

# NOT CHARITY

THE ETHICAL FASHION INITIATIVE, PART OF THE UNITED NATIONS AND WTO'S INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTRE, CONNECTS SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST MARGINALISED PEOPLE WITH THE TOP OF FASHION'S VALUE CHAIN, FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT. FOUNDER SIMONE CIPRIANI AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR JEREMY BROWN, TWO WONDERFULLY WARM, INTELLIGENT AND DRIVEN EMISSARIES WERE IN AUCKLAND RECENTLY FOR THE LAUNCH OF NEW ZEALAND'S OFFICIAL CONNECTION TO THE CAUSE, KAREN WALKER'S VISIBLE EYEWEAR COLLECTION. GRANT FELL AND RACHAEL CHURCHWARD SAT DOWN WITH THE TWO MEN-ON-A-MISSION TO TALK, LEARN AND ULTIMATELY SHARE THE VISION

# JUST WORK.



*Karen Walker  
Eyewear 'Visible'  
campaign image by  
Derek Henderson*



*Simone Cipriani  
in the field. Photo:  
Tabir Karmali*

**Grant Fell:** *Simone, can we start with some of your origins - at CESECA, you had a background in footwear and leather – a background that led to many early international posts.* **Simone Cipriani:** CESECA was a service company set in Tuscany, in those days the footwear industry was highly internationalised with a lot of factories all over Asia and they needed somebody to do the training with the work force, the quality control, the logistics and this is what we did at CESECA. We also used to work at the forefront of technology, we were among the first organisations in Europe to adapt the CAD cam technology to the footwear industry. We were using CAD to introduce it to the sector in Italy, a lot of companies in Italy and in Europe but our main centre of operation was internationalisation of production; Asia, North Africa, India, Vietnam, Indonesia and so on. We did some work in some Chinese provinces but India was the big heart of the pie. *GF: So how did this early work with CESECA lead to what you are doing now?* **SC:** As a result of doing this work, I was approached by the UN and by the European Union to work in development because they needed people to do training, to set up training centres, to develop light industry; shoes, bags, garments and so on. We had this expertise and, by chance, I had started to develop this. So I was passionate about this and I started to do that as a consultant. I did it as a consultant for a while and then one day the chairman of the board of CESECA came to me and said, “Simone, you like working in development, you are always asking for leave to go abroad and work in development.” So I joined an organisation called PISIE which worked in development for the leather and footwear industry worldwide. It trained people about leather, bags, shoes, and so on all over the developing world. I think it has trained around 4,000 people worldwide, a huge amount of people. I was the Secretary General of the organisation but I was also doing my consultancy with the UN. After a short while the UN organisation asked me to go and create, and direct, a project for the leather industry in Ethiopia, and I accepted. I didn’t really want to leave Asia as I was emotionally attached, I was designing in those days in Indonesia, in Java – which was beautiful and then also in Ho Chi Minh City and I was very passionate about that – I loved PISIE, working in those places, but Ethiopia had something...and then I started also going to Kenya where I met these missionaries who taught me how to work with informal producers and this is where we had the idea, to work, not with the industry but to work with informal artisans, women, micro-entrepreneurs. This was the first emergence of ethical fashion. Let’s put the two things together. *GF: So that was the genesis of the Ethical Fashion Initiative itself, there in Ethiopia...* **SC:** I was in Ethiopia, but I was also working in Kenya, and while I was there, there was a vacancy in Geneva. I applied. I won the vacancy and when I got there I went to them and said, “Look, I have not told you the truth. I am not interested in the leather sector any more, I am interested in doing this thing (ethical fashion).” They said to me, “Do a business plan. We will give you the money for a trial, if you fail, you are out.” And it worked. Jeremy here, was one of the most promising designers in the UK...**Jeremy Brown:** Was one! (laughs). **SC:** In those days he was still very young, a promising designer and it was in those days that Jeremy joined us. We put together a team, outside the UN, a team not of bureaucrats, to be with us. People that I knew from my work in the industry. Step-by-step we developed the business model; first of all we don’t just work in Kenya, we work in Bukina Faso, in Mali and in Ghana... *GF: How does that process work, in terms of which countries are added to the Ethical Fashion Initiative. Does it happen organically?* **SC:** The market is demanding fabric, natural dyes...so I knew that these things would be available for example in Mali. We travelled extensively for a

while to see what was available in the communities in each area, and then we set up the programme there... *GF: So it is market-driven?* **SC:** It is always market-driven, yes. For example, one of the first five groups in fashion, one of the world’s biggest fashion groups, is just now working on a special project, on the creation of a textile which is why we are currently expanding to Palestine because they have the embroidery there and to South East Asia to get some silk. Recently Silvie, a colleague in Geneva, gave me some silk, which is indigenous from there, a rough silk and they weave it. We may expand to that as well...*GF: Can we talk about the economic model, which appears to be the foundation of the Ethical Fashion Initiative...* **SC:** Yes. The first part is product development. Jeremy has a whole team now in an office in London, because a lot of creative people are from there, and this is where we do the development of the idea based upon the materials we have. Then we do the sampling, the same as normal, the samples go into the fashion season and then through the fashion season, are sold, same as a normal fashion business. Then we organise production with the fashion houses, but the production has to happen in the communities that we are working in. So in order for the fashion houses to place an order in those communities they have to place an order with a production hub, a hub that we have set up within the community. This hub is a social enterprise, it’s a social enterprise that receives the order and organises production in the communities. The people in the communities are organised into cooperatives and individual enterprises. Here, people have their own current account, business administration, very simple. From us there is the building, the technical assistance and we co-manage this social enterprise along with local management in order to ensure that important values, the value of family and fresh food are upheld. We do one thing that is very important, we do an impact evaluation in order to understand the story of what we do, in order to understand the real impact, in order to know the metrics of development. This work is done by social workers and directed by an anthropologist and goes into the community centres as a survey, a social survey. Then we have the numbers of the change, in the life of the people – do people improve their diet, are they nourished, is the most common disease of the area decreased, are more children going to school? This is the way we check if what we are doing is good. **Rachael Churchward:** *Fantastic, you are constantly self-monitoring...* **SC:** A lot of people, a lot of brands they come to me and they say, “We will give work to Africa!” but how do you know that is it good? It is not always good, sometimes we discover that we have made mistakes but by having this way to check, you can correct yourself. We have found a lot of mistakes in our work by doing this but this is how you find out! *GF: I asked Murray Bevan (PR expert for Karen Walker) when we first saw the Karen Walker Visible campaign if the models that were wearing the glasses would actually get a pair of glasses each and he said he had asked the same question and the short answer was that they didn’t because within the village or community it might be seen as a type of favouritism and that the wearer may have them stolen from them or worse...that concept of slum economics and slum currency...* **SC:** Yes, slum economics is the economics of how people survive within a network of people and survive out of experience. In a slum, the reality of living is that every day you have to put some food on the table, and you don’t have the security of work so everyday you survive out of the network that you have with other people - you get to know an opportunity here, an opportunity there and you have to invent your work of the day. Even the shoemakers I was working with, these shoemakers were passing from one thing to the other. One day it was an opportunity for stitching some soles onto school shoes so they were going to schools and doing it there. Another

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day they found that a factory had opened and they needed some work shoes so they went to find the right leather for those work shoes. Another day, they would work for people who had just got a job as a housekeeper for a rich man. They would go to them and say, "I know that you need shoes to work in that man's house so I will make you some leather shoes out of your first salary," it's a continuous need for invention – to the extent that it makes these people extremely resourceful. In a slum you have to be resourceful, or, you fall into the other side of a slum, which is the pit. The pit from which you do not emerge any more and your life expectancy is between 34 and 42 which is very low, when you consider for us (Westerners) it is 78 or something similar. The first time I worked there many years ago, I had some white in my beard and I think I looked older than what I am and I was considered to be an old man. "I'm not so old," I said, "I'm forty!" "Well," they said, "you are not young!" (laughs). *GF: Tell us more about the luxury bag label Taytu which was established in the mid 1990's...* **SC:** Ahh, Taytu. This is what taught me what was the wrong road. There we went (into Ethiopia) with some formal companies and we invested in this brand. I also called in the designer, from Europe, who invested a lot personally into this brand. Then I brought in some informal artisans to work with the brand but the informal artisan's work was out. Two or three big local people, who were very rich, took the brand so I detached myself from it, I told them that I don't want to work with it any more - I don't think the brand has survived, that it had made some scarves, and that it may have failed. If it failed it was because it didn't have a clear marketing concept – like we have now – with regard to responsible fashion. It was not linked with a fashion house or a brand and that's what we learned, you have to develop it with a brand or for a brand, an existing brand...*RC: Not try to start a new one in the middle of Ethiopia...* **SC:** Yes, you need to have established distribution capacities in the global market. So, when Jeremy develops a product now with say Stella McCartney, these products are sold because Stella McCartney puts them into her market, we don't have to go and look for retail distribution for them. I had had enough of going to fairs with a suit case full of samples that we are trying to sell... also with Taytu, they completely excluded the reality of the artisans, the micro-producers, so they became something in between a small European factory and a small African factory. At the time, in Asia, their factories were so much better. You'd have China, India and those countries make things bloody well! In the world of today, you see some shoes that look like they have been made in England, the craftsmanship, but they are made in India...*RC: Beautifully made by artisans!* **SC:** They are perfect. You see some bags today, from Kolkata, you don't see the difference with a bag made in Europe because there is NO difference, even the leather is the same. *GF: We really like that the Ethical Fashion Initiative is primarily supporting women in these regions. Is that because most of the artisans are primarily women?* **SC:** It is because in these societies, women are discriminated against, highly discriminated against. They have become the backbone of their societies because they are the ones that are forced to invest what little money they have into the family, into education, into healthcare and development. So women are incredibly responsible. Investing in women is about investing in the future of these societies because whatever investment you make into women, it goes into development, it goes into health care and it goes into education. Unfortunately, in many of these

places, if you invest in men, it is not the same, you could well be investing in whiskey (laughs). I am Italian, I come from a very chauvinist country, they don't want to hear that in Italy but it is true. I am very glad that my daughters have grown up (away from Italy) because they have more opportunities. There are changes, the new Prime Minister has a cabinet which is nearly half women, it is very good. For a long time now though I have been working in teams, which are mostly women, with CESECA it was almost entirely women...**JB:** It is the same with us now though, we are literally the only two men! **SC:** Yes, the team is big but we are two of the only men...**JB:** We do work with men as well but the vast majority of the team are women, probably about 90% are women... *GF: That's fantastic, an abundance of empathy no doubt! What sort of roles do the men have then?* **JB:** We have some great men, like our logistics manager in Kenya, he is a guy and he is amazing. **SC:** He is amazing! **JB:** He comes from a slum, he is very morally conscious... he started in the most unskilled job possible and now he has advanced to become the logistics manager of the operation which is like, third in command...**SC:** Yes, third in command but he could easily be higher up than that...**JB:** Yes, definitely...*GF: So the hubs, are they all staffed and operated by local people, people local to the region?* **SC & JB:** Yes! Only local people...*RC: Fantastic!* **SC:** We travel a lot, Jeremy and I travel for 6-to-8 months of the year. The winning factor in a way, is for us to not be there all the time, otherwise it becomes run by us, directed from the outside when this belongs to these societies...*GF: They have to take responsibility for it?* **SC:** Yes, they are responsible for it all...**JB:** They are also their own enterprises, they are not part of the UN or anything like, that, they are self-supporting...**SC:** Each business is funded by trade, it is not funded by us. We can manage it...just to give you an idea, just last week we were in Geneva doing the ratios, the financial ratios just so we know where we are but these are all local companies, we just oversee it from the outside. There is one in Kenya, there is one in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso...and then we have one bigger hub in Ghana where we have just put in 65 stitching machines but that is bigger because the government gave us an industrial building. We don't have a hub in Mali, because in Mali we work within an existing community so we use their premises and we don't have any hub in Haiti because we work with an NGO and we use their premises. In Palestine we will have to see what we can do...*GF: Is Palestine the new frontier for the Ethical Fashion Initiative?* **SC & JB:** Yes...well there are a few new frontiers...**SC:** South East Asia...**JB:** Brazil...*GF: I was thinking about this yesterday, this is such a simple, yet big idea that can be extrapolated out to many, many countries; Papua New Guinea, Madagascar...there are so many countries that have incredible artisans, and thousands of years of history within that artisanal legacy...* **JB:** Pretty much all over the world... **SC:** But what we don't want to do is be involved in managing all of these (future hubs and societies), what we want to do is to pass on the information, educate these people on how to do it themselves, pass to people the knowledge of what to do and how to do it...**JB:** And connect...**SC:** Which is what we are doing in Brazil...**JB:** Yeah, exactly...**SC:** In Brazil we are passing on the knowledge to a new partner...**JB:** In Peru we are connecting two of our existing partners together and we will bring our knowhow to the field...**SC:** We will be a facilitator, manage directly these first things and then leave the others to facilitate. **JB:** Kenya was an incubator, a pilot to figure out how to work with the poorest



people and then how to share that knowledge with people all over the world. **RC:** *The potential for this seems to be enormous...* **JB:** In twenty years time, people will come to us because they want to innovate. They will want beautiful, hand-made, hand-crafted items from all over the world – it might be traditional skills (they are after) or it might be new materials mixed in with traditional skills in a small community somewhere – and they will be working directly with the community, the possibilities are endless. **SC:** Hopefully this will be a case of applying our system, which we developed in Kenya and are managing in Ghana, Burkina and Haiti but we will be giving it to someone else to manage... **JB:** ...but still to be accountable and to manage it properly... **GF:** *You did a project with Hands That Shape Humanity in 2012...* **SC:** Yes, that was with Myer and is when we first met Karen Walker and also worked with Sass & Bide... **GF:** *So are there other non-profit organisations like Hands That Shape Humanity that you can, like you say, hand the model over to?* **SC:** There are. There is an NGO in Palestine, in Haiti, and there is the National Movement of Recyclable Materials in Brazil who have come to Kenya already to learn our system of work and it is a big movement in Brazil, thousands of people, it is huge. Now, it is our aim to structure this knowledge, this know-how and our capacity to pass this on to these people... **JB:** More and more people are coming to us as well, in different regions, asking us if we can offer that service but we are really just now getting to that stage where we have these systems to share... **RC:** *Amazing, love what you are*

*doing...* **GF:** *It's fantastic, good on you... as a final question, how has the Karen Walker collaboration been for you, compared to some of the other partnerships, how has it differed?* **SC:** Karen has been a pleasure for two reasons. Firstly, because she deliberately selected and designed the product on the basis of our need to create work, she created a very simple product but full of handwork, beadwork and decoration so as to create work for the artisans. Secondly, she agreed to do a proper campaign... **JB:** She didn't even agree to, she suggested shooting a campaign! **SC:** Yes, it was her idea (laughs) and that's such a pleasure for us because usually we have to try and convince people to do a campaign, you have to push, you have to ask... **JB:** I think Mikhail had a lot to do with it... **SC:** I understand, because some of the others say they don't feel like they need to do a campaign because the products sell well anyway but if you tell the story as well as sell the products it is better for everyone... **JB:** It promotes the cause as well.. **RC:** *I think that will resonate with New Zealanders, we are very outward looking and we want to know why something is made in Africa, we want to know the story behind it...* **SC:** Yes, New Zealand is a very aware country and it has been such a pleasure to work with Karen because she is so...on board...she helps us do the real work, the work that matters... **GF & RC:** *Fantastic Simone and Jeremy, it's been a pleasure...* **SC:** We have enjoyed it very much, come to Africa!

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