

The adventures of Vivienne, QUEEN OF KIBERA

Punk doyenne Dame Westwood caused a stir in the slums of Nairobi when Juergen Teller shot her Ethical Fashion Africa collection campaign. *MARION HUME* joined her colourful entourage

Soo Hyun Hong, who works at Vivienne Westwood's HQ in southwest London, is perplexed. What can this email about "unrealistic expectations" from a UN agency called the ITC possibly mean? Who wouldn't expect that a location vehicle required for a fashion shoot would be fitted with rails, studio-style lighting and a steamer iron?

It hasn't crossed Hyun Hong's mind to check that there's a mirror. But, then, there isn't time for much to cross his mind. They only told him yesterday that Vivienne Westwood and the team are flying to Nairobi, Kenya, with Juergen Teller, the superstar photographer who shoots all of Westwood's ad campaigns (as well as those for Marc Jacobs, Céline and others). Hyun Hong's going too.

Fast-forward 24 hours and here we are in Kibera, the biggest slum in Africa, estimated to have 23 times the population density of Manhattan but without skyscrapers, so just imagine how packed it is on the ground. Westwood is shimmying into a golden gown that carries a price tag beyond what it costs to buy a house here. (The dress is not outrageously expensive, although to many slum dwellers, a simple home with a door that locks and a cold water tap is beyond their wildest dreams.) Hyun Hong is lying on the floor of an old bus, trying to wrestle free a spangled stiletto that went airborne after we hit a pothole, almost taking model Elsie Njeri's ▶



Vivienne Westwood with model Elsie Njeri beside the railway tracks running through Kibera in Kenya, Africa's largest slum. Photographed by Juergen Teller.

eye out. And that was while she was being lashed by a fake-fur chubby, swinging wildly from a wonky clothes rail. Maybe Njeri thinks that's normal on a fashion shoot, given it's her first. She turned up at an open casting, taking a day off from university.

The location van is certainly "new", which is to say that just hours ago, it had paying passengers aboard — as it will again once the seats are back in place. Last night, metalworkers stripped the interior and soldered in a rail which isn't straight. But, then, if you'd grown up in a lean-to dwelling off a gully running with raw sewage, how familiar might you be with straight lines?

Westwood steps out onto the dirt, shoves a crown down on her tangerine hair, uses the wing mirror as she smears on her lippy and off she trots, posing with Njeri on the railway tracks that bring commuters from richer parts of Nairobi right through Kibera every day. Nearby is Westwood's swaggering pirate of a husband, Andreas Kronthaler (she is 70, he is 46). By now, Hyun Hong, the



Westwood in the makeshift location van



The crew arrives in rural Laikipia, an area hard hit by drought



At work on the new collection at the hub of the Ethical Fashion Initiative, at The CoDown Arts Centre, Nairobi

“We want to bring the world’s attention to the contrast between what we have in the rich countries and the fact that poverty like this exists. So both sides are winning.”
— Christopher di Pietro

details guy, is there with his duct tape, glitter powder, safety pins and clothes brush. He is so focused that he doesn't notice the ring of men sporting menacing machete scars. They are the security. Without them (and it has happened), a bus full of foreigners might be stripped of everything, including their lunch.

While Juergen Teller snaps the scene with a pair of little Contax G2 cameras, Christopher di Pietro, who is the marketing and merchandising director of Vivienne Westwood (which, despite the wild antics and crazy runway shows, is a multimillion-dollar business), looks on. “I’m used to surreal, but I think this takes the biscuit,” he says. But what the hell do those who have nothing think? How do they feel about the fashion world using the day-to-day grind of their lives as a backdrop for frocks?

Why not ask them? (Many Kenyans are trilingual, speaking a tribal language, Swahili and English. Those who don't will usually grab a passer-by to translate.) A group of guys has gathered. Some are using toothpicks, a sign of wealth because it implies they have eaten meat, although probably haven't.

Others film the goings-on on mobile phones (it is not unusual for those who have never had a landline, given they've never had a permanent home, to have mobiles). “What do you think?” I ask two men called Nixon Ochieng and Eric Ochieng — not brothers, they tell me, but friends. “I can't find words to explain because this is not something we are used to over here,” says Nixon. “So I lack the words to say what is happening in me and those in the crowd.” And Eric? “Esteem is riding high. This is a great moment. People feel at the peak of their lives.” Is this because there's a beautiful model in Kibera?

They seem unsure which female I'm referring to. “The beauty of a well-dressed woman is a prize, but for men in the slum, the need is for a stronger woman who will work and supplement the male,” Eric says. And what about Westwood being 70? Slums are violent and disease-ridden. The life expectancy of a male is 35; for women it is 47. Eric and Nixon drift away. They must think I take them for fools or something.

But while other men linger, women hurry past. Why won't they talk to me? Are they angry about this? I ask Vincent

Oduor, who was born in a slum and is now studying for a master's. “They can't stay because the children grow hungry. Some are shopping; some are on their way to wash and do the laundry. This is contrasted to the men, as you can see,” he says. Then a gaggle of girls saunters by. I stop one wearing a T-shirt with the slogan “Mary is my Home Girl” above an image of the Virgin Mary. “I admire that lady that she can still show her beauty.” And a fashion shoot here? “It's a very positive message that we do not strive and struggle on our own.”

Teller, with two cameras in hand, turns his attention to Westwood's husband. “It's good,” he says, as he snaps Kronthaler wearing skin-tight jogging pants and outré shoes, leaning nonchalantly against an old car. Meanwhile, Hyun Hong has spread a collection of bags on a blanket, in imitation of a nearby stall selling plastic baskets.

Oduor and I calculate that the collective price of Westwood bags would feed a family for three months, while the total cost for the plastic baskets, piled equally high, is four dollars. Which might locals prefer? “I like this,” one woman says, pointing at a Westwood tote. “I like the bright colours and I could carry in it everything I need.”

But that's enough. Slums are not places you linger, and Simone Cipriani, a bearded Italian who knows how things can turn terrifying in a heartbeat, is urging us back on the bus. “I think this is going to be the best shoot that we've ▶

ever done," says Kronthaler as he walks over. "All the other brands just have a model with a bag and everything looks the same, but doing it this way looks great."

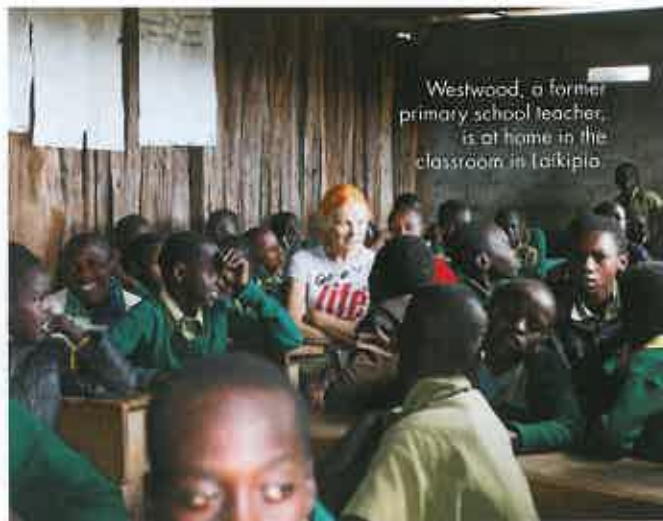
"We are treading a fine line," adds di Pietro. "What we want is to bring the world's attention to the contrast between what we have in the rich countries and the fact that poverty like this exists. The whole idea is for the sake of mutual gain, so both sides are winning."

But there is more to all this. I'm not about to launch into a charitable plea that you should buy a Westwood bag and save a slum dweller. The methodology behind what may look like madness is instead lifting not one or two but thousands out of poverty, long-term, through fair work that gives them the opportunity to change their lives. Cipriani helms the International Trade Centre's (ITC) Ethical Fashion Initiative. Just another do-good scheme? Much more. Here's the serious bit. As the 21st century dawned, the UN urged those lucky enough to be born in the rich parts of the world to pledge billions to make things fairer for everyone else, this through a bunch of MDGs (Millennium Development Goals). One of these is the empowerment of women, because if we are equal to men — well, we all know why that works.

The ITC puts policy into practice and harnesses the power of fashion as a vehicle out of poverty. Designers didn't show up overnight. For five years, those with no skills were given the support to acquire them, in crafts and in management. Early samples showcased stitching as wonky as that clothes rail.

Cipriani is not your average trade-not-aid worker, given he grew up in Florence and has three fashion-savvy teenage daughters to keep him on trend. As for partnering with Westwood, he sees her as the queen. He turned up at her London offices to pay court with a box of beads and bits of crochet and screen-printing on old tents. The breakthrough for the slum artisans was brass; they strip old dumped cars and reclaim it. The Westwood team spotted a rough nugget and imagined an iconic Vivienne Westwood brass orb. Very regal indeed.

The mantra of this huge initiative is "Not charity, just work". It links marginalised people to the top of the



Westwood, a former primary school teacher, is at home in the classroom in Laikipia.



An artisan works on a Vivienne Westwood orb.

fashion chain for mutual benefit, which means haggling for the top price if you are talking with a mercantile villager.

Next, we head to a Maasai village — a real one of broken down *manyatta* hovels; not a photo op. Jackie Nayelu walks for hours each day, decked out in her beaded finery, to work for The Ethical Fashion Initiative in a senior role. But the trouble is, she's gone home ahead of us and now we can't find where she lives. The Maasai, forced by drought off ancient lands, are squatters and often get moved on. "I thought it would be here, but it has moved," says Cipriani. So we have to walk further, puffing up and down hills, our hands pressed in front of us as if in prayer, except it's actually to avoid the vicious stinging nettles.

I walk between Westwood and Kronthaler and she is jumpy. "Andreas, where shall I go?" she says.

'Oh, God, Viv, I think, 'you can't need the loo here.' The Maasai welcome us with singing, and Westwood dives into a goat pen, which makes me wonder if Karl Lagerfeld would be so adaptable.

But she doesn't need to pee. As she re-emerges having changed into her six-inch Rocking Horse wedges, the head woman comes into view with what looks like a beaded Sputnik protruding out of the top of her head. The two women look aghast at one another. The thought bubbles might read: "What the eff do you have on your feet?" "What the eff do you have on your head?"

Maasai culture is patriarchal and far removed from the picturesque images

of supermodels jumping up and down with men with spears. It's straight down to business. First, what will we buy? Kronthaler is an expert shopper and I feel obligated when I see stuff spread out on blankets. With an extravagant necklace I will never wear (although I'll see Kronthaler backstage at the Paris show in his), together we spend \$20, enough to feed a family for a few weeks. But the head woman isn't interested in trinkets. She shows Westwood the latest work: black leather cuffs beaded in white with "Sex" and "Too old to live, too young to die" on them. She wants a bigger order.

Through the work they do for Westwood, these women have replaced cattle that died in the drought and, in doing so, have restored the

masculinity of their men and earned themselves and their daughters less brutal lives. To thank Westwood, they present her with a beaded stick. "Oh, I've no use for it, you see," says this multimillionaire, who, when her husband finally persuaded her to move from a tiny flat into a fine 18th-century house, arrived not with a removal truck but with three carrier bags. The stick is taken on Westwood's behalf. Later, when she understands how a man with the stick has the right to speak and so now she will speak on behalf of the women, she claims it, then blogs about the responsibility it brings. Westwood takes nothing lightly.

Next, we will head north to a barren land where Vivienne Westwood bags are saving the elephants — it's true. That's another chapter, featuring different designers including sass & bide. It is, logically, too demanding to expect people who have never owned a coat to make them, so what is produced is mostly bright, summery accessories. But what to do for the autumn/winter season? Invite the most vibrant duo from the Southern Hemisphere to get aboard the bus.

The hottest bag right now? I wish I could give you a sneak peek at the fabulous sass & bide creations, but you can't hurry things here. You'll definitely want one, though. Trust me and the community artisans of Africa on that. ■

Vivienne Westwood's Ethical Fashion Africa autumn/winter 2011-12 collection is available from www.yoox.com and www.viviennewestwood.co.uk.