



# THE WORLD'S FIRST LIFESTYLE BRAND

*The History of a Brand That, By Accident, Came to Define the '80s  
and Become a Globally Recognized Household Name*

Built on an infectious exuberance for life and joy, Esprit amassed an incredible cult following, making them the It brand of the mid-to late-1980s. It was the people's brand — accessible, playful and highly desirable. Conceived by Doug Tompkins and Susie Tompkins Buell in 1968, every decision made felt relevant and almost modern, propelling Esprit into the identity of the decade.

No detail was too trite: the receipt paper, the hang tags, the boxes or the in-store cafes. Together, these important details illustrated Esprit as a lifestyle brand — eons before that term held any solid meaning. The brand catapulted from hawking dresses out of a station wagon to a billion-dollar empire in mere years, epitomizing the American dream. In the wake of Tompkins' unfortunate untimely passing, Buell reflects on their accidental success and subsequent staying power.

Esprit, the quintessential high-eighties sportswear line based out of San Francisco, elaborated on the concept of the “lifestyle brand” to an unprecedented extreme, obsessively committing to the idea that every granule of a company’s image is consumable and therefore crucial. The story Esprit sold was wildly and sometimes excessively complete, unifying architecture, photography, graphic design, package design, retail design, marketing, social activism and advances in its often-imitated corporate culture. It was clean, bright and confidently commercial. It was ready-to-buy. The clothes were its perfume.

Esprit’s peak occurred during the mid- to late-’80s under the direction of the powerhouse husband and wife team of Doug and Susie Tompkins (now Susie Tompkins Buell), who divorced in 1989 after building the brand from a business selling dresses out of the back of a

Tompkins Buell Foundation, which continued the activist work of the Esprit Foundation she founded in 1990. It currently focuses on supporting women’s rights organizations.

Buell and Tompkins infrequently discuss Esprit publicly, so it was momentous that they both accepted invitations to be interviewed for this story. I emailed each of them to begin making arrangements to speak, with Buell in person at one of her homes in the Bay Area, and with Tompkins via Skype. Buell responded that afternoon, with no immediate word back from Tompkins. The next day, it was reported that he had died of hypothermia after a kayaking accident during a sudden storm on General Carrera Lake in Patagonia. He was traveling with a small group that included his longtime friend Yvon Chouinard, the founder of the Patagonia brand. Buell graciously agreed to go ahead with our meeting. But what was already going to be a rare and perhaps unpredictable reminiscence had

includes a Jean Prouvé coffee table, a pair of Prouvé “Visiteur” lounge chairs, and a Serge Mouille standing lamp. Buell sits on an unassuming couch, a copy of an Eileen Gray design, below three framed Depression-era Dorothea Lange prints that are a part of her extensive photography collection. There is no visible house staff. Midway through the conversation, she excuses herself to the kitchen to make a pair of almond milk lattes. After the interview, she drives off in a Mini Cooper.

Buell is just beginning to form what she will say at the San Francisco memorial service for Tompkins in a few weeks. It is a bizarre coincidence that she was pre-scheduled for a guided conversation through her years with Tompkins, and she seems to welcome the opportunity to process some of her memories. She is thoughtful, generous and unguarded as she revisits Esprit, an extraordinary time in her extraordinary life, of which Tompkins was an extraordinary part. It is not indiscreet to

“We didn’t know what we were doing! We’d never done anything like it before. But it wasn’t so complicated then. Everything was much more tactile.”

station wagon into a billion-dollar empire. After Esprit, they each rolled the rewards of their work into exceptional second chapters (or third or fourth chapters, depending on how it’s counted). Tompkins, a lifelong outdoorsman, moved to South America, dividing his time between homes in Chile and Argentina. In 1993, he married Kristine McDivitt, a former CEO of the outdoor-clothing company Patagonia, with whom he amassed hundreds of thousands of acres of land in the Patagonia region for conservation. This included the creation of Pumalín Park, Chile’s largest private nature preserve. Tompkins’ heavyweight environmentalism earned him the nickname “eco baron.” Buell split her time primarily between her apartment in San Francisco and her 47-acre property in Bolinas, a coastal bohemian enclave in Marin County where her family owned a house when she was younger. (It changed hands once before selling to members of Jefferson Airplane.) In 1996, she married Mark Buell, a real estate developer and philanthropist. She became increasingly involved in political fundraising and cultivated the Susie

become that much weightier, particularly with the strange new responsibility of being the primary keeper of the Esprit story. We met in her warmly minimal 12th-floor penthouse apartment in the Pacific Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. The address is well-known by political insiders for housing a remarkable number of the nation’s wealthiest Democratic campaign donors, who open their homes to aspiring candidates for intimate big-ticket fundraisers, that it is sometimes referred to as “Susie’s Building” speaks to her formidable influence. In fact, it is difficult to find mention of Buell that does not note her early support for Bill Clinton and her close friendship with Hillary Clinton. The Clintons threw her a surprise engagement party at the White House in advance of her wedding to Mark, and more recently hosted her 70th birthday party — at Roberta’s pizzeria in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

The living room is lavishly simple, accented in shades of green with panoramic views of Alcatraz and the Golden Gate Bridge. There is ample evidence of Buell’s early interest in midcentury design that

acknowledge the well-documented discord between Buell and Tompkins, whose very ’80s back-and-forth personal and corporate conflicts rendered them the Cookie and Lucious Lyon of junior sportswear. The dynamic certainly colored the Esprit story. But successful collaborations are often uneven, accompanied by chaos that can be electrifying. “Exactly,” Buell says. “You’re not looking at the bottom line. You’re just looking at new opportunities and ways to do things and it’s fun and it’s thrilling and it’s creative. Just go for it.”

Their partnership began in the summer of 1963 when Buell picked up Tompkins, who was hitchhiking near Tahoe City, California. The son of an antiques dealer and a decorator, he spent most of his youth in Millbrook, New York. Buell grew up in the Russian Hill neighborhood of San Francisco, the daughter of a “bohemian” mother and a former California betting commissioner who went into real estate. They moved to San Francisco and married the next year. In 1964, Tompkins co-founded mountaineering brand The North Face in the city’s bohemian North

## The Old Brand

Before Esprit was officially established as Esprit de corp., Susie Tompkins had already started a business producing dresses. The name of her business partner back then was Jane and since dresses were their only product, they called it Plain Jane. However, in the mid-seventies, almost overnight, the new generation of liberal women did not want to wear dresses any longer. They wanted JEANS... and cool stuff to wear with them. Because of this denim boom the young entrepreneurs eventually diversified into seven different product categories: Plain Jane dresses, Sweet Baby Jane blouses, Esprit’s Chemise tops, Rose Hips jeans and pants, Cecily Knits sweaters, Bombacha skirts and Jasmine Teas T-shirts.

The corporate logo was a perfect match for denim fashion—in both style and design. Today it brings back memories of those seventies record covers, of wild disco and kinky soul albums.

ESPRIT DE CORP.



ESPRIT

## The New Brand

It was after we said “Let’s get rid of Esprit de corp.” that Doug Tompkins said we need a new logo for Esprit. It became very clear what was going to happen. I spent about a month and worked it out and did what you see here: today’s Esprit logo. So I brought it in to Doug and made my presentation. I had other alternatives, but I said: “This is it, this is the answer.” It was up on the wall. He said: “No, I don’t know, I don’t know if I like that. I think you should go back and try again.” And I said “OK, I see.” So I waited another month and I brought back the exact same presentation. I said again “This is the answer. What else do you want? You want some new art—do it yourself. I’m not a mind-reader; this is the answer.” Then he said “OK, but if you’re wrong, I’ll have you killed.” I said “Cool, no problem.”

John Casado // Designer of the Esprit logo



Beach neighborhood. The Grateful Dead played the opening party for its smartly designed first store, Joan Baez and her sister Mimi Fariña attended. “We had two Hells Angels at the door and took them out to dinner afterwards at Vanessa’s,” Buell recalls. “We just did fun things and people were drawn to us. I was always curious for the out-of-the-ordinary.” (Tompkins cashed out of North Face in 1969 for \$50,000.)

that might be helpful in growing a billion-dollar brand. Neither of them completed high school or attended college. “We didn’t know what we were doing! We’d never done anything like it before,” Buell exclaims. “But it wasn’t so complicated then. Everything was much more tactile. For instance, we would take a manila envelope to the airport. It was swatches or colors or things that today you would scan and away they would go.

featured Buell on its cover, wearing oversized separates with rolled-up sleeves and slouchy white ankle socks, standing on a cube superimposed with Tompkins’ smiling face, *Esprit’s Graphic Work 1984-1986*, which the vintage bookseller Idea Books, a bellwether of correct references, listed on its Instagram days before the interview with Buell, and *Esprit: The Comprehensive Design Principle*, in which Tompkins sums it all up when

“I would see Toscani’s work in Elle magazine and I thought it was very appropriate for Esprit because it was playful, it was happy, it was positive. He brought that to Esprit and it was exactly what we needed.”

In 1967, after having two children, Buell founded the Plain Jane Dress Company with her friend Jane Tise. Their business grew quickly, due in part to the sales help of a third partner Allen Schwartz (who became well-known in the ‘90s for designing A.B.S., a line of affordable, hastily produced replicas of Oscars dresses that anticipated fast fashion). According to Buell, Tompkins was inspired to come on board after Plain Jane received an enthusiastic order from the San Francisco department store Joseph Magnin. “I would have ideas, Jane would design them, and Doug would make them happen,” she says. They introduced new lines with bohemian names like Sweet Baby Jane, Rose Hips and Jasmine Teas. “As soon as we started getting legitimate, we had to have an incorporated name,” Buell recalls. “I was folding laundry and Doug said, ‘What do you think of the name Esprit de Corp.?’ It was good. It was catchy. It was a corporate name. I

And then we would approach people waiting in line to go to Hong Kong and say, “Can you take this to Hong Kong? Somebody will meet you on the other end.” You just had to figure out how to get it done.”

In 1976, Schwartz and Tise sold their shares to Buell and Tompkins, with Tise staying on in her position as design director until exiting the company three years later. At that point, Buell and Tompkins took full control. She became the design director and he assumed the self-titled role of “image director.” They consolidated all of their labels under the name Esprit de Corp., which Buell spontaneously shortened to Esprit while overseeing sample production in Hong Kong. Tompkins then hired San Francisco graphic artist John Casado — who later co-designed the original Macintosh

he writes, “It was not, in fact, until 12 years after the founding of the company that any attempt to form an image and create a context for the product was made.”

In 1984, Tamotsu Yagi relocated to San Francisco from the Esprit Tokyo office to become the brand’s in-house graphic director. His first job for the company was to redesign the cafeteria meal card. “When Doug asked me to do this, I knew that he was not your ordinary president and chief executive officer of just another company,” Yagi told *Women’s Wear Daily* in 2008. Every aspect of the company was an opportunity for a unique design solution. As Tompkins was known to say, “No detail is too small.” The most mundane assets became museum-caliber objects: hang tags, gift boxes, shopping bags, in-house corporate binders, even the to-go boxes,

“A lot of it was unexpected combinations. ‘Don’t worry! Just put it together!’ Back in the day, wearing stripes and polka dots was like, ‘Oh my God.’ Today, you can wear anything and nobody notices.”

didn’t care. I would never see it.” It was an anti-war play on words, a tongue-in-cheek subversion of the military ideal of “esprit de corps.”

Buell and Tompkins acted on instinct. They had no fashion industry experience nor any formal education in design — nor anything else

computer’s famous “Picasso” logo — to invent what became Esprit’s kinetic, stencil-style triple-bar trademark. It was the beginning of what Tompkins has described as a “radical shift in direction.” Tompkins edited a series of highly collectible books documenting the work that followed. They include *Esprit: The Making of an Image*, which

snap-on cup lids and saw-toothed napkin ties at Caffè Esprit restaurants. Cash register receipts were customized to match their respective store’s interior. In fact, each item was so fully thought-out that, for example, a triangular shoe box created specifically for children’s ballet flats translated beautifully as a two-dimensional

graphic element in a still-life image. Even trade shows were considered. For a 1988 market week exhibit, designer Michael Vanderbyl installed a grid of tall, slender, cone-shaped black-and-white-striped pedestals, each topped with a shoe (or bag or belt) positioned on its toe, with its laces drifting upwards as if weightless.

“Doug had this ferocious energy and driving force,” Buell says. “He was determined to do things on the highest level. He was complicated and it got us in a lot of trouble because he would overdevelop the neighborhood, if you know what I mean — design things that were way out there. But he didn’t care. It didn’t matter what it cost. Most people would have taken the money out of the business and bought yachts and islands and started new businesses. We didn’t do that.”

Esprit’s successful long-term collaboration with the photographer Oliviero Toscani began

within messaging that persists today. In fact, Buell says that she and Jim Nevins, a favored collaborator who was an in-house creative director, developed what would become the Gap’s iconic 1998 “Individuals of Style” campaign — that was centered around the implied beauty of diverse and unconventional celebrities — for Esprit. But before Buell could put it into action, she was forced out of the company, with Tompkins taking over creative control. Feeling unable to safeguard the project, she contacted Mickey Drexler, who was then head of the Gap, and sold him on hiring Nevins from Esprit. “He took it to the Gap and did it. I’ve never told anyone this before,” she says. “I wasn’t thinking that I’m giving gold to my competitor, I was just thinking that Jim is going to get a great job and this campaign is going to happen.”

The “Real People” approach was a personal stance. Tompkins even refused to advertise in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, in part because he

and the Benetton brand. Buell was uncomfortable with the overlap and unsuccessfully petitioned Tompkins to intervene. (Toscani recently published a compendium of his images, titled *More Than Fifty Years of Magnificent Failures*, that includes an essay by Tompkins.) Buell says Toscani saw what a socially active company Esprit was and cultivated those ideals at Benetton, which was frustrating for her as it meant the appropriation of something more personal to her than a fashion look. “It was important because it had to be real,” she explains. “At Benetton they had separate dining rooms for their employees. Do you think that’s egalitarian?”

When encouraged to reconnect to the Esprit phenomenon on a design level, Buell is at first surprisingly reserved. After all, she was the one who traveled the world, keenly filtered trends, designed and produced the countless pieces for sale, and then oversaw Esprit’s brilliantly mixed, matched, layered and generously accessorized styling (store

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in 1978. “I would see his work in *Elle* magazine and I thought it was very appropriate for Esprit because it was playful, it was happy, it was positive. He brought that to Esprit and it was exactly what we needed,” Buell recalls. His bright, inviting commercialism translated their idealism perfectly. “It looks innocent now, doesn’t it? And that was kind of racy in that day,” she says, responding to an image of fresh-faced coeds covering their apparent nakedness with an assortment of Esprit logo tees. “Toscani would do this. He was excellent at that — getting them out of their clothes and having them hide behind T-shirts. That was so clever and fun. And everybody had a good time so the smiles were real. They’re all happy and wondering what their mothers will think when they see it.”

One of Esprit’s most enduring innovations was its use of “real models” when it rolled out its “Real People Campaign” in the Spring 1985 catalog that featured company employees photographed by Toscani. It was an unexpected shot of realism that championed the individualistic, beauty-from-

objected to its idealized cover models. In 1987, he told the *Los Angeles Times*, “I find them sex-object types ... flaunting their cleavages, and they’ve got these phony-looking hairdos, and they’ve got a lot of makeup. That’s not the kind of image that I’d like to portray, so I don’t think that so many of our customers are reading that magazine.” He added, “Anyone can hire Brooke Shields.” Helen Gurley Brown, who was then editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan*, visited the Esprit offices to fruitlessly appeal to Tompkins to buy advertising pages. “I remember that day,” Buell says. “I’ve always felt that way. Everybody has their way of wanting to be, but we were more about a confident girl. You don’t need to look like that, just be confident. We never projected sexy-sexy — maybe curious and coquettish a little bit.”

In 1982, Toscani made a contentious decision to become the creative director for Benetton — while still the principal image maker for Esprit. His work for their direct competitor placed diversity, internationalism and social politics front and center, and was so impactful that it still defines his career

mannequins always wore hats). Buell had an unmatched say in defining the colors, shapes and proportions that spoke so clearly to how young women wanted to feel during the ‘80s. Buell laughs when I tell her how I mentioned meeting her to a friend who became very excited and exclaimed, “Wow, I never shoplifted except at Esprit.”

It turns out that Buell saved little from the experience: only the Esprit books that Tompkins published and some keepsakes from the original headquarters on Minnesota Street that was destroyed in a fire in 1976. And so there is no mythical archive of brightly colored modular separates to unlock and discover. “I’m realizing about myself now, at this age, what my character is and what I hold onto and what I don’t,” she says. “I can’t remember what I’ve ever done. I just want to keep thinking about what I’m going to do going forward. I don’t dwell on the past. Even good stuff.”

And yet, traces of her Esprit worldview are still discernible. It’s in the way she talks about Prouvé:





“He designed for institutions like hospitals and schools. It was necessary form — form that functioned. It was not fancy and I like that.” And it seems appropriate, even gratifying, that she wears almost head-to-toe Uniqlo: a brown down vest over a long-sleeve white jersey shirt, black stretch pants and a pair of Clarks desert boots. “I don’t like to go shopping very much, so if I go

put it together!’ Back in the day, wearing stripes and polka dots was like, ‘Oh my God!’ Now you can wear anything and nobody notices. We were just breaking out and doing things that weren’t considered the way you do it. It was playful. It was different. It was happy. It was quirky.”

She describes making “very accessible” clothes.

cultivated a significant relationship with Ettore Sottsass, Aldo Cibic and the Memphis Group designers during his elongated visits to Milan. The Memphis look — which continues to enjoy a resurgence that has reached well beyond the art book fair set—complemented Esprit’s irreverence with its instantly recognizable high-gloss pop surrealism. “He got a lot of energy from them,”

**“It was something that I felt was good for retail. You could entertain customers with good design. We would be inspired by some of the Memphis stuff and make sweaters to look like it.”**

in there and find something that works I’ll get a bunch of them. The quality is excellent,” she says. When Buell wears dresses, she mostly wears one, by the designer Samantha Sung, which she buys online in a range of prints. “And then if I go to something really upppy I wear, well, my dresses work all the time.”

To prompt discussion, I open a copy of *Esprit: The Comprehensive Design Principle* to a page of advertising tears from the 1985 Sport line with “real people” in active mid-leap poses against a field of pastel color-blocking. “Is that really so ‘80s?’” Buell wonders aloud, when asked what it is about the clothes that is so ‘80s. It’s definitely ‘80s, I respond, it defined the ‘80s. “Yeah, it is ‘80s,” she says. We arbitrarily hone in on a photogenic Norwegian Esprit customer service employee wearing an exaggerated, full-sleeved hooded teal jacket with a peach cable-

“They were something that you wouldn’t feel would go out of style while it wasn’t really in style. It was comfortable and not precious. It wasn’t mysterious. I really like very little fashion. When people start putting zippers on the wrong way and this and that, it’s very contrived,” she says. “I always thought that you don’t want to have to work too hard wondering what to wear or what to buy. Just get stuff that works well together, that’s kind of coordinated a little bit, that you feel confident in.” One of her favorite projects was a collaboration with the illustrator Joel Resnicoff, who created prints populated with angular sketches of very ‘80s characters that Buell translated into apparel — perhaps most vividly as a Summer 1986 white column dress crowded with the large, primary-colored floating heads of stylish women wearing hats, turbans, bows, bob cuts, high ponytails and statement earrings.

Buell says. The Cologne, Germany, Esprit store featured some particularly fantastic Memphis moments, like a sales counter that was a jumbled multicolored block party, and manically textured Sottsass shelves for displaying shoes, paired with Michele De Lucchi “First Chairs” for trying them on. Which is not to mention the showstopping, perfectly postmodern circular colonnade in the showroom at the Zurich, Switzerland headquarters. While the sensibility did not necessarily appeal to Buell, “It was something that I felt was good for retail. You could entertain customers with good design,” she says. “We would be inspired by some of the Memphis stuff and make sweaters to look like it.”

The first flagship store opened in 1984 on the site of a famous roller disco called Flipper’s at the corner of La Cienega and Santa Monica

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knit sweater over light yellow leggings, she holds a Zolatone panel behind her head, which helps to pop her mirrored sunglasses and a dramatically knotted orange sherbet scarf that matches her gloves. “I know. I know!” Buell exclaims and laughs. “A lot of that was about unexpected combinations. ‘Don’t worry! Just

With the company’s success, Tompkins had the resources to will into existence a spectacular collection of original Esprit architecture. “Doug loved expressing himself in a very big way. He hired the biggest designers and the biggest architects. I was busy choosing colors for T-shirts and he’s doing all that,” Buell explains. Tompkins

boulevards in West Hollywood, Los Angeles. It was a masterpiece of brand theory, with the clear intention of creating the most fully realized consumer experience imaginable. Built for a reported \$15 million, and covering 15,000 square feet of selling space, the “Superstore” was loaded with so many ideas and executed

with such microscopic attention to detail that it is conceivable the Esprit team might have physically burst if they were unable to express it. Architect Joe D'Urso designed the vaulted multistory industrial interior in which the apparel was the color — save for the oversized campaign photography on the walls and the Sottsass-

parking structure that makes better sense when you know that it was built by Esprit.

Around the same time, Esprit opened a supermarket-style Outlet store in a converted trucking warehouse on its San Francisco campus, which became a destination for fans of the brand.

glass walls, exposed bricks and abundant philodendrons — was designed around the exhibition of Tompkins' extensive collection of Amish quilts. There was a greenhouse, a furniture-making studio, grass tennis courts and a kitchen that was way ahead of its time preparing employee meals with organic ingredients.

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designed installation in the shoe department, with its giant color blocks connected by a sculptural chrome squiggle. There were shopping carts, checkout aisles and original packaging inspired by supermarkets: towels bagged like loaves of bread, socks hung in vegetable netting and underwear rolled into yogurt cups. The Zolatone print on the shoeboxes matched the Zolatone trim on the storage racks which matched the Zolatone-coated walls. It really was a superstore. Finally, there was an Esprit world to enter and Esprit air to breathe.

“It was really important to Doug to go to that extreme. That’s who he was,” Buell explains. “He would build these monuments and I would be freaking out all the time because it didn’t make sense to me. It wasn’t sustainable. But it was big energy and it made more things happen and it put a lot of emphasis on graphics and design, not just

“We had shopping carts and people would run around and pile in clothes that we had leftover and go try them on. It was famous,” Buell enthuses. “People still say to me, ‘Oh my god, twice a year my mom would drive us up and we would take two friends and spend the whole day.’ It was really a great time because it was so well designed, it was so progressive, it was so new.” In 1986, with so much invested in controlled brand environments, Esprit invented the concept of the shop-in-shop, debuting the first of its kind inside a San Francisco Macy’s that was outfitted according to Esprit specifications down to the light fixtures and staff uniforms.

The main office at the San Francisco headquarters was a world unto itself and an unexpected architectural departure. Nicknamed “Little Utopia” and “Camp Esprit” by employees, it famously prioritized neo-hippie

Esprit offered a liberal range of programs and benefits, from rafting trips in the Himalayas to on-site yoga, aerobics, language courses, and disco lessons. Employees received subsidized tickets to cultural events and were paid for volunteering 10 hours a month at nonprofit organizations. The in-house lecture series featured guest speakers like Anita Roddick, the founder of The Body Shop; Dave Foreman, a co-founder of the activist environmental group Earth First!; the economist and social theorist Jeremy Rifkin and Gloria Steinem. “She talked about how important it was for everyone to be aware, stand up for what they believed in, and, of course, about women and family,” Buell recalls. “We tried to inspire ourselves and then share that with everyone in the company.”

“Those days at Esprit in the ‘80s ...” she continues, trailing off. “People model their companies after that now. The energy was just

**“Shopping and clothing is fun, but I just don’t want to take it too seriously. But the social aspect? I loved that. What matters? What’s important in the world? What do you think is really important?”**

in retail but in wholesale and business in general.” When *LA Story*, Steve Martin’s 1991 satire of Los Angeles, needed a location that conveyed over-the-top consumer culture, they filmed at the Superstore (Sarah Jessica Parker’s “free-spirited” character SanDeE\* worked there). Today it is a CVS store with a curiously geometric concrete

values and pioneered a new, more progressive office culture that became an archetype for today’s corporate campuses. Designed before the company’s real estate boom, it was less postmodern playhouse and more Esalen Institute. The spa-like open-plan workspace — with its salvaged Douglas fir beams,

so amazing.” I mention that I know someone who visited the offices during that time and described it as “amazing,” “so San Francisco” and “a little culty.” “It was culty,” she agrees, and laughs. After Kenneth Cole, which advertised its support for the American Foundation for AIDS Research in 1986, Esprit was one of the





first major fashion retailers to publicly advocate for AIDS awareness. Buell was moved to take action after being present for a close friend during his last days before dying of AIDS-related causes. “That was the beginning of our social outspokenness,” she says. “I was really, really happy when we found a social footing and could talk about issues in the world.” The company ran a 350-word essay by Tompkins calling for increased AIDS education — followed by the phone number for the National AIDS Hotline — in their Fall 1987 catalog that reached an estimated 1.3 million customers nationally. The piece’s title, “Beauty, Health and Awareness,” was spelled out in rainbow type. “Don’t die of ignorance,” Tompkins wrote. “Be careful and spread the word, not the virus.”

“We got a lot of blowback from that!” Buell recalls. “Mothers from the Bible Belt were

development, the company pioneered sustainable fashion with the launch of its Ecollection line. In 1990, while Tompkins was in control of the brand (Buell had been temporarily ousted), he published a two-page open-letter-style advertisement in the *Utne Reader* titled “A Plea for Responsible Consumption.” It petitioned readers to consume mindfully and buy “only what you need.” (“We’ll be happy to adjust our business up or down accordingly, because we’ll feel we are then contributing to a healthier attitude about consumption.”) The essay signs off with the Esprit logo and the text, “A Company That Is Trying.” It was brilliant, outrageously direct and about as radical a statement as a major retailer can make; there is a great divide between championing progressive causes and publicly entertaining financial contraction. Tompkins clearly articulated his belief that the consumer culture he promoted accelerated the environmental crisis he was

that. What matters? What’s important in the world? What do you think is really important?” In 1996, four years after she stepped down as creative director, Buell sold her last remaining interests in Esprit. “I think that if Doug and I hadn’t left Esprit we would be struggling with our consciences and how to keep this monster fed. I don’t know what would have happened,” she says. “Now, because I worked so hard then, I can do something good with what I got out of it. And for Doug to do what he’s done, to buy so much land and preserve it — it’s amazing.” According to *The Atlantic*, as of 2014, Tompkins and his wife have protected more land than any other private individuals in history. “It wasn’t really business to him,” Buell says, offering her outlook on his time with the company. “It was an adventure. It was an opportunity.” “I think we did great work,” she continues. “I know we made a big difference in many people’s lives, not because they bought our clothes but

“I know we made a big difference in many people’s lives, not because they bought our clothes but because they worked there and were allowed to grow and feel a new kind of energy.”

saying, what in the world were we trying to tell their girls! They wouldn’t be spreading the virus! And who are we?”

At the height of Esprit’s cachet, estimates put yearly sales upwards of \$800 million. Buell and Tompkins had become ‘80s business titans. “And in the meantime we had gained all of this awareness of how devastating we are to the environment,” Buell says. “We had the Eco Desk to try to figure out how to make things with less of an impact.” How did that go? “Hypocritical. You can’t do it. Get out of business. So that’s sort of what happened. It’s kind of nice how it all ended up. When you’re in a business like that it keeps you from really being able to see the big picture because you’re struggling to stay valid, to stay alive, to keep making it happen.” And yet they still forged ahead with groundbreaking work like integrating recycled materials into package design; in 1989, they became the first major fashion retailer to print catalogs on recycled paper with soy-based inks. In 1992, after two years of research and

fighting. At that time, the company’s influence was so substantial that some critics wondered if his statement spoke to the start of a larger cultural shift. That same year, Buell and a group of investors bought out Tompkins, who ended his day-to-day involvement at the company to focus on conservation.

Upon returning to Esprit, Buell developed the 1991 “What Would You Do” advertising campaign with new image director Neil Kraft, which featured socially aware young people sharing opinions on how to effect change. (For example, a teenage Gwyneth Paltrow appeared beside her quote, “I would distribute condoms in every high school in America.”) “It wasn’t Esprit’s moment right then, but I am still incredibly proud of that campaign,” Buell says. “Honestly, I don’t like clothing that much. When I need to, I get dressed up. I do love a good Hermès bag now and then. I love good quality. I like to buy the vintage ones. Shopping and clothing is fun but I just don’t want to take it too seriously. But the social aspect? I loved

because they worked there and were allowed to grow and feel a new kind of energy, not from Doug and I, but from the environment and the openness.” And while Buell now looks out on San Francisco with a second lifetime of accomplishments to define her story, she acknowledges, perhaps after some encouragement, that she dressed a decade. “It’s a part of my journey,” she says. “And I know we did this and I know it was a big deal and I’m not saying anyone could have done that because I know it was a magical combination that was not designed. We just fell into it. We really did.”