

Transition Sneakers

Mauro Massaroto shoes, available in dozens of funky prints and colors, are turned into a symbol for transition.

By Ana Tajder

Here are sneakers with a very interesting story. Believe it or not: Sneakers as a symbol of a socio-political transition. Once worn by masses of Titos's pioneers, these sneakers are now worn by insiders of the European fashion scene. And here is a man who gave the sneakers their well deserved makeover: Mauro Massaroto. Mr. Massarotto studied at the academy of art and design "Leonetto Cappiello" in Florence, worked for various fashion brands and creative agencies in Milan and then spent five years as the creative director of Custo Barcelona. Now he is back in Croatia, putting all of his energy and enthusiasm into reviving a "communistic" sports article giant.

The production of Startas shoes started in Borovo factory, in the Croatian city of Vukovar in 1976. In its peak times, the factory employed 22,000 workers and produced 5 million pairs a year. A whole generation in ex-Yugoslavia grew up wearing plain white Startas sneakers and blue school uniforms, living out the socialist ideology of equality for all. Apart from the shoes, the STARTAS brand also covered various sports articles known in the whole eastern block. The brand reached its peak in 1987 when Zagreb hosted the Universiade, youth sport games, in which Startas was proudly worn by 3,500 sports people from all over the world.

But in 1991, at the zenith of Serbian attack on Croatia, Serbian forces took control of Vukovar which, by the end of its three-month siege, had become utterly devastated. 2,000 defenders and civilians were killed, 300 died in a mass execution, 800 went missing and 22,000 were forced into exile. The Borovo factory was bombed on the last day of the war, seven out of its ten halls completely destroyed, its workers forced to take refuge, some even locked in Serbian concentration camps.

Vukovar never really recovered. Large parts of the city and its surrounding area still look like the war has just ended. Today, the Borovo factory is employing around 300 workers, 30 of which make Startas shoes by hand, producing 2,000 pairs a year. Mauro remembers "When I first arrived in the Borovo factory, my heart was pumping with fear and excitement – I was standing in front of a dead giant. While working in one hall, which is „only“ partially ruined, you look at the leftovers of the neighboring hall. Of course, to an accidental visitor, this can look like a movie set – on a sunny day, rays of sun are shining through the branches,

smoke and dust are filling the air, all those old machines are running, ladies are still wearing their blue uniforms.... Once you enter the factory, it is like passing through the dimensions of time and ending up 20 years back in time, in the old Yugoslavia of 80's, back in your childhood. I believe this gave an extra push to my creativity. “

This summer, the shoes had their international premières in Florence, Barcelona and Zagreb, presenting the colorful results of creativity. While keeping their recognizable style, the sneakers are now available in dozens of funky prints and colors and different models ranging from Basic to Deluxe. In a way, this makeover turned the shoes into a symbol for the transition from one socio-political system to the other. The sterility, but fairness, of socialism is now replaced by the colorful turbo-capitalism in which you can have everything you wish – as long as you are able to pay for it. When asked about this, Mauro says that “today’s Startas is just a logical development of something which should have happened long time ago but, out of more or less understandable reasons, didn’t.”

The shoes turned into an overnight hit: 999 exclusive models were launched in Croatia and sold out in three days. The sales will soon start in Asia and Italy. Talks with world-wide distributors are happening at a fast pace. But Mauro is not stopping at the shoes – his long-term plan is to revive the whole old „communistic“ sports giant. He asks for patience “waking up something forgotten is a big project and a hard job because it includes not only re-designing the articles but also renewing the whole brand management – from business policy over marketing and communication to distribution.” Startas’ funky website proves it is doing a great job on all levels.

When asked if Tito’s, former Yugoslavian leader, picture will ever adorn his sneakers, Mauro laughs explaining that “for now, we are not planning to use Tito in our designs although we are sure those shoes would be sold in Slovenia like crazy!” Well, considering current social and economic developments, or crashes, this might happen much sooner than expected.