

‘The audience doesn’t lie.’

Show producer extraordinaire Etienne Russo on the changing demands of the fashion spectacle.

Interview by Thomas Lenthal
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The fashion show as we know it today would hardly exist without the hand of Belgian producer extraordinaire, Etienne Russo. Having started his free-wheeling career in the late 1970s, modelling for Kansai Yamamoto in Japan and then art directing a Brussels club, he fell into producing fashion shows through his involvement with the Antwerp Six – producing his first Dries Van Noten show in 1991, and every single one since. From humble beginnings as a player in a small world to being instrumental in the development of today's larger-than-life industry, Russo's production house, villa eugénie, has been developing what we've come to understand as the fashion show in real time. Back in the 1990s, a couture show meant sitting down in a Parisian *hôtel particulier* amongst a couple of hundred wealthy

ceremony. But before any of that happens, Russo sat down with *System* to discuss the past, present and future of creating shows that engage all five senses.

Thomas Lenthal: Very simply, how would you describe what it is you do?

Etienne Russo: It has never had a name because it is not an old profession. Sometimes it is scenography, sometimes choreography; it has never been defined. And now we have to add a bit of strategy. It is a job in constant evolution. It's like: you stay still, you die.

But if you are sat at a dinner party, and someone asks you what you do, what do you tell them?

I usually try to change the subject! [Laughs] I haven't found a way to explain it in a short way.

year at the club, I asked them to do an installation. I was already experimenting with mixing elements to create an experience, and one day in late 1990, Dries called me and said: 'I'm going to do my first show in Paris, do you want to do it?' It was a serious opportunity, but I was scared. I had seen a few shows, but it was not the same as being in my club, which was like a laboratory. On the day of the show, I was hiding, terrified in the toilets. Dries was going crazy looking for me: 'Where is Etienne?! Where is Etienne?!' I couldn't move for 20 minutes. That was my first show in Paris, in the basement of the Hotel Saint James Albany. We put real grass on the catwalk. But being in the basement without the right light, it started turning brownish, so we had to air-brush it. We were a small team and everyone was doing everything. I was installing

to look at. You belong to a generation that created what shows have become.

Really? I think of Kenzo and Kansai Yamamoto. As a model, I remember being on stage in Tokyo for Yamamoto. There were more than 350 people on stage, for two back-to-back shows in front of 12,000 people in a sumo arena with lots of drummers – so much going on! I like to compare the Belgians to the Japanese – the Belgians were to the '90s what the Japanese were to the '70s and '80s, like with Margiela changing all the proportions. Back then, I was an underdog. I was living in Brussels, where I was born, and coming to Paris to do my thing for the Belgians.

Were you taking care of the Margiela shows?

Not at the beginning, only when he

to every art fair that I could. Buying a book is one thing, but going to exhibitions, going to Venice, you create a relationship with the gallerists, sometimes more than with the actual artists. A few became very good friends.

Do you take inspiration from other fashion shows that you see taking place?

No, never. I try to not look at what else is happening. Except maybe McQueen, because that guy was brilliant, a genius. And Margiela, but I ended up working for him. Margiela and McQueen were at the same level, which is why one quit and the other one quit in a different way. With McQueen, you watch the shows ten times and you say, 'Oh my god.' With Martin's shows it was more like, 'Why did no one ever think of that before?' Lee was provocative; he had to say what

And then Instagram arrived, and you were no longer looking at lighting or at a set, you were looking at it all through a phone. So, with all that happening, we had to think very differently; the evolution of the market and the evolution of technology were pushing us in a direction we'd never thought about before.

It's a captivating thing when a good show is put together – you can feel it. But I've yet to see a video of a show that makes it as interesting on the screen. It becomes purely factual – just dresses.

I agree, but we are trying to change that. Hermès asked us, 'What do we give to the people who are not in the room?' If I think of the last Hugo Boss show we did in Milan, I said I wanted it to be approached like a movie; I don't want it to be centred all the time, so if there

'The first ever show I produced was Dries, in Paris. I was so terrified I hid in the toilets. Dries was going crazy looking for me: 'Where is Etienne?!''

women, watching models walk against a no-fuss backdrop of an ornate room with only flowers as decoration. Fast-forward to the Grand Palais reopening in the mid-2000s and a blossoming partnership between Russo and Karl Lagerfeld coalesced. With a deep understanding of the word 'grand' and the venue's capacious potential, the pair embarked on a journey that cemented the modern world of Chanel in everybody's mind: the supermarket show, the casino, the giant ice cube, the rocket, the waterfall, the beach, the ski village – big visual statements made for the digital age. With the seamless merging of fashion and entertainment, and the increasing scale and complexity of the work he produces, it's not farfetched to imagine Russo pivoting to produce a Super Bowl halftime show or stage the Olympics

Then let's start from the beginning! You were in Brussels, and you were modelling – how did that lead to you working in fashion?

I was in the right place at the right time. My modelling career allowed me to travel. I went to New York when it was really booming, just before the mid-'80s, and I decided to live in Tokyo, where you saw Caucasian people so rarely that when you did, you'd wave, like, 'You are not alone!' When I came back to Brussels, I started working in a club, Le Mirano, spread across two floors in what had been a 1930s cinema. There was an interaction with Paris and fashion there; Jean Paul Gaultier did a show there, and the Antwerp Six, who weren't labelled that at the time, had just come out. I started doing pictures with Walter Van Beirendonck, and then with Dries [Van Noten]. And in my fifth

the show and selling the next day: one client in the morning, another in the afternoon, and then I'd cook for a client in the evening. Back then I would come to visit Paris for four or five days, see maybe 60 or 70 venues and select 20. And still, when you see Dries, he's never lost that, he'll never show in a place if he doesn't feel a good reason for it. So, nowadays when you have only one venue to present that will suit all his needs, it is a miracle.

You were inventing how it should be done. The first shows had models holding up a number, then there was the Hotel Intercontinental, then the tents at the Louvre, and then people began trying to turn the shows into a more interesting experience. It was really in the late 1980s, before the internet, that shows started to become exciting

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started doing Hermès. After Dries, there were other designers, but it was only in 1998 when I started working with non-Belgian brands. And then there was this ultra-polished luxury, when Tom Ford arrived with his sort of porno chic...

What was your inspiration back then?

Everything. The street, people, a magazine, a lot of art. I would buy tonnes of books. I had the time to go through books and put little post-its in them, without knowing what I would do with the ideas. My perception of contemporary art really changed at the end of the 1990s, when I met a gallery owner in Florence who started introducing me to the work of artists I didn't know; through that, I started collaborating with artists and collecting art and going

he felt. I could have seen him doing an opera or a movie; it just happened that fashion was a form of expression that he had mastered.

Tell me about the Chanel by Karl shows you were involved in. The mountain, the supermarket, the rocket...

When Chanel shows moved to the Grand Palais, Karl found he had to express himself differently and that it took time. Sometimes he would be briefing us on a future idea while we were still working on the previous show.

It was taking things to a different scale, and then everyone started going bigger. It triggered this new movement.

LVMH and Kering were pushing each other, and acquiring brands, and so they had to make themselves stand out from the other, and make a big statement.

is something, just move the camera, go there. We want the spectator who isn't there to feel like they are there. To give them a cinematic experience. When we did a quick debrief with the CEO of Hugo Boss, two days ago, he told me that 20 million people watched the show. So these people need to feel like they're getting something special, not just watching from afar.

What would you say are the metrics of success today for the work that you deliver to clients, compared to 20 years ago? Is it the client coming back and saying 'I had 300 million likes'?

Well, that helps! But you feel it there in the moment; you know if it is good or not. There is a kind of electricity that builds up in the room, so that when the show finishes or is about to finish,

you feel the way it has been received. The audience generally doesn't lie; the intensity of the applause. And then – this came with the internet – the client shows you on a kind of dashboard how many people watched online, and how that compares to the previous show, after 48 hours, after one week. When you hear that millions of people are watching, that motivates you to say 'How do I surprise them next time?'

Is the only moment when you can truly enjoy a show in hindsight – ten years later or a day later – or do you continue to obsess over the imperfections?

I am harder on myself than any client. I only see what didn't work and what I will do better next time. Even if you get a very good response, you have your own personal judgement on the entire

decisive about what would and would not work for the next seasons. And then suddenly we had bloggers, and then influencers and the new media. But who is it that makes all of this business work?

The one who buys the bag at the end of the chain.

Exactly. And this person has now started to receive information directly, in real time. The moment it is given to the press, they get it, too. So this grows the capacity of a show, and you don't talk to 600 people in the same way you would to 1,800. Plus, if a show was just about the moment, I don't think productions would be so big. But a show is a tool for months afterwards.

More than months, years; it becomes part of the history of the brand.

statement and then the question of how to embrace the audience and give them a wonderful moment. Between those points, there is so much you can do. When you grow your audience, you understand that there are people who, with all due respect, are less fashion-educated. And there are still those people who are 100 percent in that field. You want everyone to understand but you don't want the purist in the front row to feel a downgrading in quality.

It is like the Golden Age of Hollywood, taking sophistication to millions of people without dumbing it down. It is true that fashion isn't dumbing itself down in these shows.

Of course! The designers still have their message to deliver; we cannot just give entertainment. Pharrell did a lot of col-

Also this season, Dior Men's was maybe as impressive as Pont Neuf; totally different, but just as impressive. The impact was incredible; it was touching to see that perfect little machine working so neatly.¹

In the end, Kim Jones chose the opposite route to Pharrell; so opposite that there was no comparison. For me, it was an art installation. The checkerboard. His ideas are very clear, he is fast and super well-organized, and he has a wonderful British sense of humour. He is so, so fast in his head; you show him things and he knows, instantly, no hesitation. I would say it took four months to think it all through and get it right. And there was no rehearsal with the system before we got there. It had to be built in situ. All problems had to be solved on the spot. It took a bit longer than eight days to build.

The Green Carpet Fashion Awards and you meet people who work in the opera... It's a different world. They think at another speed, they rehearse for six months. We arrive and in three days we put the show together.

Do you have your eyes on things like the Super Bowl halftime performance?

Yes, of course, like the Olympics, or working on a movie. There's a moment when your ego thinks for you, and it sees you like a king of a little kingdom. Then maturity comes along and you say, 'OK, why do I put all my energy into this? Because there are people who have been trusting me for so many years who I can't ever let down.' Then you say another thing, 'There are people better than you at this; you are not going to reinvent the wheel.'

back with three serious concepts that are 85% finalized proposals and there is a dialogue. Hugo Boss trusts us to build an image strategy based on the collections. Each scenario is interesting. We have the luxury of having too much demand compared to what we can deliver, so we can be selective. We really love young designers with a new perspective on fashion. We did the second show for this very talented Belgian designer called Marie Adam-Leenaert² and it feels like we are starting the Dries years again with a modest budget.

So you do those shows pro bono?

Yes. Incubating talent. You know, sometimes when a request comes, we don't have the capacity at that moment to deliver to the level required. Many years ago, Louis Vuitton was one of them. I

'I'm harder on myself than any client is. I only ever see what doesn't work, and even when the response is great, I have my own personal judgement.'

production, the execution, the micro details. But you have to balance dissatisfaction with the voice that says 'It's okay'.

Do you feel more pressure now, with budgets bigger than ever? For some of the brands you work with, they want to do the most impressive show of the season, and money is not an issue...

I have to put you straight there; money *is* an issue. It always has been, and it always will be. But the scale of the people you reach has changed. If you think in terms of how advertising used to be, it was about how much you spend per person. A global company that wants to grow needs to talk to all those people. Before, the information was relayed by the press and filtered by whoever was at the show; *Vogue*, for example, was

Yes, it is image-building. There will be TikToks, Instagram clips, they have to film in different ways for all the different platforms. Before, you just did a quick edit for the resee in the showroom. Then a week later, you'd deliver the film. Now you see the digital in real time, and a team works until late after the show to distribute the content on different channels and platforms.

And to reach those audiences, brands are prepared to spend a certain amount of money. I mean, seen from the outside, Pharrell's debut show for Vuitton felt like a completely different paradigm. It expanded the horizons of a fashion brand using people who are not part of the fashion culture; a combination of fashion and entertainment.

I love it. Fashion-tainment: the fashion

labs before – Chanel, Moncler, Adidas – so this was not his first attempt at fashion. And he was always dressing with fashion attitude. Before, you needed to be a designer and your talent would be recognized. Now you need to be a public figure, you need to be a good designer, you need to show up in the office in the morning and you need to know about marketing.

Pharrell is a producer, to me. And that is his genius.

We had worked together at Moncler, so we knew each other a bit. He cultivates gratefulness and giving back. He said, 'I want to give back to Paris.' He said, 'You people, the city, everyone has given me this.' The humility in that guy is something I have rarely seen in this business.

'Specialists are amazing, but they only master one thing. Like a doctor, I want to be the best generalist who sends you to the best specialists.'

And on top of that, you have to take care of the wellbeing of the models. They were inside a box. At some point, the box has to close and we have to make sure no one has a panic attack. When I look at performances and the production that goes behind them, I always think that so many things could go wrong. If any part of this house of cards goes bottoms up, it will all fall down and be a major catastrophe in real time. And it does happen. Of course. And this is where you cannot lose your cool. For me the most important part of this job is reacting fast, you have to be like a chameleon. Technology pushes boundaries but there are moments where technology fails, too. Basically, my thinking is always 'worst case scenario, worst case scenario, worst case scenario.' In Milan last week, we worked with Camera Della Moda on

Your work is done on a case-by-case basis, but how does the dialogue play out between yourself and the creative direction? It must be different every time.

I would say there are three scenarios. In one, we are executive producers. There are very few shows like that, but we do them. Miu Miu is like that. Chanel, too, even if we do a bit more, they tell us what they want. Then, in the opposite scenario, there are clients like Moncler who give you a brief and they want it all from you. And in between, there are the ones I love the most, a kind of ping-pong, a dialogue. Alber Elbaz was like that. I have that with Daniel Roseberry and with Maximilian [Davis] at Ferragamo. A back and forth. Dries is about prints, fabrics, you know – he'll try to make you understand where he is going. Hermès is a brief; we come

wouldn't have been able to do the work to the right level back then, but I got it back through Pharrell. If you develop a good connection with people, it endures. Véronique Nichanian at Hermès is someone I have known for 25 years, since 1998. And Alber, too. Once I was invited by a friend to their house in Saint Tropez. I went to Place des Lices on a Saturday morning and from a distance, I saw the *brocanteurs*³ there and I spotted a beautiful miniature staircase. I bought it and said, 'This is for Alber, but I have no clue why.' I come back to Paris and we have our first meeting, and I say, 'Oh Alber, I have a little something for you.' He unpacked it, put it on the table, said nothing, walked around it, then suddenly said, 'This is the show!' And so we built that staircase larger than life and it was the show. That special connection with

people means you can take risks. Dries – I mean, I would not be here without him. I have a special affection for this man. It is platonic, but I have to fall in love.

How many people now work at villa Eugénie on a constant basis?

There are people on the payroll in Belgium, Paris and Italy. Beyond them, there is a pool of people that we work with, between 120 and 150 altogether, including the United States. I know everyone: the ones bringing the power generators, the ones who do the cleaning. You need to give attention, respect, and encouragement to everyone. You know, if you have a beautiful set but the toilets are not clean... *Everyone* counts.

Tell me about Moncler.

We were doing pro bono for Thom

as a heart, and at the end the couple at the front made out on a wedding cake. The soundtrack was kitsch love songs and the last one was ‘Ti Amo’ and people started singing along, like a huge karaoke. You asked about measuring success... Since then, Remo and I are like family, not just friends. So, when Genius arrived, my first question to him was, why change the system? We have Gamme Rouge in Paris, Gamme Bleu in Milan and Grenoble in New York. He said he was bored, and he wanted a change, but couldn’t explain why or how. Rethinking the whole system, we came up with the nine designers. We ended up in London, 15,000 people.⁶ It was big: 20,000 square metres and he wanted it to cover not only pure fashion but also lifestyle, which is why Jay-Z came along and Adidas and Pharrell.

loud. Daniel Roseberry – there are big pressures around him, but he is trying to keep things small and intimate.

What’s the future of shows?

I cannot say what will happen in 15 or 20 years but there are things being added now that together make these things... not ‘bigger’ or ‘better’, but, sort of, ‘fuller’. After Covid, it came back stronger, not in terms of the money, but because people were eager. All the same people in the front row who would complain that fashion was dead and the calendar was boring were the first ones to say, ‘I am craving to go to a show!’

Speaking of new developments, are you using AI?

Yes, for the set, for designing décor, for images. For things like translations, AI

like a human. After five minutes you feel like you are in front of a human. And you kind of fall in love with her.

In what capacity was she involved?

We had one that was at the entrance welcoming the guests, talking to all of them. Like a hostess, but more than a hostess. Everyone could talk to the second one after the show, and there was a third one sitting as a guest. I think the woman next to her was a bit shy. I went to talk to the engineer and asked how it all works. Basically, she has two cameras in her eyes and a microphone to listen to what we say. It takes milliseconds for her to give you the appropriate answer.

There was not one answer that was wrong. But she has a hard time walking; she cannot walk. She can touch but cannot grab. So, I asked the engineer, ‘Why? When will you have a full humanoid who will be able to be totally autonomous?’ And they said in 25-30 years. They started the version they have now in 2007; it took them 16 years.

What would you do with a humanoid like that? Why this interest?

Part of my job is having an interest in everything. There was a moment, years ago, when I was starting to get frustrated because clients would go to specialists instead of me, and to be honest that

hurt my ego. But then I realized I didn’t want to be a specialist. Specialists are amazing, but they master one thing only. I want to be the best generalist who knows all the best specialists. Like a doctor – you trust him to send you to the best specialists. That changed my attitude to work. I want to know about everything, and that makes everything interesting. There’s no subject I wouldn’t touch – cars, football, rugby, food, fashion, theatre, music, cinema, art, books, nature. I am a scuba diver, and there is so much underwater that we have not explored. You know, why spend trillions to go to Mars when there is so much to discover right here?

‘I am a bit sad about becoming so old. If I could carry on until 2060, the changes that we’ll see in the next decades are huge. I’m going to miss all that.’

Browne in New York, at the very, very beginning of his career. Thom Browne was assigned to do Moncler’s Gamme Bleu line – at the time it was Gamme Bleu and Gamme Rouge.⁴ Gamme Bleu was in Milan and Gamme Rouge was in Paris by Giambattista Valli. So, with Remo Ruffini we started to present Moncler Grenoble, rooted in the core of the brand, the Olympics, the technical stuff. Remo didn’t want a fashion show, and I knew that the very first presentation Remo did in Italy was 40 to 50 guys in a line.⁵ It was just an installation. So, we started from that, and did something different every season where we could take people on a journey with *tableaux vivants*. For one show on February 14th, we had couples – boy-boy, girl-girl, and boy-girl – coming out of a huge chocolate box designed

And now, again, I feel that he is starting to look for something new.

I know you worked for Hermès, and something very interesting to me about Hermès is that they just do the opposite to the other clients.

Indeed. It is not a house like any other. I think they have 18 *métiers*, and fashion is just one of them. At Hermès, we have to pay even more attention to detail; the construction has to look like it will last forever, to convey the essence of the craftsmanship they have.

Craftsman-chic.

Yes, we like that! There is no notion of ‘spectacular’ at Hermès, only quality. You have to feel an ease, a way of not shouting; it has to feel natural. Some people whisper, and others shout out

is a million times faster than a human, and that is a gain in time and productivity. I’d be super happy if we could reduce the work time in fashion week from 18 hours to a normal day. Not to pay anyone less, but to allow people to rest a bit more. I am actually a bit sad about being so old. If I could go until 2060, the changes that we’ll see in the next decades are huge. I am going to miss all that. Did you ever speak to Sophia?

Who is Sophia?

She is the most advanced humanoid. I went to talk to her. I think she might be back in Hong Kong now.

You brought her to Paris for a show?

To Milan for Hugo Boss. Sophia talks to you in 80 languages. She has eyes that look at you, and her facial elements are

1. Staged in a purpose-built grey box installed on the grounds of the École Militaire, the Dior Homme Spring/Summer 2024 collection featured 51 models rising out of trapdoors in the floor, as ‘hommes fleurs’ in sympathy with the floral theme of the collection. An unbroken lightbox ceiling offered optimal lighting for smartphone photography.

2. Belgian designer Marie Adam-Leenaert graduated from La Cambre National School of Visual Arts in 2020, and worked for Balenciaga

and Givenchy before launching her eponymous brand in 2023.

3. *Brocanteurs* are antique dealers. In Saint Tropez, there is an open air market each Tuesday and Saturday, where traders sell a range of fresh produce alongside paintings, arts and crafts, and other secondhand items.

4. In 2008, Moncler launched its Gamme Rouge collection in Paris designed by Thom Browne, followed by Gamme Bleu in 2009 designed by Giambattista Valli in Milan. In

2018, both lines were discontinued as Moncler refocused. Shortly after, Moncler Genius was launched with a rotation of guest designers.

5. The first Moncler Grenoble presentation was held in February 2010 and featured a line-up of many men on a four-level scaffolding structure. Wendy Lam, the writer behind the blog ‘nitro:licious’, who attended the presentation, noted it was ‘a brilliant idea to have 100 models staged on a scaffold at Chelsea Piers to show that Moncler jackets can withstand the

wind chills from the Hudson River. They were constantly switching out models to insure they don’t freeze to death or pass out but the scene was worth it, it was truly amazing.’

6. Staged at the Olympia exhibition centre in London, ‘The Art of Genius’ was an event held in February 2023 to celebrate the latest cohort of Genius designers. It included a performance by Alicia Keys, a glamping-wonderland installation by Pharrell Williams, and a robot peepshow by Hiroshi Fujiwara’s FRGMT, among others.