

# A Collective (Despite Itself) That Delivers the Goods

By GUY TREBAY

fashion show the designers of As Four begin with the audience being anesthetized, Sleeping Beauty-style. The harmless potion takes hold, they in with their crew and switch the model's clothes for things of their own invention. When the spell lifts and the fashion people awaken, they find that they are not exactly new people, certainly not the same as before.

So American, that idea of the maker, one of the designers, who goes by the name Ange, said of their off-kilter party. "Of course," said Kai, one of her collaborators, "we would be sued to death if we did this, and we would live happily forever after." Taking a quick puff of his cigarette, Kai added, "So, we will be doing this particular fantasy during Fashion Week."

At four o'clock on a frigid afternoon, the designers of As Four, a fashion collective that resists that designation, gathered in a fourth-floor Chinatown loft where they work and sleep and also create their clothes: sinuous reptilian jeans, futuristic disk-shape bags and garments of complexity and surprising chic that have their makers something approaching cult status.

They are strange arrangements in any case, and the fashion sort can be considerably particularly suspect. A coherent ideology seems to go missing, for starters, replaced by vaporous environmentalist statements or a nutty iconoclasm that inevitably raises the question, How does one oppose the system and still get good placement in it?

The As Four cult is small and healthy,

## As Four, designers with cult status.

led chiefly by style hounds hungry for something creative to report on; by downbeat personages like Bjork, who remain content to sport their surrealism in the streets; and by buyers for stores like Barneys New York and Seven, which pace fashion-patronizing designers with talents that are not easy to categorize.

Kim Hastreiter, the editor of Paper magazine, said, "Their silhouettes are interesting, they invented the disk bag that everybody copied, and they work in this organic, intuitive way that is completely their own." Hastreiter's view is far from unique. In the fashion news-features department, *Vogue* has compared the group's work to the sculptural innovations of James Julie Gilhart, the fashion director of Barneys, said of As Four that the designers "constantly surprise you by looking things that tweak your imagination." In December, the judges for the Ecco Fashion Foundation selected As Four among 50 entrants to share a new \$100,000 grant for innovative talent.

Other designers chosen include the minimalist Peter Som, the 21-year-old Mac Posen, the luxury dressmaker Crocker and Tess Giberson, whose garments are sewn by hand. Unlike the winners of the grant, which is used for mounting a show during Fashion Week (Feb. 8 to 15), As Four has yet to announce firm plans. In fact, it has yet to announce its clothes.

"Sometimes you want to roll your eyes," Hastreiter said, "but, at the same time, they always deliver things that are beautifully designed and beautifully constructed." Some of those things are twill geometric-prints (\$411.11), an ingeniously wrap-around top" (\$1,111.11) and tulle and

RIGHT The clothes of the As Four designers have complexity and surprising chic, as in this top. Start by putting the hands through the holes.

MIDDLE The wraparound in place.

FAR RIGHT "They're completely organic and inventive," one editor said.



The As Four designers, from left, Ange, Gabi, Adi and Kai, at the silver-painted fourth-floor loft in Chinatown where they live and work. The dress form is embellished with tulle and crystal pins made from recycled scraps. Powder, right.

crystal pins made from recycled scraps (\$188.88). The prices reflect the group's idiosyncratic play on numbers.

At the moment, As Four seems unruffled by the tight deadline. After all, when the group held its September 2000 fashion show, "The Botanical and Zoological Kindergarten of As Four," it chose a date and sent out invitations before even obtaining a space. "They're real artists who are not into being commercial," said Ms. Hastreiter, who also served as a judge for the fashion awards, which Ecco Domani, an Italian winemaker, set up last fall. "They're completely organic and inventive. They're the true indies, the kind of people New York as a city should subsidize."

In a spiritual sense, New York already does. Where else might a woman from Tajikistan (Ange), whose shaved eyebrows impart to her the lunar beauty of a Memling madonna, fall in with an Israeli (Adi) given to chubby fur jackets and gravity-defying coiffures; a Lebanese-reared Palestinian

(Gabi), who sets off his aquiline profile by wearing his dark hair in an asymmetrical wave; and a handsome German (Kai), whose platinum crew cut and lavish cigarette ash give him the look of someone who wandered in from a Fasshinder film.

"Write that we're so poor that we have no heat and have to wear our clothes indoors," Kai said. It should be noted that the clothes in question were extravagantly reworked furs.

Blue dusk light filtered in through the loft window and was reflected off the silver-painted studio interior. The designers sat at a large round silver table. The seating included silvered stools and salvaged invalid chairs. Powder, the group's white dog, wore a pink tulle ruff as she skittered across the floor.

Hanging on racks nearby were examples of As Four's extraordinary inventions. There was a pair of rubber trousers with layered segments that resemble scales. There was a dress form supporting the

beginnings of a ribbon garment stitched into calligraphic volutes by hand. There were patterns on hangers for the improbable disk-shape purses that were widely photographed last year and that came into being, Kai said, as a joke.

"The first time we had that bag," he explained, "we took some paper and made a hole and stuck an arm through it, and we laughed." They made the bag next in canvas and then in leather, then saw it depicted in fashion magazines and, soon enough, quoted rather closely by Helmut Lang.

If this disturbed the designers, they were too cautious to remark on it. Their focus, they say, is not so much on outside influences as on what happens within the group. They came together in the mid-1990's — first the two women, Ange and Adi, who were working as fashion stylists; and then Gabi, recently divorced and defected from a mainstream designing career that included a stint with Kate Spade; and then Kai, who appeared at the group's doorstep when the



The team's disk-shape bag started as a joke in paper and ended in leather.

tenement where he had been living alone.

Yet, as Gabi insisted, they are a collective. "The girls met and ran into boys, and we stuck together, that's how it happened," she said.

The idea of collectives, he added, was not new. In the late 90's, when the effort to create a plausible fashion avant-garde took the form of amorphous design groups with no titles, reminiscent of the Baader-Mein Kampf group, there were Orfi (Organization for Fashion Interest), Co. of Unemployed People and Daughters of Style, among others. "They were not real collectives," Kai said. "It was just press."

Some of those groups, as Ms. Hastreiter pointed out, were more than reality. "The problem always is, 'Where is it? How do you get it?'" Any apparent vagueness, in the case of As Four, is deceiving. In the few years since the four friends came together, they have produced four collections, staged a downtown spectacle and put out a line of garments affiliated with Seventh on Sixth, their garments were displayed on mechanical dolls. They have sold not only in New York but also at Paris and at Bus Stop, the essential depot in Tokyo.

This is not to suggest that they have been swept up by the style pack or that the grant from Ecco Domani does not have the nick of time.

"The fashion system is stuck on itself," Gabi said. "There's no room for people like us."