



FASHION CONSCIENCE

Behind that fur coat is a world of pain and suffering, but thanks to an HSUS outreach campaign, a new generation of designers is embracing a more humane ethic

by ANDY MACALPINE

At the end of a semester spent studying garment construction, fashion drawing, and patternmaking, students at Parsons The New School for Design received a different kind of education—one that could save millions of lives.

With final exams looming late last fall, they filtered into an auditorium in the heart of Manhattan to attend a crash course on the realities of animal fur production. Representatives of The HSUS's Fur-Free Campaign outlined some sobering truths: millions of animals are cruelly killed every year for their pelts, and rampant mislabeling and false advertising keep consumers in the dark about what they're really buying.

To show students why this matters, campaign manager Pierre Grzybowski set out a collection of clunky metal traps used to capture fur-bearing animals in the wild; his attempt to pry open even the smallest traps demonstrated how unrelenting the devices can be to animals caught in their grip. When he stuck a pencil between the recoiling metal jaws, the flying wooden shrapnel reinforced his point.

A short video packed an even bigger punch. The audience saw animals such as foxes, minks, and rabbits confined in rows of small, filthy cages. The visuals turned more graphic as the video continued: Animals were electrocuted, crushed in a steel trap, or hung upside down to be drained of their blood. When the footage showed a raccoon dog being skinned alive, audience members let out a collective gasp and jumped in their seats.

For many of the students, the session was their first behind-the-scenes look at fur production, exposing not only the brutality toward animals but also the environmental destruction caused by the use of fur in fashion. "I think they know where [fur] comes from," said one of the attendees, fashion design major Katie Kim. "I think they know it involves skinning an animal, but I don't think they know the specifics." When Kim asks fur-using classmates about their choice, their responses reveal a lack of awareness, she says—perhaps a purposeful blindness to horrors they'd rather not think about. One classmate told her that fur production is merely one unethical act in an industry riddled with them. Others have simply responded that they love fur.

After the HSUS class, many students can no longer look the other way. Fashion design major Emily Wilson once considered buying fur to keep warm during the harsh New York City winters. But having visited with her family's dog just a few days earlier, she found that the presentation "definitely hit home." As she walked out

of the auditorium, she said she no longer wants to buy fur—and was considering challenging a friend who planned to incorporate it into his final projects.

ON THE INSIDE

It's just the type of advocacy The HSUS aims to inspire in the fashion industry. Through one leg of its two-pronged effort, the Fur-Free Campaign has persuaded many designers, brands, and retailers to stop using fur, while convincing others to extend their fur-free commitments; the list of fur-free names stands at 300 and continues to grow. The second undertaking involves introducing the next generation of fashion professionals to the growing bounty of fur alternatives—while helping them reject the outdated notion that a coat of dead animals is a status symbol.

The insider focus is based on the idea that a designer's fur-free commitment drives change in the marketplace. While consumers

can also make a difference through their purchasing power, they often take their cues from fashion houses they know and like, and a brand name can lend glamour and credibility to a fur-free wardrobe.

By working with design students, The HSUS tries to reach these power brokers before they've solidified their alliances—while also parlaying a new generation's influence into cultural enthusiasm for cruelty-free couture. With their fingers on the pulse of new trends, young designers "are educating everyone else on what's fashionable," says campaign deputy manager Sarika Reuben. Humane treatment of animals is simply an extension of their concerns about sustainability and the environment, she notes; if they say it's important to consider the ethics of fashion, "then people will pay attention."

That attention is even more heightened when the young designers attend the nation's leading design school. The HSUS presentation at Parsons, which touts its role in establishing New York City's Seventh Avenue as the crux of American fashion, marked a bold move into territory previously staked out by the fur industry;

Parsons is home to annual competitions where furriers shower winners with raw materials and trips abroad.

Last year, the head of Parsons' fashion school invited HSUS staff to speak to some of the 1,300 students as a counterpoint to these relationships. "I feel like the fact that much bigger designers are using fur is getting a little bit more of the headlines," says dean Simon Collins. "And the fur industry has a lot of money just to promote themselves. ... That's sort of why I'm keen to get HSUS in



The size of an animal determines how many are killed for a full-length coat:

15

Coyotes

15

Otters

20

Bobcats

20

Raccoons

24

Red foxes

65

Sables

90

Martens



The inhumane trapping of animals for their fur is a subject of The HSUS's presentations to fashion design students. Terrified and injured animals may try to escape by biting the traps and their own limbs; they may be left in the traps for several days before trappers return to kill them.

to give the other side of the story.”

Since becoming dean in 2008, Collins has discouraged students from “casually” using fur in accessories. For those who want to work more fully with the material, he asks them to first consider the ramifications—realities he says were effectively depicted by the HSUS video. “There were some graphic images in there, but then there should be. That’s part of what goes on,” he says. “But equally, it’s not a sort of desk-thumping, anti-fur, ‘Just don’t do it’ [message]. It’s a much more reasoned and thoughtful presentation. And I think it’s quite provocative. I want the students to be provoked.”

Collins, who envisions establishing sponsorships of students by fur-free companies, says he believes fur isn’t the only way to impart extra value to a garment, and he would welcome seeing consumers’ desire for fur supplanted by a demand for alternative materials. With the growing sophistication of textile science, that goal may not

be far out of reach.

Some of the earliest faux furs were poor facsimiles—thick, matted, and rough to the touch. But new technologies have improved the quality of fibers used in synthetics, says Parsons instructor Donna Avery. “I used to demonstrate to students, if you blow on faux fur, it would not move,” she says, “whereas if you blow on real fur it would sort of part in the middle.” Today’s artificial pelts, she says, are much more realistic.

The materials have become so advanced that, despite her 30 years in the industry, even Avery was fooled when HSUS staff challenged her at the fall presentation to identify whether several fabric swatches were made of real animal fur or synthetic. Barred from using her usual detection techniques, she had to make the call based on look and touch alone. She was shocked by her repeated mistakes—and by those of her fellow faculty members. “It blew my mind because all of us were getting everything wrong,” says Avery, adding that she plans to

use some of the samples in her classes.

At least one member of the media was similarly hoodwinked when attending a recent runway show by famed fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld. The head designer and creative director for Chanel has long used fur in his high-end designs, and the clothes unveiled during his March show in Paris seemed to be no exception, prompting a *Los Angeles Times* fashion critic to write that “Lagerfeld’s compassion for the planet apparently does not extend to its four-legged inhabitants.”

Afterward, however, Lagerfeld revealed that all of the fur was synthetic, telling a reporter, “It’s the triumph of fake fur ... because fake fur changed so much—and became so great now—that you can hardly see the difference. ... You cannot fake chic, but you can be chic and fake fur.”

DRAWING BACK THE CURTAIN

The textiles tech boom has helped propel the success of a unique partnership The

HSUS launched in 2005 with the Art Institutes' network of design schools. Fur construction and design aren't part of the curriculum, and students won't find a fur competition on any of the 46 campuses, says Bruce Dempsey, vice president and academic affairs specialist for the Education Management Corporation, which operates the Art Institutes. The use of animal fur isn't banned—"that's a difficult line to walk because of creativity and the students' choice," Dempsey says—but many of the faculty and individual school presidents support The HSUS's fur-free message.

The Art Institutes also partner with The HSUS to organize and promote the annual Cool vs. Cruel contest, where students in fashion design and fashion retail management create cruelty-free interpretations of select fur garments. Over the years, students have incorporated an array of materials into their designs to achieve what was done previously with animal fur.

The last contest got a jumpstart over the summer, when Reuben visited 16 AI campuses on behalf of The HSUS to give presentations similar to the one at Parsons. Her talk was a wakeup call for Gilberto Alvarez, a recent graduate of the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale. Previously, he believed fur was probably harvested from animals who died of natural causes in the wild. "I didn't think they brutally beat them," he says. "I didn't think it was that horrific." The images affected him powerfully: "I always talk about it now. And I always tell people they should watch the video, and I send them to the [HSUS] website and try to open them up to it."

The video's impact on Alvarez was clearly reflected in his Cool vs. Cruel entry. He fashioned a short cocktail dress with large swaths of synthetic hair attached to the front and back, an attempt to "represent us as humans being tortured for our 'fur,'" he says. His effort landed him the third-place \$400 prize—and, Reuben hopes, a few double takes. "People are a little shocked at first seeing human hair on an outfit," she says. "Animal fur on a garment should elicit the same kind of response."

Runner-up Jeremy Hunt, a student at the Art Institute of Indianapolis, aimed to re-create a different aspect of fur, designing an elaborate cocktail dress made of black polyester material that resembled silk satin.

The skirt incorporated a basket-weave look that "creates a texture, makes you want to touch and feel it," he says.

Before the competition, Hunt didn't feel strongly one way or the other about fur, he says. Reuben's fabric samples opened his mind to the possibilities of designing without it. "There's no reason to use fur," he says. "We've gotten to the point where [the] technology [and] synthetic faux fur we're able to use are just as good if not better."

With her winning dress design, Ingrid Bergstrom-Kendrick emulated the volume of fur, using gray polyester felt because "it's more like building a structure than sewing a garment." While her previous commitment not to use fur was a subconscious one, the Cool vs. Cruel competition has cemented her resolve—and prodded her classmates to look more closely at the issue.

"I'm sure that no one would want to see animals suffer like they do," she says, "so I think if they're aware of what they're choosing, I don't think they would choose it."



A *Los Angeles Times* fashion critic who chastised Karl Lagerfeld for using fur in this collection got a surprise: It was synthetic. Lagerfeld deemed the mistake "the triumph of fake fur."

Such insights demonstrate that The HSUS's message of compassion is reaching students who otherwise never would have learned about the mistreatment and killing of animals for fur. And it's happening at a crucial juncture in their lives, says Andrew Page, senior director of the Fur-Free Campaign. "Convincing young designers to be fur-free is critical," he says. "An early decision to avoid the cruelty of fur can persevere for a designer's entire career and impact countless animals."

FASHIONING A NEW TREND

"Nevermind global warming: Fur is back in vogue. ... Indeed, designers are experimenting with fur as a new, natural material alternative, banishing mothball-scented stereotypes of old. The fur craze has already filtered down to the street," wrote Katya Foreman in a recent issue of *Women's Wear Daily*, describing "strong interest from the younger generation that has never worn it, including young men."

Building on this thought, Michael Holm—a design director for the world's largest fur auction house, Copenhagen Fur—told the writer, "Young designers don't seem to be afraid of the material. It seems they're adopting it as any other natural material." Nicole Fischelis, vice president and fashion director of Macy's, added, "It's no longer just a pelt. It's another material to express your creativity. The big new thing is mixing fur with wovens. It's inserted, it's appliquéd, it's patch-worked."

Such industry-friendly articles skirt ethical concerns about fur, dissociating the merchandise from the realities of how it's made. Many members of the fashion media follow this model, serving as a de facto marketing arm for producers and retailers by heaping lavish praise on their cruel wares.

Fur trade groups may be responsible for engineering some of the flattery. According to a March story in *The New York Times*, cooperatives representing breeders, fur farm operators, and auction houses lure designers with free samples and junkets. "The quid pro quo is simply that they mention our name to the press," said Steve Gold, marketing director for North American Fur Auctions, adding that it's typical to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars annually on suchloys. "We want to make sure fur



The HSUS's Cool vs. Cruel competition showcases the work of a new generation of fur-free designers. Left to right are 2009 runner-up Jeremy Hunt, grand-prize winner Ingrid Bergstrom-Kendrick, and third-place winner Gilberto Alvarez. "People who make a stand make a difference," says Alvarez. "... You don't have to go with what everyone else is doing."

is on the pages of magazines around the world," he told the paper.

The HSUS counters this glamorization of brutality through events such as the annual party honoring Cool vs. Cruel winners in Manhattan, which spreads the message that compassion is a far classier trend. The 2009 gathering, held in November at the trendy Bowery Hotel, showcased the students' creative alternatives to animal fur as the wave of the future, with garments submitted by the 16 finalists adorning mannequins set up in the middle of the room. As DJ Samantha Ronson pumped music throughout the hall, the fledgling designers visited with the crowd of celebrities, journalists, and partygoers. Posters showed photos of fur-bearing animals and described how minks, rabbits, foxes, and raccoon dogs are killed for their skins, while the video from Reuben's AI presentations played on large TV screens.

About 600 people showed up at an event planned for 400, a turnout that indicates the competition's growth over the past five years. "Every year we look for bigger venues," Page says. Likewise, he adds, HSUS campaigners have progressed from handing out fliers in front of Fashion Week gatherings to hosting fur-free parties and sponsoring Fashion Week shows for fur-free designers. "We went from being outside the industry—literally, on the sidewalk—to helping designers send clothes down the runway. I think our message is reaching a lot of people who might not listen to someone

who isn't part of the business."

Fashion photographer Nigel Barker, one of the contest judges, envisions the Cool vs. Cruel event one day being broadcast to millions of young people in a forum such as MTV. For now, the cash awards given to the contest winners show that fur-free design can be "financially exciting," he notes: "We live in the real world, and in the real world people need to be appreciated and applauded when they do the right thing."

Echoing this sentiment, Alvarez says his award has given him a sense of professional accomplishment. "Until you actually recognize that people like your stuff, I don't think you can really say, 'OK, I'm a designer,'" he says. He feels empowered by—and proud of—his newfound fur-free ethic. "People who make a stand make a difference," he says. "... You don't have to go with what everyone else is doing."

For Bergstrom-Kendrick, who graduated from the Art Institute of Vancouver in December, winning the contest has helped launch her career, landing her a weeklong internship with the VPL clothing line. Company owner Victoria Bartlett has made a livelihood of fur-free fashion—and has taken her advocacy beyond passive endorsement. The HSUS sponsored her 2010 runway show during New York Fashion Week last September; Bartlett designed a special T-shirt for The HSUS and handed out gift bags containing the Fur-Free Campaign's brochures and pins.

Bartlett, who has opposed fur since childhood, says events like Cool vs. Cruel help counteract fur companies' courting of budding professionals. "They dangle money in front of these young designers who need money to ... produce a show," she says. "And that's where the weakness is, and they know that."

By serving as a role model, she hopes students come to see that fur does not define the industry. "That's what you need is for them to understand that fur is not cool," Bartlett says. "... The more designers who can be involved, I think it makes a stronger army of people to help change it."

The influence flows both ways, as the Art Institutes' Dempsey noted to the crowd gathered at the New York City party. By taking the message to heart, he said, the students are helping to fashion new standards for the industry. They are "shaming some of the designers who are still designing [with] fur and they're saying, 'Look, there are alternatives. You don't need slaughter. You don't need to kill animals.'"

Students are learning they can educate others "that at one point [fur] may have been a necessity for warmth, but it no longer is and people need to get beyond that.

"It's not a luxury. It's someone's skin and fur."

▶ **WATCH** The HSUS's Cool vs. Cruel video, browse our fur-free list, and learn how to tell the difference between real animal fur and faux at humansociety.org/magazine.