

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: WESTWOOD IN THE NGONG HILLS, NAIROBI, AMONG THE MASAI WOMEN WHO WORKED ON THE BEADING FOR HER A/W '12 COLLECTION; VIRGIN'S NEW CREW UNIFORM; VIVIENNE WESTWOOD GOLD LABEL VOGUE 2007; WESTWOOD AND BRANSON, HEAD TO HEAD

SKY'S *the limit*

She's a fashion provocateur and eco-activist. He's a billionaire businessman. Together, can Vivienne Westwood and Richard Branson turn the aviation industry green? By Violet Henderson



MARIO TESTINO; CHLOE MUIKAI; GEMMA DAY; JASON LLOYD-EVANS

Vivienne Westwood is dressed as an airline stewardess. And she looks surprisingly comfortable. Her screaming-red ensemble has a cinched-in waist, flared sleeves and a hint of a bustle. It is unmistakably her own design. She cocks her head, raises a pink eyebrow and, it appears, Virgin Atlantic's first new uniform in a decade has take-off. A dozen Virgin employees applaud. It's only when the 71-year-old designer attempts to make a break for it that things come undone. The grandmother of punk has swapped her trademark platforms for squeaky red stilettos and from the dramatic wobble of her heel, it seems she hasn't worn anything this flimsy for a while.

Richard Branson looks on, bemused. He recalls: "If I'd asked Vivienne to make my company a uniform 35 years ago, she'd have marched me straight to the door." But, back then, she was young, hotheaded and married to Malcolm McLaren. And besides, Branson didn't yet have an airline, only a record label – to which he'd just signed the Sex Pistols, managed by McLaren and dressed by Westwood in punk's anti-uniform. What changed? "Oh, she's

still anti-capitalist, but now she runs a capitalist company, so she's against the current form of capitalism..." He stumbles, and takes a sip of coffee. "Actually, you'll have to ask her about her politics."

Fortunately Westwood is here to talk about just that. She dismisses questions about silhouettes and fabrics with a wave of her hand, "I am wasting time talking about this." This is a woman with an agenda: to save the economy and the planet. "They're the same problem. Nothing is costed properly and it's destroying the earth," she says. "We need to re-educate people that what is good for the planet is good for the financial system." The "we" refers to her own ecological movement, Climate Revolution, that she launched dramatically, dressed as a pirate, beneath a banner at the Paralympic Closing Ceremony (all of >

SPOTLIGHT

which came as a bit of a surprise to the organisers). Now the pressure is on. She and her revolutionaries believe they have until the next Olympics to halt global warming. "Or it'll get hotter and hotter, with more floods and disasters. Only a billion people will survive. There will be warlords in some parts of the world, rape and pillage. England will have to try and fight off people coming to live here in boats..." The designer covers her eyes with her long fingers.

Given the apparent severity of the situation then, it's not immediately obvious why she is designing a uniform for those who operate carbon-spewing aircraft at a profit. But Virgin is, as airlines go, ecologically minded, ever since an incensed Al Gore banged on Branson's front door in 2006 to deliver a four-hour lecture on the danger of climate change. The airline owner subsequently pledged a decade of his company's profits to research into cleaner energy. And these Westwood uniforms are being developed with the very latest recycling technology for environmental sustainability.

The eco-warrior is only vaguely aware of the uniform's ecological credentials ("I'm not sure if they've made the suits out of plastic bottles or what"), but she hopes to "find out what they've been doing for future reference". Instantly, a Virgin PR appears before her, politely waving a sheet black with information on their joint venture's recycled-polyester count and its nanotech-finishing statistics. Westwood moves the conversation on. "I don't like planes," she bristles, her Irn-Bru-colour hair glinting fiercely beneath the studio lights. She asks: "Why would you travel when you can read a book?" before making the audible mental note to "tell whoever books my company's air tickets to reduce flights by 50 per cent this year". The Virgin PR looks desperate. Westwood just blinks.

She clearly relishes any opportunity to damage consumer business – her own included – and developed the motto: "Buy less. Choose well. Make it last." She says she is doing her best to prevent Vivienne Westwood's expansion (despite China's other intentions), and lately she's been toying with reducing her production. This less-is-more philosophy has its roots in her punk days. "Nowadays people just shop.

During punk they really tried to put a look together," she says despairingly. But while her principles of economy are political, they are not always politically correct. Discussing a luxury-goods conference she attended in Africa, Westwood bemoaned how "all anyone wanted to talk about was the new emerging middle classes there. I know people who fought apartheid who are saying they didn't fight it for these African rich kids who all just want the latest consumer-icon stuff." And, later, advocating self-sufficiency, she suggests women should consider "not having a career, paying the nanny the same wage



they receive themselves just because they want to work. It might be better if a woman had a little allotment and looked after baby herself."

Westwood herself isn't going to shut up shop. She's too savvy for that. And besides, she harrumphs, "another person would just do my job". As it is, "I can use this wonderful platform to influence things." She agitates by calling her collections provocative names: "Chaos", "Propaganda", even "Climate Revolution", which don't bear connection to the clothes on the runway. Her autumn/winter 2013 Gold Label show went under the banner "Save the Arctic" to drum up awareness for the project she is working on with Greenpeace.

The list of charities the designer is actively involved with is eye-watering: she's designed bags for Ethical Africa; T-shirts for the Environmental Justice Foundation; and necklaces for Reprieve. She's travelled down the Amazon for Cool Earth; campaigned for Leonard Peltier and Julian Assange's freedom; and works as a patron for Liberty. She says she contacts "literally hundreds" of NGOs herself, and no, she never gets tired. Her conversation is filled with references to people fighting special environmental battles all around the globe. And she is perfectly capable of citing niche cases of

environmental transgression, such as African lettuce farming that deprives the locals of their minimal water supply. Steve Hilton even asked Westwood to meet him at Downing Street to discuss the rainforest. Model Jacquetta Wheeler, who worked with the designer extensively for the charity Reprieve, observes: "She doesn't just put her name to things, she really does something and she's not afraid to speak out for what she believes in. Vivienne is quite a force of nature."

Pulling at the hem of her skirt, Westwood reveals what motivates her is injustice. "It's absolutely dreadful that some people get the luck and live their life, and others are blown up in a few hours of being born." Earlier, when she brushed off Branson's ecological mission as "the satisfaction of his conscience", she may well have also been talking about herself. Vivienne says that if she ruled the world, the first thing she would do is ban advertising. But she advertises. And she loves it.

"We work with one of the greatest photographers in the world, Juergen Teller, and those sessions are wonderful," she says, before remembering to reiterate how advertising prevents personal choice.

Branson kisses Westwood goodbye and the designer extends an accusatory finger, "You haven't answered my question. Will there be more planes or less?" Branson looks blank. Vivienne presses on. "In the future. Will there be less planes or more?" Branson sighs and says he thinks that there will always be demand for travel, but if they make jet fuel green, this need not be such a problem. Vivienne shakes her head, smooths down her red pencil skirt and teeters off in the direction of the nearest clearly marked exit. ■