

Projects & Personalities

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Words by Mark Smith

BYBORRE



A COMPLEX YARN

It's all very well being on the "inspiration circuit", but as material innovator Borre Akkersdijk says, "that's not business, it's entertainment". To make innovation profitable the scale has to be towards the market. But what kind of market? There's nothing "fast" about ByBorre's own products and collaborations – unless you are talking about the speed at which samples can be turned around.

The man pushing the frontier of materials development is on his hands and knees clearing a barely there smattering of spilled coffee grounds from the office kitchen floor and swearing in his native Dutch.

"We have a bit of a coffee situation," says 35-year-old Borre Akkersdijk, switching to English before taking a seat at the table adjacent to a set of pristine white double doors bearing the notice Restricted Area: Authorised Research Personnel. Beyond those doors are incredibly sophisticated computerized circular machines by Santoni. Coupled with his aesthetic sense of fabrics, mastering these machines has seen him develop his practice from experimental knitwear to boundary-pushing textiles that attract clients-partners from across the world.

Sporadically over the course of our conversation in the spacious, split-level facility on Naritaweg in the Amsterdam suburb of Sloterdijk, the doors swing open, the low factory thrum of mechanized knitting intensifies and a member of Akkersdijk's 29-strong workforce emerges with a stack of packages to be dispatched via courier. "Mind you don't hide the logo," he reminds a colleague applying tape to a cardboard box. "It's the first thing they'll see."

Clearly Akkersdijk is a details person, and unapologetically so. In fact, he argues that it's an indif-

ference to detail that has made the global fashion industry the unwieldy and unsustainable juggernaut of overproduction that we know it to be.

"Eightypercentoftheenvironmental impact of a garment is the direct result of design decisions," he says. And yet manufacturers are so focused on volumes, sell-through and the desire to reduce margins that the question of where to source materials is wrought with absurd and counterproductive compromises. It's akin, says Akkersdijk, to a shopper who finding that there are no eggs left at the supermarket settles on lemons instead.

"Sure, a lemon is almost the same colour and almost the same shape as an egg," says Akkersdijk. "But it's not going to give you the same dish in the end."

Like his personal assistant Matthijs, Akkersdijk is wearing pieces from Edition7 of his iterative ByBorre label. The overall aesthetic is clearly informed by the shapes and structures of competitive judo, a huge part of Akkersdijk's childhood spent in Nijmegen, which was not without its challenges. Money was tight, his devoted single mother torn between the demands of work and family.

And although he says that pictures of his work have "been on the inspiration board of the Nikes of this world for 12 years", the output is

intrinsically resistant to imitation in any meaningful sense. Take the loose-fitting turtleneck sweater with draw-cord hem and characteristic black tape edging. The two yarns forming the intricate patterns commissioned by Amsterdam artist Jeroen Erosie are the result of meticulous material research. One is "a nylon that's coloured with coffee waste to make it more sustainable", the other is a merino wool in the exact off-white colour that nature intended.

His black drop-crotch trousers, featuring strategically placed Gore-Tex panels, are the result of a very Dutch experience. "When you're biking to a meeting in a light rain shower, you want a degree of waterproofing down the front, but you don't want to change on arrival and you certainly want to be sitting on something comfortable, like jersey."

Designed for years of heavy wardrobe rotation, these clothes sell for substantial sums in stores such as Dover Street Market and Browns. They also act as a calling card for ByBorre Create – the four-step collaborative process whereby brands entrust Akkersdijk's lab with the creation of custom textiles for specific purposes.

The diverse results can currently be enjoyed in salubrious contexts including the seamless, interactive knitted interior of BMW's concept car cabin, the textured covers of

Natuzzi Italia's Circle of Harmony range of sofas, and on a quirky drop of bags celebrating 85 years of the cult Japan-based brand Porter.

In the process, Borre and his team have the opportunity to "nudge" influential clients towards making the right decisions. The dense teal panels on the Porter bags are made from ByBorre's 100% recycled polyester yarn called A03 (Attachment Only 3 Layer), for example.

ByBorre Create isn't available to just anyone; the online application stipulates that only fellow trailblazers will be admitted. Ex-Lanvin resuscitator Alber Elbaz made the grade last year when he came to ByBorre with a brief integral to his new Riche-mont-backed project, AZ Factory.

"He said, I want to create couture but it needs to look like couture and feel like sportswear," recalls Akkersdijk, "so we connected him with our yarn developer in Spain who created a very high protective recycled nylon that's super stretchy." Once woven at the ByBorre lab, it creates what *The New York Times* approvingly calls "the three-dimensional effect of opulence" for dresses that can be crushed and packed and sat upon.

A patchwork-covered mattress propped against the glass wall of the boardroom and visible from Akkersdijk's desk (no laptop, plenty of boxes of sneakers) speaks to the light bulb moment that began all of this. It came while Akkersdijk was a student at Design Academy Eindhoven, looking for "volume textiles" to make a stool for his degree project. He arranged a placement at the Innofa mattress factory, where he became fascinated by the computer-aided process that was being used to edge the mattresses.

"I looked at it and all the little dots it was making so that the filling yarn didn't come out. I thought, wow, I

would love to make a jacket out of that. I just immediately thought of A-POC by Issey Miyake."

An acronym for "a piece of cloth," A-POC is the manufacturing method the Japanese visionary used to create clothing from a single thread in a single computerized process. Akkersdijk reprogrammed the knitting machine at the mattress factory to make "different patterns and stripes. I changed the capabilities of the software to make them go bigger."

Little did he know that just a few years later he would come face to face with Miyake himself. In 2010 the ex-director of his degree course, the celebrated trend forecaster Li Edelkoort, took Akkersdijk to Tokyo. Akkersdijk was there to assist Edelkoort's "forever boyfriend," Anthon Beeke, who was recovering from a stroke at the time – and to set up an exhibition that Edelkoort was headlining called *21_21 Design Sight*.

But on arrival, Edelkoort took him to buy a smart jacket before whisking him off to a lavish event that turned out to be Miyake's birthday party.

"He said, 'I'm so happy to meet you, I've heard all about you and your graduation,' and the next day we met up and he gave me the watch from his wrist."

This wasn't the only gift Edelkoort proceeded to give Akkersdijk, "two envelopes, one containing money and another with the addresses of all the places I should visit".

Weaving his way between appointments with *le tout Tokyo*, Akkersdijk didn't stick out as much as you might expect of a six-foot Dutchman with red curly hair. "Because I'd been on the tatami five times a week, it felt very normal to bow to people," he says. So formative was this entrée into the highest echelons

of the Japanese design world, he would retrace his steps four years later when business took him back to Tokyo. "Same hotels, same everything."

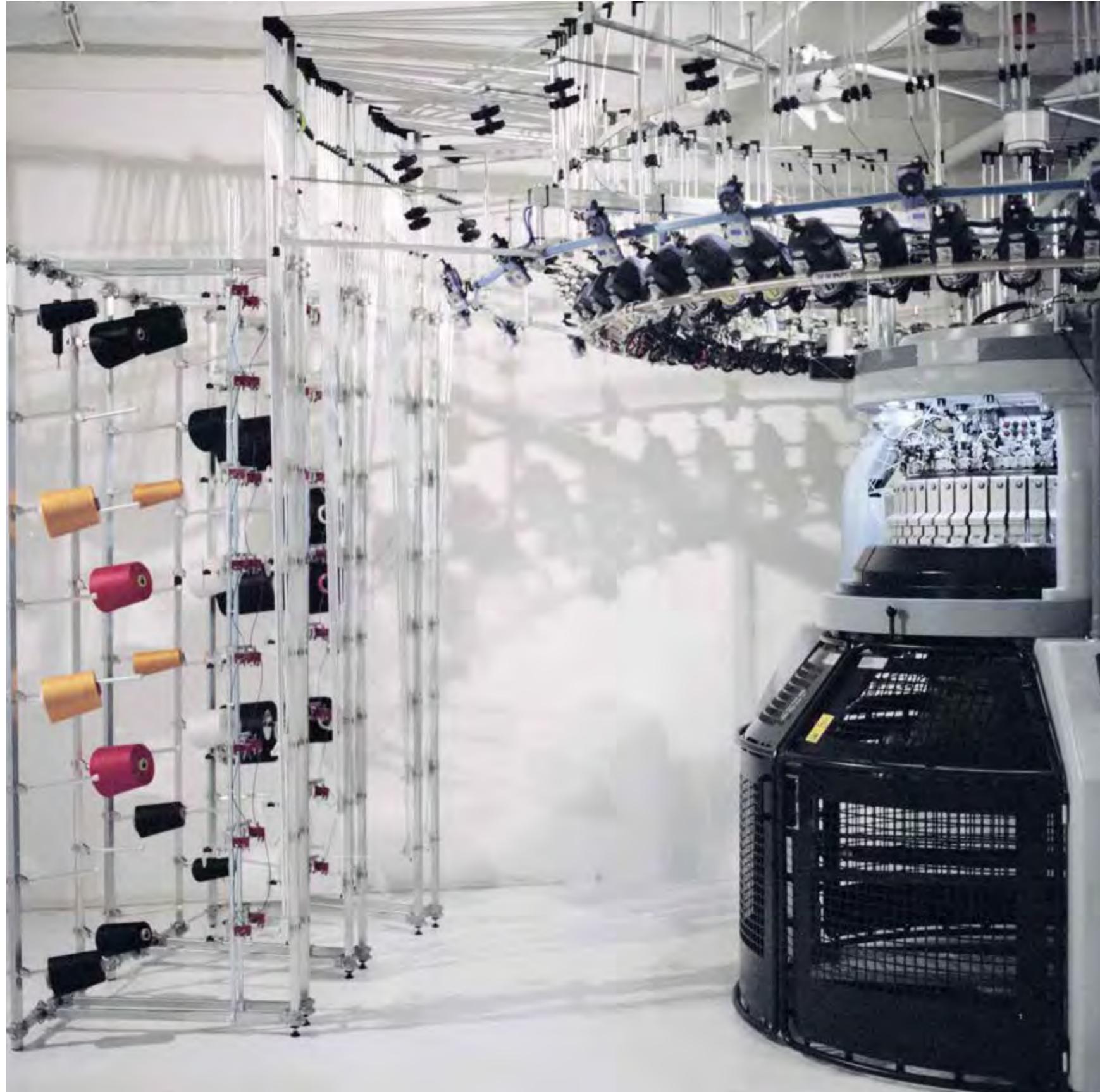
By this point in his career Akkersdijk was a regular on what he calls "the inspiration circuit" – being wheeled out at conferences to demonstrate what might be possible, in theory, were they not so hampered by the system.

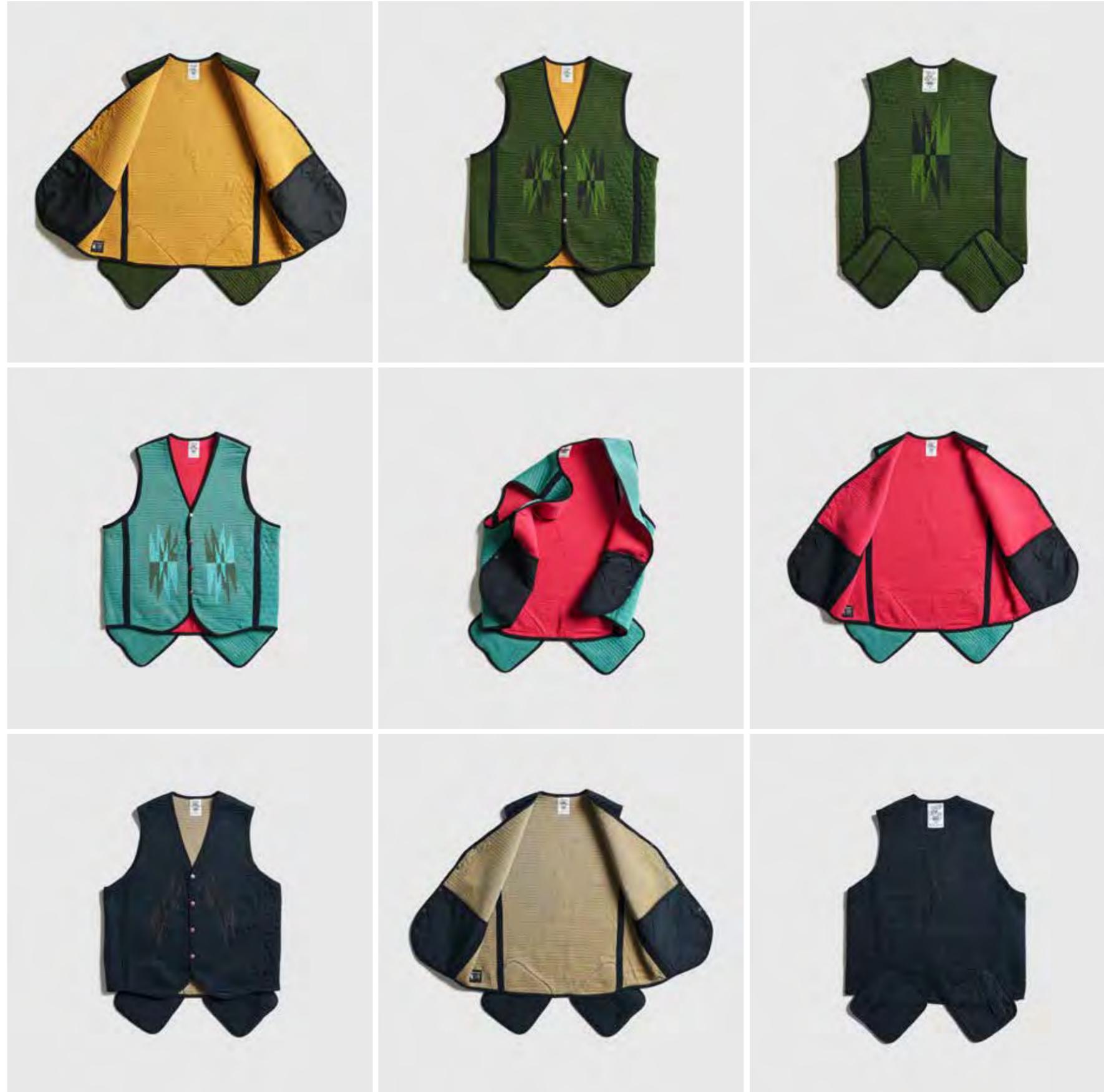
"I was on the big stages," he says, "but that's not a business, it's entertainment."

He credits Nike Flyknit running shoes, and the extraordinary showcase they received at the London 2012 Olympics, with mainstreaming the idea of knit as a credible high performance material.

"The funny thing is that [Flyknit] was rolled out because it used less yarn, less construction – all money decisions. It became a functional thing, but the machines it was made on were actually very slow. I was already working on circular machines that were much faster and could do more surface – the saving could be spent on better yarns."

By 2015 ("I'm not bad at knowing how much I'm worth or knowing what I'm doing is worth, so I can value") it was time for a change. "I'd done textile development since 2008, I'd worked at Li Edelkoort. I'd developed for Nike, Moncler, Volvo literally by myself, I was the consultant who was there for the marketing stories, the little taps on the shoulder. I made some money and I got around but I couldn't build a business – it was project-related and always innovative. But everyone knows innovation in itself isn't profitable – you have to scale it towards the market. So I was actively looking at that and I truly believed that the new world is the tech world."





Enter Arnoud Haverlag, a self-described “Amsterdam-based entrepreneur and adrenaline junkie” who joined the business as CEO. Last year, the pair announced that ByBorre had received €3.2 million in series A funding (stages of start-up and venture capital financing) to expand the company’s global on-demand production network.

“I’m not a money guy but I built a business with my business partner,” says Akkersdijk. “At my core I’m a creative but I’m also an assembler. I understand what you have to bring together to make it work.” The lab, he says, is “a place where we can really test, play, and make mistakes without losing time due to travel, importing and exporting goods long distances, and relying on third parties to bring something new to the table.”

It has the capacity to turn around samples in an astonishing five days. Beyond that, production happens as close to market as possible. He intends to set up knit hubs in Japan and the US in the coming years.

“A lot of people rely on their [supply] partners for innovation. We educate our partners to become more innovative.” He says that with any new factory, ten out of ten times it’s going to go wrong. In the past, he’s credited judo with his persistence: “I learned a lot from it at a really young age – that things go wrong sometimes or that not everything is going how you want it to go.”

Before I leave, Akkersdijk takes me on a tour of the knitting machines behind the door. Each machine is accompanied by a machine engineer. One sample in progress is for a small but highly respected conceptual design studio that has apparently eschewed collaboration with a global textile company to work with ByBorre. Another machine is turning out prototypes for blankets featuring a cartoon character

whose guardians are notoriously picky about whom they work with. Also in progress is an eye-catching panel of suiting for a billion dollar fashion megabrand.

So that’s what the immediate future has in store for Borre Akkersdijk. But what’s his prediction for the bigger picture?

With characteristic specificity, he tells me he can foresee a playground in which children will frown on the wearing of brightly coloured garments because of the unnecessary amounts of dye and pollution involved in their production. Exceptions, he says, will be made on the grounds of functionality. “For example, if it’s a sailing jacket.”

Only in a world with Borre Akkersdijk in it could this slightly Margaret Atwood-esque scenario sound like a fun no-brainer. <