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BEYOND FASHION

Fashion never ends with clothes; if anything, it is only the beginning. This is why the works of **Elsa Schiaparelli** grace the cover of this edition; it is not a nostalgic tribute, but rather a clue. Elsa Schiaparelli traversed art, Surrealism, the body and the imagination, before divisions were created between disciplines. This act of bridging disciplines is no longer the exception but rather has become a common state of affairs. Increasingly, brands are designing furniture, putting their name to architectural designs, curating residences and collaborating with artists. This is not purely a commercial endeavour but highlights the need of fashion to constantly redefine itself in order to remain relevant in an accelerated age and a volatile market.

This transformation is not confined only to the industry. The space for debate has also broadened. Fashion necessarily has to take into account ethics, labour and supply chains, raw materials and a shared cultural language. In other words, fashion is no longer just for fashion insiders but rather involves us all.

Against this backdrop, individuals are emerging who have not 'abandoned' fashion but instead have sought to move passed it. Some remind us that clothing remains the most direct expressive medium, whilst others, like **Mauro Simionato**, are seeking to venture into new territories, driven by research and curiosity, leaning towards the yet undefined. There are also places like **ITS Arcademy** that are tracing new lines. It is not a question of elevating fashion since this is not needed. Rather, it is a nod to fashion's inherent condition since the art of dressing has always been composite.

Perhaps the aim is not to determine how far fashion can go but to recognise that what we are witnessing is not so much the transformation of fashion as it is the realisation of what it has always been. It is first and foremost a process of thought and then a process of creating clothing. Fashion graces our world before it even graces the runway. If today it engages with a broader range of creative expressions, it is because creating new products is a responsibility: producing without thought, without sustainability, or without meaning is no longer compelling. Every creation demands a purpose, a reason, and care for the world it enters.

■ Margherita Cuccia e Giulio Solfrizzi

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THE PUPPET MASTER OF FASHION SHOWS

Étienne Russo and the Villa Eugénie phenomenon

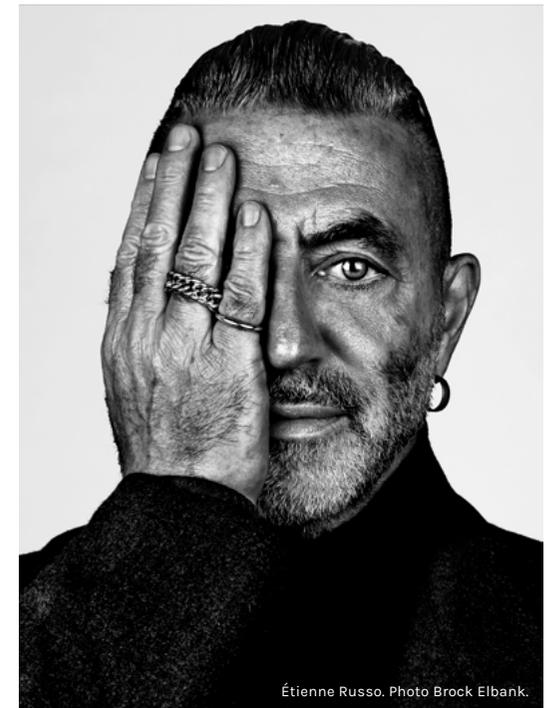
Over the past 30 years, Villa Eugénie has produced some of the most spectacular fashion shows in the industry. It could be described as a leading company in the organisation of special events, whose expertise and poetic sensibility first established themselves in the worlds of luxury, fashion and beauty. The man behind this ambitious and successful project is Étienne Russo. Born in Belgium and raised at a time when country's cultural scene was more vibrant than ever, he drew inspiration from everything around him, including Japanese culture. It was in Japan, after all, that he began his career in the 1970s as a model for Kansai Yamamoto. He later moved into artistic direction at a Berlin club, where he honed his skills throughout the following decade. There, he experimented, flirted with politics and morality, and learned how to build something from nothing while entertaining others. Eventually he founded his own business, one he finds difficult to define precisely as it is essentially an ideas foundry based in Bruxelles, Paris, New York and Milan. It was in the Lombard capital that Russo chose to settle on one floor of the historic Palazzo Durini, a few steps from the Duomo. He started with a few rooms and ultimately completed the feat of acquiring the entire floor. The final expansion will take some time yet, but he has already opened the doors to us—both to his space and to his heart.

Before becoming the Étienne Russo that everyone in the fashion world knows today, who were you?

At first, I didn't have a specific direction. I studied at hotel school, where I learned two things that I still use today: precision and timing. It's like cooking: if you're thirty seconds off, it's over. After that, I lived in Japan for several months. I consider it one of the most sophisticated cultures in the world: an absolute attention to detail, a beauty that imbibes every daily gesture. Even when something breaks, it is repaired and made even more precious. This vision had a profound effect on me.

When did the turning point come?

When I returned to Belgium, I started working in a nightclub as creative director.



Étienne Russo. Photo Brock Elbank.

Dozens of fashion shows, a highly coveted dinner, and even an alcoholic beverage. Étienne Russo could be described as an eclectic creative — because he truly is



on the left:
Dries Van Noten SS05
at the bottom:
Chanel FW14/15.

thing or another together. We met when I was working at the club, where I organised an exhibition involving photographers and designers. The Antwerp Six created an installation there, amid music and crowds. The nightclub became my experimental space. I completely changed the mood twice a year, with a summer and winter version. In 1989, for example, I created a "neo-psychedelic revolution" to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution. The fact is, I was so nervous about my first fashion show that I hid in the bathroom twenty minutes before it started. But then, as they say, the show must go on. More than thirty years have passed and I still curate his fashion shows today. It's a rare privilege.

That's where my love for a certain kind of provocation was born, for not always being politically correct. It's a tension I still feel today, even though it's become more difficult to sustain.

For me, it wasn't just a club: it was a laboratory. In those years, people got ready to go out, thought about their look for days, and the audience was a real social mix that no longer exists today. That's where I realised that I was, at heart, a mixologist. I didn't mix liquids, but people, languages, worlds. The nightclub taught me the art of immersion, of creating an atmosphere that completely changed the perception of space.

And when did you discover your signature style?

One day I visited backstage of the Bruxelles Opera: costumes, wigs, accessories. It was a visual shock. I decided to bring opera into the nightclub, without thinking too much about it. At one of these events, an androgynous opera singer performed a cappella with his back to the audience. Everyone thought he was a woman. When he turned around, the effect was explosive. That's where my love for a certain kind of provocation was born, for not always being politically correct. It's a tension I still feel today, even though it's become more difficult to sustain.

What was the first fashion show you worked on?

In 1991 with Dries Van Noten. We were already friends, always fantasizing about doing one





Then there was Martin Margiela who had a radical simplicity that was incredibly hard to achieve. He would take obvious things and transform them into brilliant ideas.

Who do you hold dear in your heart after all these years?

Besides Dries, I have experienced moments with Alber Elbaz that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Once I gave him an old ladder I found at a market. He looked at it and said, "This is the fashion show". And it really was, because we built the set on that model. These are moments of pure connection, gifts of life. Then there was Martin Margiela who had a radical simplicity that was incredibly hard to achieve. He would take obvious things and transform them into brilliant ideas.

How do you keep your passion for your work alive?

After working with big fashion houses, today I feel the need to go back to my roots. Subcultures, young people, new energy. I have received so much, now I have to give back. I

truly believe in the new generation, they are the ones who will carry all this forward. It is no coincidence that I mentor young designers (Robert Wun, for example) because they have talent but often lack the means. Experience should not be taken to the grave, it should be shared. I am looking for an Italian designer, if you have any ideas...

Your interest in lifestyle led you to invest in hotels and restaurants.

Hotels and food are part of the same language. A dinner for 500 people served at the same time is like a choreography, a ballet. If one person makes a mistake, everything falls apart. Then, the Bolliti arrived, the dinner that anticipates Christmas in Milan and brings together personalities from the worlds of fashion, publishing and showbiz. It has become a tradition because it is authentic. It is not luxury, it is sharing. And I like to create the right mix of people, as I used to do in nightclubs. Organising it is as much fun as Heaven-Sake, the Japanese-made, French-inspired sake I produce with Benjamin Eymere and Carl Hirschmann. It is a traditional Japanese alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice, water, yeast and koji mould. We are educating people to drink it, and even at Bolliti they are asking for more and more.

—
at the top:
Dior Men SS24
top right:
Chanel FW14/15
to the right
Chanel FW10/11



What about your space in Milan?

I didn't choose it, the walls chose me. It was a disaster, but I fell in love with it immediately. There's history here, every time I come in I don't come to work: I come to absorb. I was looking for a more industrial building, but Palazzo Durini was love at first sight. I filled it with art and design, from early 20th-century educational flowers and mushrooms to Jean Prouvé furniture and sculptures by Italian artist Monica Bonvicini and Korean artist Do-Ho Suh. Now we are opening three more rooms to have the whole floor: an office, a workshop and an area dedicated to sound. I would have liked to inaugurate them for Design Week 2026, but I think we will postpone it and I would like to host an exhibition.

Do you think you can work forever?

For now, it's my fuel. It fills me with energy, allows me to see the world and continue to be excited. I have a long-term project for Milan, still in its infancy, but always designed for young people. It's something that never leaves my mind.

■ Giulio Solfrizzi

