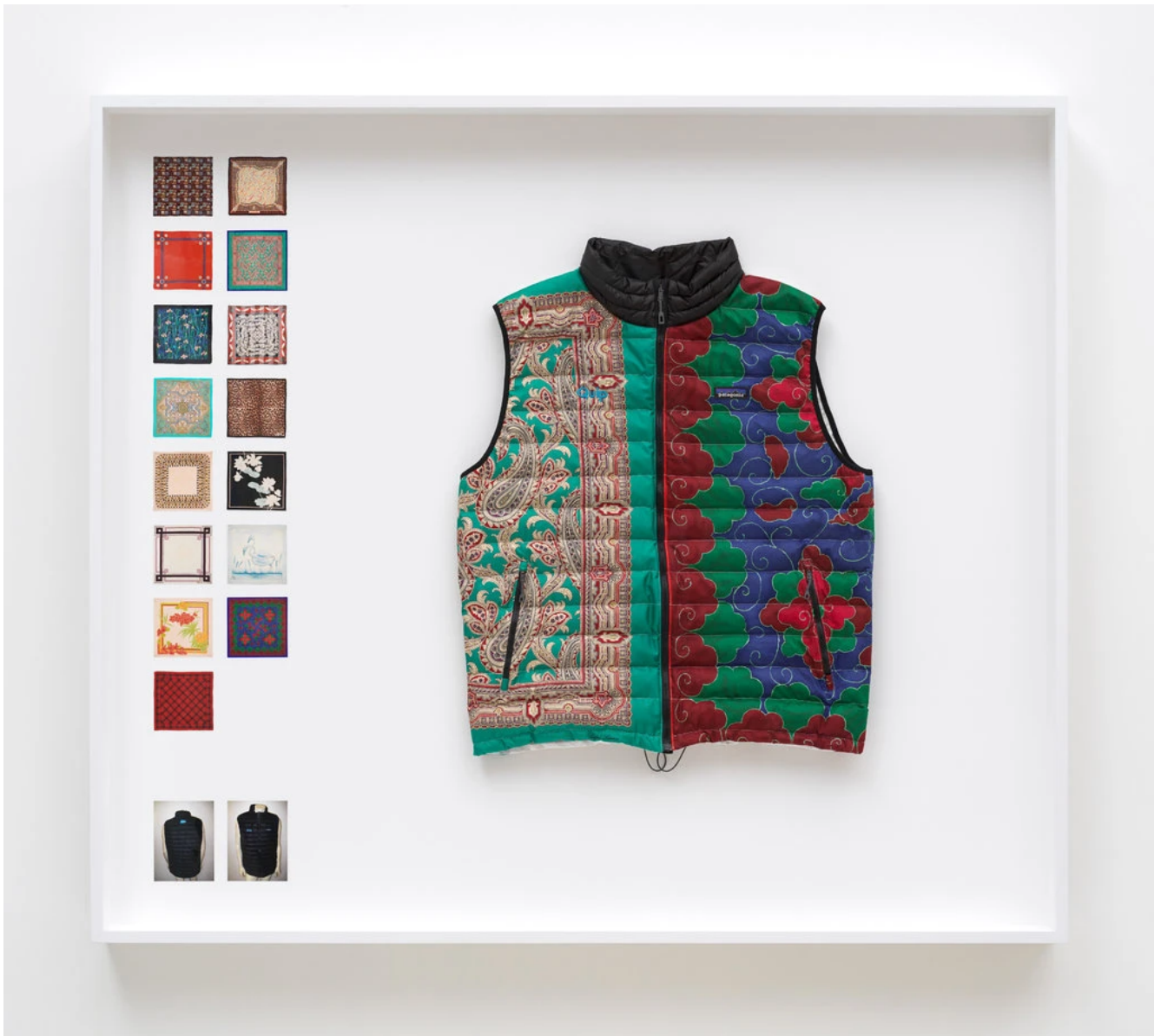
The prophecies of doom turned out to be somewhat overstated. But they may soon be heard again in the land, thanks to an unexpected source: [Simon Denny](#), a New Zealand-born artist who lives in Berlin.

Mr. Denny is the man behind a new show at the Altman Siegel gallery in San Francisco, “[Security Through Obscurity](#),” that combines (of all things) Patagonia, Salesforce (the customer relations digital behemoth) and Margaret Thatcher. The result is a visual treatise on income inequality, global capitalism and the digital world built on shared fashion references.

Also proof positive that clothes are part of the currency of our times, no matter where you look.

After all, Patagonia and Margaret Thatcher are not two names most people would put in the same sentence. Their heydays are separated by decades; their power bases across an ocean; their philosophies of life even further apart.

Yet both Patagonia and the former British prime minister have one thing in common: They each gave the world items of dress that transcended their origins to become emblems.



A Simon Denny silk scarf Patagonia vest. Simon Denny, via Altman Siegel Gallery; Nick Ash



Simon Denny, via Altman Siegel Gallery; Nick Ash

In the case of Patagonia, the power vest: the fleece or puffer zip-up that is the de facto uniform of the private equity and venture capital world and the tech companies that love it.

In the case of Mrs. Thatcher, the silk scarf, which, along with the skirt suit and pussy-bow blouse, became signifiers of the Iron Lady, the woman who put on her absolutely appropriate clothes like armor in her battle to liberate the markets and bring “tough capitalism” to Britain.

Combining both, Mr. Denny, 37, found the shape, literally, of an idea.

Mr. Denny is known for work that explores the culture of technology and its effects on society. He grew up in New Zealand and moved to Germany in 2007 to attend art school.

After graduating, as he began developing his signature, he started “following” individuals he saw as paradigm changers: reading their press, their speeches and books; checking in as their careers progressed.

Peter Thiel was one. Mr. Denny’s 2019 exhibition, “[The Founder’s Paradox](#),” held in Auckland, New Zealand, featured Mr. Thiel (for one), the billionaire tech venture capitalist who is known for buying up swaths of land in that country, as a figure called Lord Tybalt, in art inspired by fantasy board games. [Dominic Cummings](#), the architect of Boris Johnson’s electoral victory, is another. Ditto Mrs. Thatcher.

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“She was very visible in the 1980s, shaping a new kind of politics that emphasized the individual, deregulation and global neoliberalism,” Mr. Denny said, speaking on the phone from Berlin a few days before the opening.

Though Mr. Denny has previously had exhibitions at MoMA PS1 and the Serpentine in London, and represented New Zealand at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, this is the first time he has used fashion in his work, and it is partly because of the former prime minister.

In early 2019, a Christie’s [auction](#) catalog crossed his desk that included a group of Mrs. Thatcher’s scarves. “There were a number of things being sold,” Mr. Denny said, “but many were quite expensive.” There were suits, jewelry, silver, decorative vases. The scarves, however, were a more accessible story.

“I thought, ‘Wow, these could be quite potent material for me,’” he said. “I knew I really wanted to work with them.”

He ended up winning 17 of them from two different lots after “quite fierce competition.” The [estimate](#) for one lot was 400 to 600 pounds, and it ultimately went for £3,250 (\$4,218.82); [the other](#) was £500 to £800, and the final price was £3,000 (\$3,894.30). They include a Nicole Miller scarf with a Forbes print, dollar bills and slogans like “Forbes capitalist tool” and “No guts, no story”; a leopard print that made Mr. Denny think of England’s colonial past; a Chanel design; and one from Liberty of London.

“To me, they represent an era of dress — the feminine but power business look,” Mr. Denny said. “Also the Thatcher policies, which have accelerated global inequality.”

Combine that with the offer of a show in San Francisco, home of both the tech elite and a growing divide between rich and poor that is painfully visible, and Mr. Denny’s thoughts turned to another kind of dress: the vest.

He zeroed in on one example in particular, a Salesforce branded Patagonia vest, like the kind [given to Dreamforce](#) conference attendees in 2015. (Salesforce, the company co-founded by Marc Benioff in 1999 that has [revenues of over \\$13 billion](#), is one of the largest employers in San Francisco.)



Mr. Denny's Patagonia silk scarf sleeping bags are references to the homeless in San Francisco. Simon Denny, via Altman Siegel Gallery; Nick Ash



Simon Denny, via Altman Siegel Gallery; Nick Ash

The result is four Nano Puff power vests made from a variety of Mrs. Thatcher's scarves with a repurposed Patagonia label taken from an actual Patagonia garment and pasted over one breast, displayed in shallow glass vitrines like collector's memorabilia, and two Patagonia sleeping bags, which are references to the homeless in San Francisco.

Standing up, the sleeping bags resemble nothing so much as sarcophagi, likewise made from the scarves. All of the pieces are filled with repurposed down stuffing from sleeping bags sourced in resale stores around the city.

The exhibition also includes collages made from 3-D printing Salesforce patents (the kind that [Wired magazine](#) suggested could be potential foreign tax havens). Prices range from \$7,500 to \$60,000.

None of the individuals or brands involved were contacted before the show; this is not a collaboration, like the Louis Vuitton handbags done by Yayoi Kusama or Takashi Murakami, but a commentary. And its implications are hard to avoid.

"The Patagonia vest is something people here will relate to right away," said Claudia Altman-Siegel, the owner of the gallery. "I don't know if they will like it or find it too close to home. But I really hope Marc Benioff will come." (According to Mr. Denny, Mr. Thiel did come to see his show in New Zealand.)

Mr. Denny is not by any means the first artist to use the visual representations of luxury and fashion as a material way to confront cultural dissonance. Tom Sachs did it in the late 1990s when he used luxury brand signifiers to explore consumerism and branding. (Remember the Tiffany Glock, Chanel Guillotine or Hermès Value Meal?)

Wang Guangyi, a Chinese artist, did it with his “Great Criticism” series of paintings, which superimposed brand logos on Mao-era Communist propaganda posters.

“More and more artists like to use fashion as a way to help deliver a message because it’s an accessible point of entry for so many people,” said Stefano Tonchi, the former editor of W and now the creative director of L’Officiel Group. “It’s a way of talking not to a niche, but to a larger audience.”

None of this has escaped fashion itself, which as a rule has attempted to embrace artists who use its products as material, thus defanging the critical potential of the work. “I don’t think he’s the kind of artist who, if Dior called and said, ‘Let’s do a bag!’ he would want to say yes,” Mr. Tonchi said of Mr. Denny.

Though Mr. Denny has many artist friends in Berlin who are close to Demna Gvasalia, the designer for Balenciaga, and though Mr. Denny himself has been featured in L’Uomo Vogue and the magazine of the Canadian retailer Ssense, he has no plans to parlay his current dalliance with clothing into a sideline.

He seemed taken aback by the suggestion that he collaborate with a brand — though he does hope the show has an effect on how we dress.

“I think it would be hard not to think about the Patagonia vests differently,” he said. “I hope it puts all the super-contradictions of how we live into a frame that is impossible to ignore.”

Or, perhaps, wear — except in the wilderness, as the company originally intended.

Correction: Jan. 14, 2020

An earlier version of this article misidentified an artist who collaborated with Louis Vuitton. He is Takashi Murakami, the visual artist, not Haruki Murakami, the author.

Vanessa Friedman is The Times’s fashion director and chief fashion critic. She was previously the fashion editor of the Financial Times. [@VVFriedman](#)

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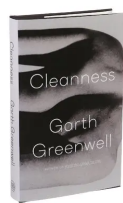
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