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Back to Work with Nicolas Ghesquière

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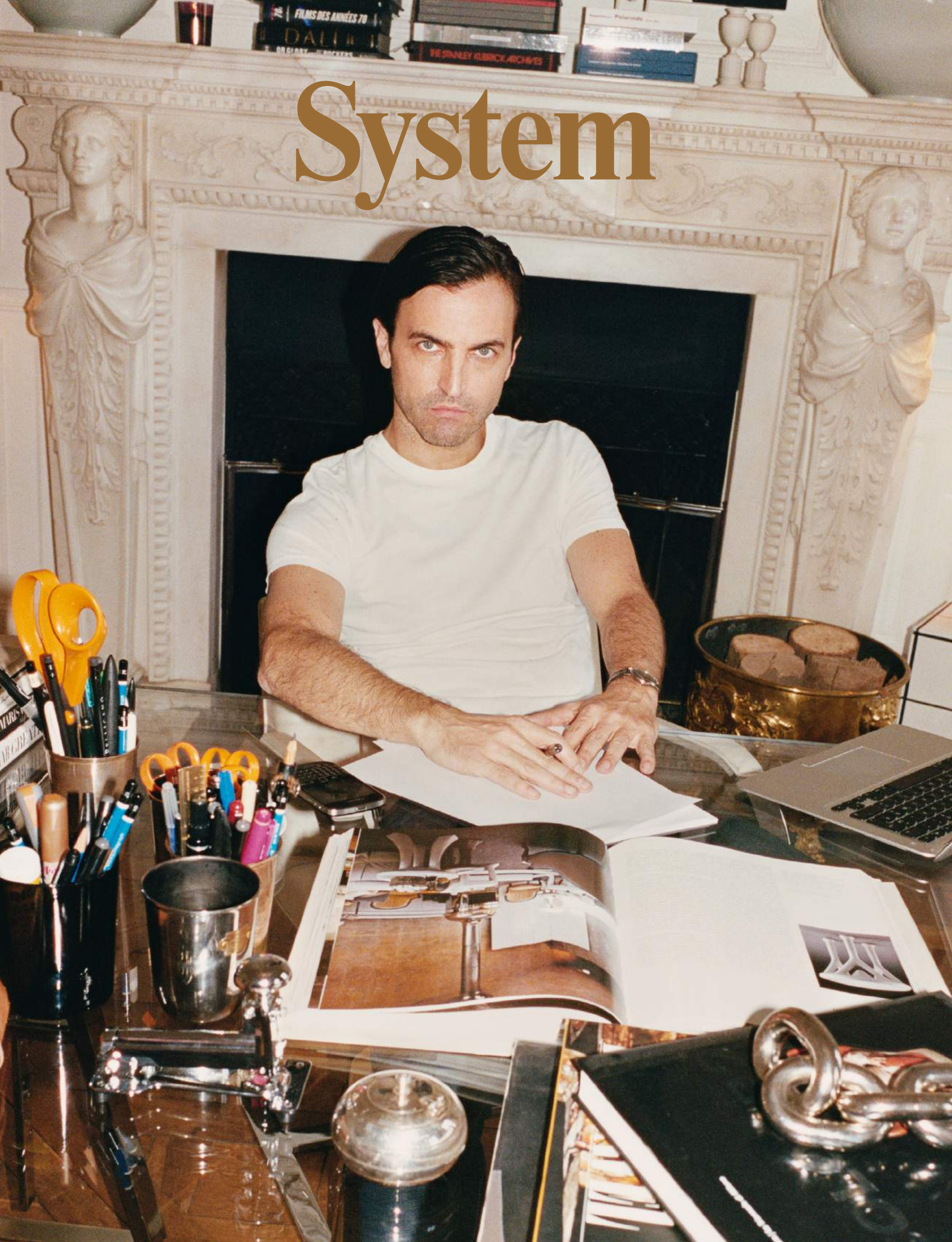

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Table of contents

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Erwin Wurm, *One Minute Sculpture*, 1997

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System **aims to convey the dialogues at the heart of fashion and the contemporary world – the conversations that everyone has about 'what we do', but that don't always make it to print.**

Our first issue focuses on fashion and those people who have worked their way into, around, and sometimes even against the system in favour of change.

Our guest editor Marie-Amélie Sauvé and cover star Nicolas Ghesquière epitomise the idea that fashion is only relevant when it's moving forward.

And as Ghesquière says in his first interview since leaving Balenciaga, to move forward you have to go back to work.

And that's good advice.

‘What works best is just going back to work.’

If anyone can change the rules of fashion, it’s Nicolas Ghesquière.

By Jonathan Wingfield
Photographs by Juergen Teller

Part One
Saturday, December 16th, 2012
Hôtel Montalembert, Paris

It's been just over a month since the shock news of Nicolas Ghesquière's departure from Balenciaga, and mere days since Alexander Wang was announced as his replacement. Other than a short and sobre press statement from PPR, there has been no explanation, no reasoning and, crucially, not a word from Ghesquière himself.

All of which makes the sight of the designer and his closest collaborator, stylist Marie-Amélie Sauvé, happily tucking into club sandwiches and Diet Cokes all the more surreal. Ghesquière has decided now is as good a time as any to open up about why he and Balenciaga are no longer, what he thinks about the current state of the industry, and what the devil he might be getting up to in the future.

It's been mutually decided that rather than pinning him into a corner with a dictaphone and a list of loaded questions, the opportunity to discuss recent events and other subjects should take the form of just that, a discussion. It's not been decided if said discussion will last the time it takes to finish lunch or if it will develop into something longer and perhaps more significant, but it's agreed that now is the time to press PLAY.

When journalists rush backstage to speak with designers, they always start with that eternally banal question, 'What was your inspiration?' So, let's start by discussing inspiration. What is it? How do you channel it? How is it changing?

Marie-Amélie Sauvé: Without sounding negative, I find today's generation of 15, 18, 20-year-olds take their inspiration too literally. We're living in a world of plagiarism. It's scary because without pure creation, we're no longer adding to history.

Nicolas Ghesquière: I'm often most inspired by things beyond the immediate world of fashion. It's broader cultural or social movements that have influenced looks or identities I've created. These days I sense that people don't dig particularly deep; inspiration rarely goes beyond borrowing what's happened in the past and rarely without adding any new layers of context. By that I mean the culture of fashion has lost some of its depth. Maybe it's just symptomatic of today's society and the culture of social networking, where people project themselves via their references and their 'likes'. Which is fine, but it's lacking in fundamental values.

'Fashion has entered the realm of pop culture, alongside television and music. It's never been so fashionable to like fashion as right now.'

Do ideas come easily to you?

NG: I find it's a dialogue between what I am looking for and what I'm instinctively longing for. When I find that mix, it generally manifests in the things I want to express. Sometimes there are very precise ideas that lead me into researching particular themes, but usually once I start looking, other things will come up and that's when you move into very interesting areas.

Why are we, as Marie-Amélie says, living in a world of plagiarism?

NG: How I see it, fashion has entered the realm of pop culture, alongside television and music. It's never been so fashionable to like fashion as right now. There was a time not so long ago when the fashion landscape was inhabited by a few marginal people and a few business types; these days, everyone has to be part of it. I'm all for a certain level of democratisation, sure, but right now things are spiralling out of control and heading downwards.

As a designer, how do you avoid being taken downwards with the forces of democratisation?

NG: There is going to be a reaction against the status quo, there always is, certainly in fashion. And so you use this reaction to rise above mediocrity and distinguish yourself. It's the only way. The system has become so totally saturated, but there is nothing better than a saturated system for reinventing yourself and finding new ways of operating.

MAS: By it's very nature, fashion operates in cycles, and we've already seen this type of reaction before.

NG: Yes, the emergence in the 1980s of the Japanese designers, as well as Gaultier, Montana, and the others here in Paris, was a reaction at the time against haute couture. I remember all the pages in *Vogue* dedicated to the couturiers' ready-to-wear lines which had to be photographed, and then suddenly, boom, a whole new system which literally overnight rendered the status quo obsolete.

MAS: Today everything is mixed up and that's the problem. I mean is it a lack of knowledge? How come everything is all mixed up now? The words

fashion and luxury have become indistinguishable: luxury means fashion, and fashion means luxury.
NG: Exactly, yes that's totally it.
MAS: I don't see how some of the fast retail brands are going to have a long shelf life. Look at what's emerging, but also what's dying just as quickly. Brands are created but they never go anywhere, there's no long-term vision.
NG: Fast retail brands get their inspiration from opinion leaders - those whose role it is to engage in research, to innovate, to show major direction. Once there are less and less opinion leaders the market will become much less competitive, even amongst themselves.

But what will the fast retail brands do with all the money they've quickly accumulated?

NG: Someone said something interesting to me recently: 'The next classic luxury group will be H&M or Zara.' It might well be the case. Beyond the collaborations they do at the moment, they will actually employ big designers for the long term. Basically, if they know there's nowhere left for them to go in their current sector, they might end up stepping up into the luxury domain.
MAS: They clearly want to be considered high fashion; you can see that in the way they're adopting the same production values as high fashion brands.
NG: But it is so much harder to climb than to fall. That's where the justice lies in this industry. There are still certain opinion leaders and executives who recognise the need for creativity in the business of a brand. If a brand takes real care of the way things are done, made, advertised, and distributed, then its value has the potential to go up. But so few brands really want to put the effort in because it distracts from making quick profit.

Talking of H&M, had you and Balenciaga been approached by them to collaborate?
NG: Several times.

Were you ever tempted to do it?
NG: No, no, never. I didn't think it was a good idea strategically for Balenciaga. I don't think what they do and what a house like Balenciaga does is the same profession. That's not to say I don't find what they do interesting; I think there have been some excellent collaborations. But it all comes down to this discussion about accessibility and exclusivity. What do you give? What don't you give?

'Everyone in luxury is fascinated by the speed of the H&Ms and Zaras. But they've eliminated the creative phase. Production has eclipsed creativity.'

Where does their strength lie?
NG: Well, the resources are amazing. Everyone in luxury is fascinated by the process and the rapidity of these monsters. But at the same time they eliminate the creative phase. Production has eclipsed creativity.

And how do you feel about these fast retail brands taking your Balenciaga designs and repackaging them to the masses?
NG: I realised my success when I saw people recreating looks that we'd done in their own way in the street, with what they had. Not necessarily with clothes by me. When it's in the street, I really like that. When a friends tell me, 'It's mad, I'm seeing all these girls looking like Balenciaga; not necessarily in Balenciaga, but dressing like it,' that is fine.

MAS: Because the message has got through to the wider world.
NG: Yes, that's where you feel the influence you've had, and that doesn't bother me at all. I've always taken that as a compliment. When there's a 20 or 25 year age difference, it's a compliment. But in other cases, it's done by professionals who are 5, 8 or 10 years younger than me, and people say, 'Well, it's normal. These designers have grown up watching you, you've been a model to them. It's worked for you, and they want to do the same thing.' That bothers me ever so slightly.

Isn't imitation the greatest form of flattery?
NG: Well, people in the press and so on have been quite tough with me in the past because I'm always searching for new ideas. I've occasionally been seriously criticised, hurt even, because when you take risks you can get treated badly. But then two years later, or even a season later, the entire collection is copied in America, or somewhere where people are a bit more indulgent, and I find that strange. I'm here to evolve and hopefully innovate; that's my role as a designer: to move forward, to take risks, and generate commercial incentives. Then, paradoxically, people turn a blind eye to the plagiarism.

Do people tell you about specific examples of plagiarism, or do you see them yourself?
NG: I've seen lots of things myself. Then Mimi [Marie-Amélie] always tells me about things she's seen. It doesn't depress me, it just seems to have become

so normal. Almost like, 'Oh, he's the opinion leader, it's his role to be copied.' Great, but this remains an industry that is based on commerce. It's not like being an artist in a gallery. And so it does feel a bit unfair.

How does it make you feel, knowing that there are girls all over the world wearing pieces that are direct copies of your collections, without knowing who you are, without knowing the *savoir faire* and the hours of work that have gone in to get make that design what it is?
NG: It makes me feel a number of things. When it's mass distributors - like Zara, which is owned by the third richest man in the world - I tend to think that I got involved with the wrong businessmen! I'm joking of course, but

Can you identify a moment when the business element infiltrated fashion and corrupted it?
NG: I'll use Tom Ford and the Gucci Group as an example because he was a creative power even though he also had a sense of business. Although Tom wasn't the most conceptual of creatives, he did have a creative viewpoint which drove a house and even drove an entire group. There's no doubt that the fall of Tom Ford from the Gucci Group brought about the end for creative directors like Tom, but also for designers in general. From that point onwards, the control has been in the hands of the corporate side of this industry.

What were your first conversations with Tom Ford about?
NG: I'd met him once before in a restaurant; we shook hands, and he said some very nice things about my work. Then one day he rang; I basically thought someone was joking: 'Yeah yeah, it's Tom Ford on the phone.' But it was him, and told me he wanted us to meet up. Around that time, I'd had quite a lot of proposals – from other houses, from all of the groups, from investors interested in backing my own thing... But Tom was the only one to actually ask, 'What do *you* want to do?'

Do you think what Tom Ford did at Gucci changed your personal view of the industry?
NG: Yes, without a doubt. Because suddenly the business side of fashion was no longer embarrassing. Tom's a total fashion fanatic, but he embraced the business side as much as the seasons of fashion. Thanks to the culture that he and Domenico [de Sole] established, we were suddenly free of any psychological complexes; there was a business, and it operated alongside creativity. Who else did that? Giorgio Armani maybe, but not in the same way. Chanel has never been like that either. Karl is without a doubt the most inventive artistic director, but there really was a before and an after Tom Ford. Tom officialised the status of artistic director of a house.

And Domenico de Sole?
NG: Domenico's level of comprehension is unique: his vision, right from the start, was incredibly sensitive to creative people. It was so important for him that a house had to be constructed around the creative energy whilst being a good business.

'Plagiarism doesn't depress me, it just seems to have become so normal. It's like, "Oh, he's the opinion leader, it's his role to be copied."'

when it's distribution on that scale, it's about successful business and nothing else; their role is to make fashion more accessible for the sake of commerce and nothing else. When it's a luxury house or a designer doing it, I find it far more mediocre – that's my word of the day.

Can we talk about the rapport between business and creativity that lies at the core of this industry.
NG: Today, I find that everyone I meet always talks about business before desire and creative impulse. There are some really good ideas, but business has become the priority over a good idea. I mean, fashion's profitability and prestige have become much more reliable than many other activities. You know, you feel better if you own a luxury group than a steel group.

Would you say this approach was unprecedented?
NG: Yes, I mean there were business models that involved a partnerships like Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, but the partnership between Tom and Domenico was totally equal. This is a businessman who would empower creatives, who'd say things like, 'Don't be scared to do it like this.' Today I will have the same level of expectation with my future partners as I had with Domenico back then. Dom-Tom, they were the precursors of a model, for sure.

Do you remember early conversations with Domenico de Sole?
NG: I remember going to London secretly to talk to Domenico, and I remember signing the contract at night because it was all top secret. There were

lots of meetings, but there was also such freedom; they really did try and adapt things so that the Balenciaga would correspond to what I wanted. They never said, 'It has to be like this and nothing else.'

And what about when they left the very group they had formed?
NG: I found out about it at the same time as everyone else, and to be honest I did feel abandoned. I told them so, too. Tom said, 'No, it's going to be alright.' Domenico told me he was sorry but that he had no choice. I think we all felt abandoned; we'd all joined the group for them, and what were we going to do now?

You said before that Tom Ford made business seem less embarrassing, more tangible. Did he ever offer you specific creative advice?
NG: I had conversations with Tom where he told me what he liked in my work. He'd say, 'Look, when you do this, it really works.' It was a delicate way of directing me. It all happened very naturally though because I had no hang-ups, and I wanted it to go well and almost make them happy. You were in a winning team, each with our own skill.

Would you talk with Stella McCartney and Lee McQueen about all this?
NG: Not so much with Lee because I didn't know him very well, sadly. But with Stella yes, we get on well.

And do you think she felt as enthusiastic as you at the time?
I can't say anything on her behalf, but there's no doubt she came on board for the same reasons as me. Stella has always had her own point of view and her own convictions. There was definitely complicity between us and no sense of competition. Things were well established, and everyone had their own vision; it was a complimentary group of houses, which maybe wasn't the case when you had, say, Helmut Lang and Jil Sander at the Prada Group.

Do you think the fact that designers now have less of a complex and that there are such high commercial stakes these days has had a negative impact?
Yes. Of course. The more we sell, the harder it is to convince people that they are buying something exclusive. You inevitably have to lean towards a common denominator: a sign of recognition while remaining an opinion leader and having an exclusive *savoir faire*, a craftsmanship, and a semi-industrial fabrication, and those elements are difficult to combine, for sure. We are definitely at a crossroads.

Part Two
Saturday, January 5th, 2013
Hôtel Montalembert, Paris

Ghesquière and Sauvé, having approved the idea of a second 'session', propose a same-time-same-place in the new year. Since our last rendezvous, rumours continue to circulate as to why Ghesquière left Balenciaga, the payout he got on leaving, and what he was going to do next. Having both just returned from sunny climes, it is with healthy complexion that they order a new round of club sandwiches and prepare themselves for 'the second installment'.

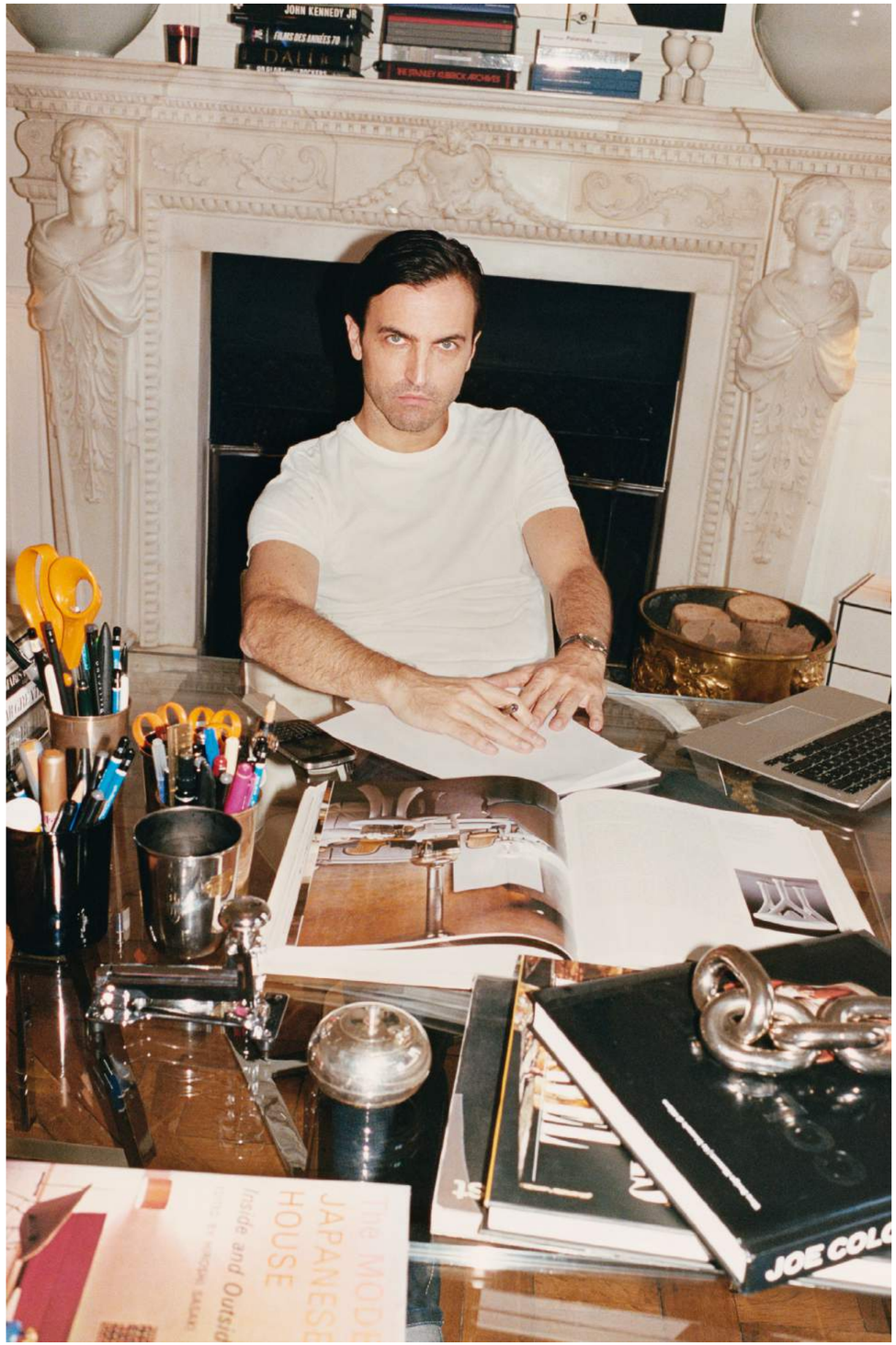
At what point into the job at Balenciaga did you realise you needed to wise up to the business side of the brand?
NG: Straight away. It's part of being a creative because the vision you have is going to end up in the boutique. It actually makes me smile today when I think about it because I had to invent the idea of being commercial at Balenciaga. Right from the start I wanted it to be commercial, but the first group who owned it didn't have the first notion of commerce; there was no production team. There was nothing.

What was your vision for the brand?
NG: For me, Balenciaga has a history that is just as important as that of Chanel, even if it's a lesser known name. It had the modernity, it was contemporary, and I've always positioned it as a little Chanel or Prada.

But what makes Chanel and Prada bigger structures?
MAS: The people that surround the designers. Miuccia Prada has an extraordinary partner, which Nicolas never had. You can't do everything on your own.
NG: And I was doing everything by myself.

So without the right people, building something as big as a Chanel or Prada is unimaginable?
NG: I don't know if it's impossible, maybe the system will change, but what's clear is that those brands, as Marie-Amélie says, have family and partners

'Being wise to business is all part of being a creative in fashion because the vision you have is going to end up in a store.'



surrounding them, *and* they have creative carte blanche. Prada, for example, has made this model where you can be a business *and* an opinion leader at the same time, which is totally admirable. It's the same thing at Chanel. Sadly, I never had that. I never had a partner, and I ended up feeling too alone. I had a marvellous studio and design team who were close to me, but it started becoming a bureaucracy and gradually became more corporate, until it was no longer even linked to fashion. In the end, it felt as though they just wanted to be like any other house.

You're saying this spanned from a lack of dialogue?

NG: From the fact that there was no one helping me on the business side, for example.

NG: I'd rather not say. There wasn't really any direction. I think with Karl and Miuccia, you can feel that it's the creative people who have the power.

MAS: It was at this point we kind of hit a road block.

NG: And it was around that time that I heard people saying, 'Your style is Balenciaga now, it's not your style anymore, it's Balenciaga's style.' That's what I mean by the dehumanisation. Everything became an asset for the brand, trying to make it ever more corporate – it was all about branding. I don't have anything against that; actually, the thing that I'm most proud of is that it's become a big financial entity and will continue to exist. But I began to feel as though I was being sucked dry, like they wanted to steal my identity while trying to homogenise things. It just wasn't fulfilling anymore.

popular today are from collections we made ten years ago. They have become classics and will carry on being so.

MAS: Although the catwalk was extremely rich in ideas and products, there was no follow-up merchandising. With just one jacket you could have triggered whole commercial strategies.

NG: It's what we wanted to do, but we couldn't do *everything*. I was switching between the designs for the catwalk and the merchandisable pieces – I was Mr Merchandiser. Then I had carte blanche to go back to being creative, and then there were the capsule collections, the 'Made in China', the trousers for less than 200 euros. And that's what my days were like.

MAS: There was no one to really develop the brand. It could have become the size of Prada! On one hand, you had

'There are people I've worked with who say they love fashion yet they've never actually grasped that this isn't a yoghurt or a piece of furniture.'

Can you give me an example?

NG: They wanted to open up a load of stores but in really mediocre spaces, where people didn't know the brand. It was a strategy that I just couldn't relate to. I found this garage space on Faubourg-Saint-Honoré; I got in contact with the real estate guy who's a friend of a friend, and we started talking… And when I went back to them the reaction was, 'Oh no no, no, not Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, are you sure?' And I said yes really, the architecture is amazing, it's not a classic shop. Oh really, really… then six months went by, six long months of negotiations… it was just so frustrating. Everything was like that.

And the conversations, like that one about the store, who would you have them with?

When was the first time you felt your ambitions for the house were no longer compatible with your partners?

NG: It was all the time, but especially over the last two or three years it became one frustration after another. It was really that lack of culture which bothered me in the end. The strongest pieces that we made for the catwalk got ignored by the business people. They forgot that in order to get to that easily sellable biker jacket, it had to go via a technically mastered piece that had been shown on the catwalk. I started to become unhappy when I realised that there was no esteem, interest, or recognition for the research that I did; they only cared about what the merchandisable result would look like. This accelerated desire meant they ignored the fact that all the pieces that remain the most

the ideas people and on the other the business people, and you could feel that there was no fluidity between the two.

NG: Undoubtedly, but you need the right filters; you need competent people. There was never a merchandiser at Balenciaga, which I regret terribly.

Did you never go to the top of the group and ask for the support you needed?

NG: Yes, endlessly!

MAS: But they didn't understand.

NG: More than anything else, you need people who understand fashion. There are people I've worked with who have never understood how fashion works. They keep saying they love fashion, yet they've never actually grasped that this isn't yoghurt or a piece of furniture - products in the purest sense of the term. They just don't understand the process

at all, and so now they're transforming it into something much more reproducible and flat.

What's the alternative to this?
NG: You need to have the right people around you: people who adore the luxury domain. There has to be a vision, but there also has to be a partner, a duo, someone to help you carry it. I haven't lost hope!

At the time when you were starting to feel that frustration, did you talk to any other designers who were in the same situation?
NG: Yes. What's interesting is how my split from Balenciaga has encouraged people to get in touch with me, and they've said, 'Me too, I'm in the same situation. I want to leave too.' There are

NG: I don't think I'm really able to answer that because certain groups are transforming. Certain groups are looking for new models themselves and they are conscious of their position in the market; they know that they will have to renew that positioning. I don't think that it will be easy for them to detach themselves from certain business models once again, but there is definitely a spirit of research with some of them. I think what's going to be interesting is the punk effect and what that will provoke; existing outside the groups should be impossible, but someone will arrive and prove us wrong. That's very exciting. There will be a new means of consuming. It might mean the mass distributors, which are already big groups and are focused on certain brands, might want to start focusing on luxury.

extraordinary - but the way she has built a business, especially in Japan, with the quality of the boutiques and the merchandising in them. No one really talks about Comme des Garçons merchandising, but it is amazing.

And what is it about the rapport between Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli that impresses you?
NG: I just think they're the most successful in terms of the quality of distribution and merchandising – it's pretty extraordinary. While they've succeeded in developing a successful commercial empire, every season Miuccia Prada continues to unveil a totally radical viewpoint, she never holds back.

In spite of the increasingly stifling conditions you felt you were operating in,

'My split from Balenciaga has encouraged people to get in touch with me, and they've said, "I'm in the same situation. I want to leave too."'

others, but my situation at Balenciaga was very particular.

What's your feeling about luxury groups today?
NG: I have nothing against groups. They can be very good because it can provide a brand with the much needed resources it needs, and there can be great synergies, so I am very pro-group. However, I also feel that groups, even those that know what luxury is, are questioning the formulas, they can see that things are sliding. They know there are very cheap clothes being sold today, they're questioning the very fundamental elements of the process.

Can fashion today exist outside of the big groups? Or have those groups changed the way fashion is made?

You mentioned before your admiration for the structure that Prada have. What other structures have impressed you?
NG: Azzedine is a model to me because he's the one who has best protected himself, he has maintained continuity while making radical choices with zero compromise. But at the same time he really has a signature and an identity which is totally recognisable. It's a great business, too, which certainly shouldn't be forgotten. It's always been managed very well, very articulately. Even his business model is made-to-measure, and that's amazing.

Any others?
NG: There's Rei Kawakubo. Not necessarily in the way she presents her collections - which also happens to be

were you nonetheless scared by the prospect of leaving Balenciaga?
NG: I just said to myself, 'Okay, well you have to leave, you have to cut the cord.' But I didn't say anything to anyone, apart from to a few very close people, because, you know, I've become pretty good at standing on my own two feet.

Once you'd decided enough was enough and you made your intentions clear, were the directors surprised that you wanted to leave?
NG: Yes. I think so, because I'd shown my ambitions for the house. There'd been lots of discussions, of course, and there were clearly some differences, but that sort of decision doesn't just come out of nowhere. I'd been thinking a lot too. I was having trouble sleeping at

one point. [Laughs] But there's usually something keeping me awake.

How did you go about informing your design team?
NG: That was the hardest and most moving part. I couldn't say goodbye to everyone. I wanted to do it individually as opposed to as a collective because I felt like farewell drinks was too corporate. I made appointments to say thank you and that I would see them soon. And what most of them said to me was, 'Oh la la, I want to say thank you because I feel as though I've been part of fashion history.' I felt that was so moving because I'd never thought about it like that.

And how did they find out…
NG: Oh, it was awful, they found out afterwards. It was really badly done, and everyone was in a state of shock. Some people just left straight away. It could have certainly been done with a bit more subtly, with a bit more dignity.

After the announcement, did lots of people in the fashion world contact you?
NG: I didn't actually see all the reactions straight away because I was in Japan at the time; one of my best friends had taken me on something of a spiritual trip to observe people who make traditional lacquer and obi belts; it was such a privileged environment with tea ceremonies. On the other side of the world, there was this violent announcement being made. When I got back to Paris I saw the press, and with all the commentary going on I actually learnt things about myself; it was quite beautiful in fact. Generally the reaction had been very positive, even on Twitter there were some very satisfactory things being written. Ultimately, I felt okay in the end because it seemed very dignified. I haven't expressed myself up until now, but I would like to say thank you to everyone, I really am very grateful.

Did you ever think about making a personal announcement?
NG: No, I never wanted to express myself like that. I don't know how to do that.

What's the most exciting thing about this period of time for you?
NG: Preparing for the next chapter and having the time to observe what's going on in the industry. People could have forever associated me with Balenciaga. We saw clearly when the split took place that there was a desire for my name, so I disassociated myself naturally from the house. That could have been a risk. It would have been different if Balenciaga had disassociated itself from me, but people had seen me develop my signature and knew that it might happen. That's exciting because whatever choice I make, the possibilities are open, and that was confirmed with the freeing of my name from Balenciaga. I'd made so much effort and been such a good obedient kid in associating myself… Now I can imagine a whole new vocabulary. I'm regenerating again, and that's very exciting because it's a feeling I haven't had since I was in my twenties.

Why are you one of the few who has managed to retain a sense of integrity in this domain?
NG: Because I was never scared to fight and speak out – to have an opinion. I was sensitive to the economic climate without being scared of having a strong point of view, and saying that was what should drive the house. I was happy where I was in spite of other offers over the years. I'm very loyal, and I felt as though I had a mission to accomplish.

Do you think that loyalty is a real value in this business?
NG: Yes, because what perverts this job is that we're constantly rejecting things and expecting them to arrive faster. The faster things arrive, the faster you get a result, the more money you make. So you become completely impatient, which has definitely been one of my faults over the years because you're always on this mission. I'm working my patience now, in this lull.

Today, with a bit of hindsight since the separation from Balenciaga, do you have a favourite collection?
NG: I actually did a little recap recently, and I watched all the videos, one after another, 15 years and 30 shows from the first to the last. It was actually a far easier experience than I thought it was going to be! I enjoyed watching the punks collection again. That was a good collection, and the girls were great: we had Gisele closing it, we had Stella, Amber, Belgian girls, Anne-Catherine, new faces at the beginning. Then there was the one we called 'The Explorers' with big parkas and white puffball dresses, Autumn/Winter 2005-2006.

What about the Cristobal Balenciaga collection?
NG: I guess that was really the moment

'The faster things arrive, the faster you get results, the more money you make. So you become completely impatient, which is one of my faults.'

of recognition. I received letters from everyone, from Karl and the *Chambre Syndicale*, saying welcome, you've made it. 'The Flowers' was another one which was superb. It was ultra-radical with classical music and a carpet of flowers, all in the dark with lots of repetition. And lastly, the one at the office tower last season, I really loved that moment. I actually think that was a determining factor in my decision to leave.

Had you already made up your mind?
NG: I think the seed was germinating. I was already wound up because the powers that be really didn't understand the need for a show that they felt was so 'edgy'. We'd found this slightly strange empty office tower, Dominique [Gonzales-Foerster] did the set, and it was sublime. I love the fact that the weather was bad, and there was mist, and we were in this tower, and it was totally cinematic.

What did you typically do the day after a show?
NG: I've tried everything: compulsive shopping, immediately going on holiday... Nothing works, it's a metaphorical hangover, a meltdown no matter what. In fact what works the best, strangely, is just going back to work.

What will you miss most about Balenciaga?
NG: I will definitely miss the studio and the atelier, but the rest not at all. Quite the opposite in fact. I really do feel as though I am no longer being sucked dry. No one is asking me things endlessly, asking for ideas all the time: what's next, what's next, what's next?

So you've almost come right back to the origins, and it's just you and Marie-Amélie again with a small team.
MAS: But it's good when there aren't many of you because ideas are shared more easily. It's more fluid.
NG: And we have to protect ourselves following the experience we've had. But I feel a weight off my shoulders now. I'm excited to start building my collage again because I won't be able to go for long without creating something again soon. Ultimately though, the thing that remains is this beautiful story behind me already. That's what I like about the celebration of my departure: 15 years, done and dusted. You cannot argue with that. There was a vision.

Part Three
Saturday, January 26th, 2013
Hôtel Montalembert, Paris

Just when you think you're falling nicely into a routine - Saturday lunchtime, table for three, club sandwiches, and a couple of hours to chat - things take a slight detour. Ghesquière, graciously arrives a little flustered. 'Please, order some food,' he politely offers, 'I'll only have time for a coffee.'

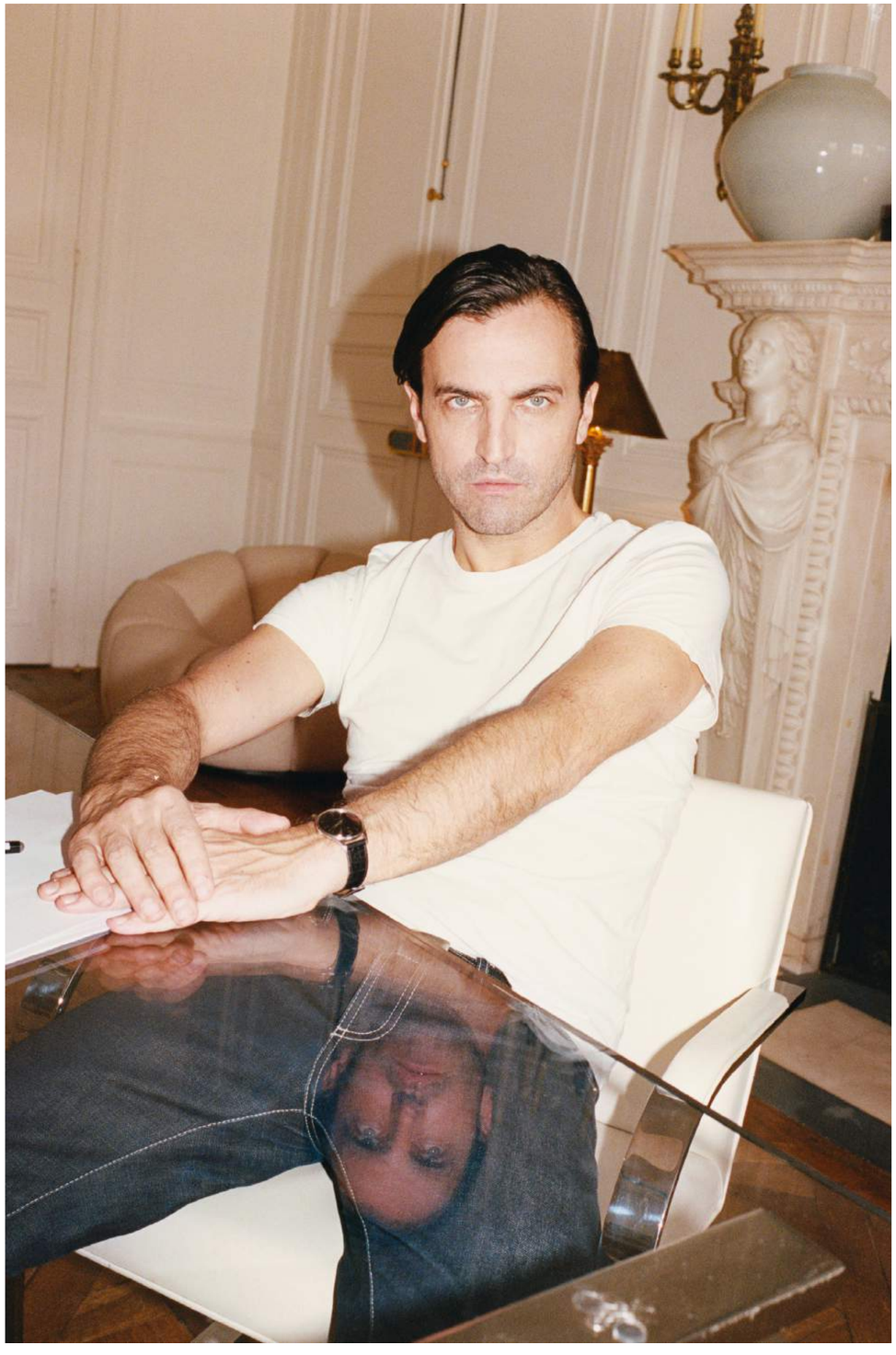
With under an hour to spare, the studiously prepared questions about the Balenciaga fallout or what on arth he might be up to behind closed (office) doors are put aside. This calls for a change of approach. Rapid-fire question time.

We talked before about the collage that people build up on Facebook, but there was a time when we did that in our bedrooms.
MAS: Yes, we stuck up posters and images.

Do you remember what you stuck up on your walls?
NG: Yes, I drew a lot, so there were loads of my own pictures. I loved that Ken Russell film, *The Devils*, with Vanessa Redgrave, so I had pictures of the actors, and of course *Alien* with Sigourney Weaver and other science-fiction images... Plus posters or photos of major icons of the time like Grace Jones. I remember insisting that my parents let me have a completely white bedroom, which they refused because they preferred me to have floral fabric wallpaper. So one day, I covered my walls with white paper. Later on, when I was a teenager, I took all the white sheets I could find in the house and covered my bed, the sofa, the television, everything I had in the bedroom. *Everything* was white. I remember my mother came in and she was really concerned that there was something wrong with me. [Laughs] But, you know, I just needed that white space, and in the end they let me keep it like that.

When we're adolescents, there are visual elements in life we're not really equipped to notice. I mean, there aren't many 12 year olds who say, 'Wow, I love that Le Corbusier building!'
NG: Oh, that was me! I loved those aesthetics already. If I saw an image of something I liked, I immediately tore out the page. Buildings, everything – it wasn't at all limited to fashion. It's still

'The day after the show I've tried everything: compulsive shopping, going on holiday... Nothing works, it's a metaphorical hangover.'



the same today when I compile images; they can take shape in any number of ways. I had a Polaroid camera when I was younger and used to take pictures of the television.

And buildings?
NG: Yes, derelict factories and old railway stations near my house. Then when you start studying, you discover more architecture: Oscar Niemeyer and so on. I think I've always been driven by this sense of curiosity. Fashion was the catalyst, but at one point it could have come from somewhere else.
MAS: Nicolas could have been an artist or made films. For me, he really could have been an architect.
NG: I think it's the *mise-en-scène* that drew me to fashion. Then there's the technical side and the construction, and

'When I was a teenager, I covered all my bedroom with white sheets. My mother was concerned that there was something wrong with me.'

the need to be rigorous and precise, so it makes an ideal ensemble.

How old were you when you had this clear vision of what you wanted to do?
NG: About 11 or 12. It was very early on that I knew I wanted to work in fashion.

And you Marie-Amélie?
MAS: I loved fashion because it was part of my world, but I didn't say I was going to work in that industry. That came later.
NG: But it's already quite unusual to have liked fashion.
MAS: Well, I really loved fashion and clothes, but I hadn't thought about working in that world. My bedroom walls were plastered with fashion imagery, so of course it was there, but I didn't allow myself to think about a career in fashion because I had parents who thought it was… they wanted me to have a serious education.

Aside from the Grace Jones photos, do you remember the first fashion images that you were drawn to?
NG: It started with classic things, photographs in magazines. I was brought up out in the countryside, but my mother had *Vogue* and all the magazines, so that started very early on. I remember one particular copy of *Vogue*; it was a Gruau Christmas special. The other images I was specifically drawn to were by Irving Penn: the still lifes, the portraits, like the one of Picasso...

Were you ever photographed by Penn?
NG: Yes, in 2006 I think. He shot me wearing a scarf. Every time he came to Paris, he always stayed at a hotel right next to where we are, the Pont Royal.

Did he photograph you in Paris?
NG: No, at his studio in New York. It was quite a big deal. I had to meet him twice beforehand because he didn't really like photographing people and would generally refuse. He shot very few fashion designers, and he refused certain actresses. It was Anna Wintour who asked him to shoot me, and I think he accepted because he liked my work. He told me that while we were having tea together one afternoon. I think he was quite nostalgic for Paris too, because he would come here with his wife. After the portrait, we did a few other things together: there was a photo of Cate Blanchett dressed as Queen Elizabeth. I did my dress for Elizabeth, and the photo he took is truly sublime. It was so inspiring to witness someone well into his eighties remain as focused as he'd been all his life.

Do you see yourself working in fashion all your life?
NG: Yes, I think so; I can't imagine not being involved in fashion in any case. I do actually have fantasies of retiring sometimes, so I don't think I'll do it forever.

Do you think that fashion is something that you can continue to do when you are old?
NG: Fashion is a playground up until a certain age, and then you absolutely have to find your style. I mean, you can engage in changing fashions and trends for years, but from the moment that a designer finds their signature, it's often a case of purifying that over time. There's a Gaultier quote that keeps coming back to me: 'A young designer has to know that I was once like him, and that one day he will be like me.' I find it really interesting, not because I'm comparing it to myself, it's just super interesting. Today there is a race for discovery; there are young talents who arrive completely ready to express themselves and others that lack maturity. Azzedine has always said that a career should start at 40…

Do you have creative talents outside fashion?
NG: No, I think it always manifested itself like this, through drawing.

What's the difference between style and fashion? Is that easy to verbalise?
NG: Style can take every form, whether it is instantly recognisable or a style unto itself. Fashion is what will have an immediate impact, be ultra desirable, and seductive in that particular moment. But, you know, when you're creating something, you don't say to yourself, 'Oh, this is going to become a timeless style.' It's a subconscious thing.

Could you give me an example of style?
NG: Kubrick, who can make both *Barry Lyndon* and *A Clockwork Orange*. He made a conscious decision to explore every cinematic category — historical, futuristic, science fiction… — and yet the atmosphere, the style of any of those films makes it undoubtedly Kubrick. In fashion, there are people like Rei Kawakubo, in a totally radical category, but the imprint is definitely there with that unique combination that is absolutely identifiable. It is *the* Comme de Garçons style. Azzedine of course, but also Jean-Paul. Issey Miyake too. Helmut Lang, without a doubt; his work is always instantly recognisable.

Can you define your signature?
NG: Ooh, that's probably the hardest question. I'd say, there's an interest in experimentation and technique, and I think I already had certain codes and a signature in the construction. But it's very difficult to say because it's what makes me – it's my identity.

When you look back at yourself when you arrived at Balenciaga 15 years ago and Nicolas Ghesquiere today, how do you compare the two?
NG: I was very determined back then, that's for sure. At the beginning, people would say, 'Oh, he has a bad temperament,' and the people who worked around me would explain, 'No he doesn't, he just has a lot of character. It's different!' People still have this idea of me as complicated and tricky, but I think I'm just determined.

I can't imagine you could successfully oversee a fashion house if you weren't.
NG: When I see young designers today arriving at a big house, the advice I would give them is, be driven, be passionate. The whole house is going to be there, and you have to take everyone on your journey.

'Fashion is a playground up until a certain age, but then you absolutely have to find your own signature and your own style.'

Today we are bombarded with images, and it's rare that any one particular image actually lingers. What was the last image that captured your attention?
NG: It's actually a film from the 1970s with Patrick Dewaere [*Série noire*] that I saw the other day; it's totally mad. In every scene, the radio is playing really loudly in the background, so you can hardly hear anyone speaking. It's super conceptual, and the styling is just amazing.

How is Patrick Dewaere dressed?
NG: He has a white polo neck under a V-neck jumper and trench coat, boots, and flares. Marie Trintignant is in it too. I can't stop thinking about it; I can't help but wonder what fuelled the director into making it...

What about the cover image for this magazine? What inspired that?
Until now, I've avoided showing pictures of myself at work; we've never shown the fittings and no one has ever seen my office. So I thought it would be an interesting thing to reveal at this moment in time when everyone is asking, 'What is he going to do next?' I like those images from the 1970s which show Halston or whoever at work, partly because that's just not really done these days. Most of the time it's the model or the designer's 'official portrait'.

Why is that?
NG: Because designers, or rather, artistic directors don't draw anymore! I wanted to put myself in that situation. I saw a photo of Antonio Lopez at work with all his brushes and pencils, and it's inspiring, so the images we made with Juergen show the context of 'work-in-progress'. It was like a snapshot of the moment: when it comes out there won't be any concrete work to show anyone this season, but it's an introduction to what's coming.

Has everything already been done in fashion? Is fashion today a composition of existing elements, or can new things be invented?
NG: I think there will always be new expressions; it's linked to the individuals involved. It's like saying the planet is well populated, but everyone has a different identity and expression, and will make a little, or big, contribution to evolution.

What is the importance of originality?
NG: There are two things. There's

being conscious of the origin, being able to define its origins. But then originality can also be completely abstract and undefinable. It also means being different, and that being different is often the result of an inexplicable association. I personally like both aspects.

When you create new things, is there sometimes a big discrepancy between what you set out to achieve and how people interpret what they see?
NG: Yes.

Do you read reviews and think, 'How strange, that's not at all what I wanted to say.'
NG: No, that never happens. The truth always comes out in the end. I've always discovered things about myself through what's been written, even if it wasn't exactly what I wanted to say. I remember Sally Singer wrote me a note after the Sailor collection saying, 'It was everything I usually hate about the 1980s — black and white, gold buttons, sailors — but this is everything that I adore. It's new and fresh.' Quite often, after their initial impression, people think about the collections in a different way and then understand what we were trying to do. People have sometimes misunderstood meaning, but then a year later it's been, 'Bravo, we get it.'

How do you react to bad reviews? There haven't been that many.
NG: Cathy Horyn was particularly tough one time when she wrote that it wasn't up to the standards of a designer like me. But you know what, she wasn't wrong. She focused on the mixing-in of street style, and we'd focused on this idea of mix-and-match. Although the looks could have been perceived as street wear, the way in which they were constructed made them the complete opposite. So she wasn't wrong, maybe she just hadn't seen the clothes up close.
MAS: And it ended up being the collection that was the most copied!

How do you personally quantify the success of a collection?
NG: I think it's when we've innovated. It's not necessarily linked to commercial success; it's more about the influence you have on women and the way they dress. It's not just the women who actually wear your clothes, it's your influence on the way people dress on a far broader level.

Which collection had the most impact on the way women dress?
NG: Without bragging, there are lots of them. It's what makes up the core of the wardrobe: the masculine cut trousers, the leggings, the different heights of the shoes, the re-tailored blazers…
MAS: The biker jacket.
NG: The tops with the quilted shoulders. A trapeze cut skirt, cut as if you cut it with a pair of scissors.
MAS: The larger volume coats we did.
NG: The Cristobal egg-shape... There are quite a lot of things. It's like all the elements that come together to create a complete look. In fact, it is a look, which is interesting.

Part Four
Thursday, February 7th, 2013
Nicolas Ghesquière HQ
Quai Voltaire, Paris

Thursday is a work day, and a work day means a rendezvous at Nicolas Ghesquière's headquarters, a sublime 18th century apartment across the Seine from the Louvre. Parquet floors, marble fireplaces and coffee tables, 1970s and 1980s furniture, a *Star Wars* stormtrooper helmet, hints of tiled décor from previous Balenciaga shows, Joe Colombo and Pierre Cardin books, and an extraordinary sense of quiet and calm.

While a tiny atelier team work silently and studiously in a hidden away office/design studio, Ghesquière (alone, Sauvé is currently abroad) takes a seat and readies himself for Part Four. As the discussion has grown, so has the idea that maybe some other individuals might want to ask Ghesquière a question.

Do you already feel distanced from Balenciaga?
NG: Yes, increasingly. Working on something else helps me to naturally detach myself. But of course, there was a mourning period, you don't forget fifteen years just like that.

Given that everyone associates you through your collections and your silhouettes for Balenciaga, does that now force you to create something radically different, a whole new vocabulary?
NG: I'm pretty situational, so I believe a lot in how you react to and behave

'I thought it would be interesting to reveal my office at this moment in time when everyone is asking, "Where is he going to work next?"'

in certain situations. There are clearly many things that I've done which belong to Balenciaga. But I also know what belongs to me, what I built, and what is coming with me. I have my style, and it will be interpreted differently now. I can't erase that, it belongs to me.

And this idea of creating a new vocabulary that belongs to you, does it lead you to somewhere completely different?
NG: Yes, because I've realised that with Balenciaga, there was the comfort of its history, which was something of a hindrance, as opposed to doing something of my own. I'm very excited about creating my own tools that will allow me to express my own style. I wasn't ever able to start from scratch before. And I really like that idea, it doesn't scare me.

What about the quality of the shows themselves?
NG: Fashion week used to be something with a certain degree of quality, but now it resembles the ready-to-wear trade fairs of the 1980s. In New York in particular, it's been hijacked by all the sponsorship and events which serve only as images to sell things later on; there aren't even really clothes up on the catwalk.

Have you thought this for a long time, or has it only recently crossed your mind?
NG: I've thought this for a few years now, but it's accelerated a lot in recent seasons. As part of fashion week, you find yourself increasingly questioning the economic stakes at hand; overly radical decisions have become dangerous when the results are so immediate, and this has resulted in a great sense of prudence, whereas the heart of fashion has always been about introducing new methods and taking risks.

Did you ever feel that you were veering more towards commerciality to the detriment of creativity?
NG: No, because it was always intentional. When I wanted to do something commercial, I always said to myself that it would be the very best commercial scenario. I've always thrown myself totally into it and found the best ways to make extremely high quality commercial pieces. It was never a compromise, so I never had that kind of dilemma.

If you had to choose between the success of Rei Kawakubo and the success of Giorgio Armani?
NG: Both of them are completely respectable. Stylistically, I won't hide the fact I feel closer to Rei Kawakubo. I also have a lot of respect for Armani, who I think has succeeded in creating a business model that is extremely faithful to his vision. That is totally respectable; the fashion is something else. He has become an empire on his own, which really is remarkable.

How would you define luxury?
NG: Everything seems to have a luxury stamp. For me there are two important things that define luxury. Firstly, for something to be really luxurious, there has to be genuine quality in the fabrication: the *savoir faire,* the quality of production and engineering, the way it has been thought out and conceived, the choice of materials. And the sheer time taken to make it – you have to know how to be patient. The other criteria is innovation: something different and new, something that someone else doesn't have. That costs a lot. That to me is luxury.

So innovation is true luxury.
NG: Well, look at something like industrial design. It's innovative, well made, and well positioned, and doesn't have to pretend to be luxurious. It's good enough that it's been intelligently designed and produced. I find that a lot more interesting than something that is fake luxury.

Who delivers intelligent solutions today?
NG: [Pauses] That's a good question.

'Success is not just the women who actually wear your clothes; it's your influence on the way people dress on a far broader level.'

Can you talk about your creative ambitions for your new ventures?
NG: I don't want to sound pretentious and say that I am going to invent an entirely new model of operating in fashion, but that's my ambition. In terms of rhythm, in terms of seasons, in terms of what I offer.

Do you find the way that fashion is presented seasonally to be…
NG: Completely out of sync?

You said it.
NG: I think seasons have no importance anymore because seasons are different all over the world. Fashion has become such a global affair. Shows have traditionally taken place where the clientele predominantly existed, but that idea is just dead now.

Or are intelligent solutions important in fashion?
NG: Yes, because they reflect the times.

What is the most intelligent solution that you created during your time at Balenciaga?
NG: Ooh la la! I don't know! [Pauses]... I'm not saying that it was a visionary approach, but I managed to establish a silhouette and keep the identity of that silhouette, which I'd developed with the show and the very upscale propositions, and turn it into something more accessible. And that worked.

I have a question for you from Cindy Sherman: 'What surprises you when you see your ideas go from drawings to actual wearable designs, and what kinds of compromises are sometimes

NG: Fashion is constant compromise. The game is then about being on form in order to transform compromise into something good, something new. This often means simplifying, and that is generally the hardest thing of all. If you simplify, and it ends up impeccably, and you maintain your identity then that's brilliant — it's purity *à la* Azzedine Alaïa — but sadly that's rarely possible.

What about the time constraints linked to fashion's rigid calendar?
NG: That's the worst thing — having an idea just for a season and not having the time to perfect it. You either have to carry it over or abandon it. That is how fashion works; it has to exist viscerally at exactly that moment in time because moving things to six months later is a real compromise. I did it several times,

but then it comes back again. I love it. Right now, I'm enjoying drawing more and more because I'm not doing it under the pressure of knowing that anything I draw has to be immediately materialised.

What is it about Cindy Sherman's work that interests you?
NG: I'm particularly fascinated by the materials she uses that end up making her pictures totally undefinable. You don't even know what the skin or fabric has been made from; it's a sort of blurring of photographs, organic matter, colours, and prosthesis that come together to create something entirely new. When I see her work, it makes me want to find those materials. And as a person I like her a lot. She is very beautiful which people don't always expect

'Doing things at the right moment is the essence of fashion. Early enough to surprise, but not too early that people only see the idea as an anecdote.'

needed to make that transformation happen?'
NG: I have the impression that once it's materialised, I have to be surprised myself. If I think it looks like the drawing, it's not necessarily been a success. I design and create something, and then I make it materialise. I constantly question the process of materialisation, the opposite I think to other designers today, because I'm very hands on.

So the materialisation adds value.
NG: Without doubt. It needs to have been transformed and acquired value. If there are obvious references, they need to be erased. If the volume is a bit obscure, then it needs to be mastered.

And what about the compromises linked to this transformation?

and it really was an enormous sacrifice. I'd wake up in the night thinking, 'I've got to do it, and it kills me that I cannot do it now; it would have been perfect for this season.'

Is six months later too late?
NG: Well, doing things at the right moment is the essence of fashion. Early enough to surprise, but not too early that you get ignored, and people only see the idea as an anecdote.

Do your ideas start with a sketch?
NG: Yes, a lot of the time.

Do you draw every day?
NG: Not every day, but I draw a lot, yes. I really like it. It's like the gym: I'll stop for a week and then start again; I won't be any good for a couple of hours,

because we don't normally see her as herself; but she really does have charisma and beauty. She has something very special.

Now to a question from Hans Ulrich Obrist: 'Nicolas, can you please tell us about your unrealised projects that have been too big to be realised, or maybe too small to be realised, or a project that was censored, or maybe a project that was self-censored, projects that one doesn't dare to do?'
NG: There are two unrealised film projects with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster that are close to my heart. One of them is a science-fiction film we've wanted to make for years. The other is a documentary: a sort of journey through what we have in common, based on reality. We started writing it last year

with the aim of making it, but it's a project that will take some time.

What is it that interests you in the genre of science fiction?
NG: It's the contrasts. I'll give some examples: in Houellebecq's book *The Possibility of an Island*, where he goes on this sort of pilgrimage to an organic, nebulous desert, but you've no idea where it is. Or in *Solaris*, it's not science fiction in a futurist way; it can be a very spiritual, organic science fiction, almost naturalist. There are lots of forms of science fiction that interest me.

Do you have a favourite science fiction film?
NG: *Solaris* is good because this nebulous thing arrives, and it's this kind of spatial drift that's materialised. I adore Stanley Kubrick. I love Ridley Scott – the first *Alien* is a masterpiece. I found *Prometheus* quite amazing. I loved *2046*. Actually, I'm going to refer back to Dominique; do you remember when she did her installation at the Tate Modern? One of the works in the Turbine Hall was a montage of science fiction film sets, so maybe that's my favourite science fiction film.

What about designers like Pierre Cardin and Courrèges?
NG: I love them! We've talked before about marrying innovation and good execution, and Cardin is the perfect example of that. It was perfectly made, perfectly sewn, it had genuine *savoir faire,* and at the same time a totally free and expressive vision. The same with Courrèges. And Emmanuel Ungaro too. Their clothes were described as *prêt-à-porter*, but in reality it was couture. Ungaro and Courrèges both worked for a time at Balenciaga, and you can sense that.

Last question for today. In a behind-the-scenes film about a Balenciaga fragrance, Charlotte Gainsbourg says, 'Nicolas doesn't give up until he's happy.'
NG: Yes it's true.

I wanted to ask if you felt you'd abandoned Balenciaga?
NG: Yes.

And are you happy with the new situation?
NG: Yes, I am very happy. The chance for personal expression is a great way to

'It makes me a bit sad to see that what goes on outside the shows seems to interest people more than what goes on inside.'

happiness. For the moment, I'm totally satisfied.

Part Five
Friday, March 29th, 2013
Nicolas Ghesquière HQ
Quai Voltaire, Paris

Over a month has passed since our last meeting, and with the *System* deadline looming, this is to be the final part of 'the discussion' (which will result in almost 12 hours of transcribed copy). In the period since our previous recording, Ghesquière has spent four weeks abroad, wisely skipping out of town the morning the seasonal fashion shows were scheduled to start in an attempt to 'create some distance' between himself and the industry that was becoming ever more curious of his movements. He is looking unfeasibly healthy, rested, and tanned after having vacationed in St Barths before spending a fortnight in Los Angeles — visiting Tony Duquette's Beverly Hills residence, the suspended glass Neutra house that juts out of the Hollywood Hills, and the world's largest personal collection of fabrics (owned by a cosmetics baron) — the go-to sights for the world's most sought-after fashion designer.

Meanwhile in Paris, the rumours of the designer's apparent next move have reached fever pitch. Will he launch his own brand? Will he take charge at a Parisian powerhouse?

Moving into one of the Quai Voltaire salons, Ghesquière rolls up his sleeves, plonks himself on the thick rug and for the last time, it's PLAY.

Since we last saw one another, some other people have sent me questions to ask you. Can we start with Tom Ford?
NG: Yes, great.

Okay, so he says, 'In my opinion what you did at Balenciaga was brilliant.'
NG: Thank you Tom!

'How does it feel to leave a house that you single-handedly resurrected and to see yourself replaced by another designer?'
NG: Ah, that's something Tom and I have in common! I think I see it in the same way as he does: I'm not sad, it's like having a beautiful old house and being the tenant, and you never actually let yourself own these things.

(continued on page 170)

The Archive of an Era: Balenciaga by Nicolas Ghesquière

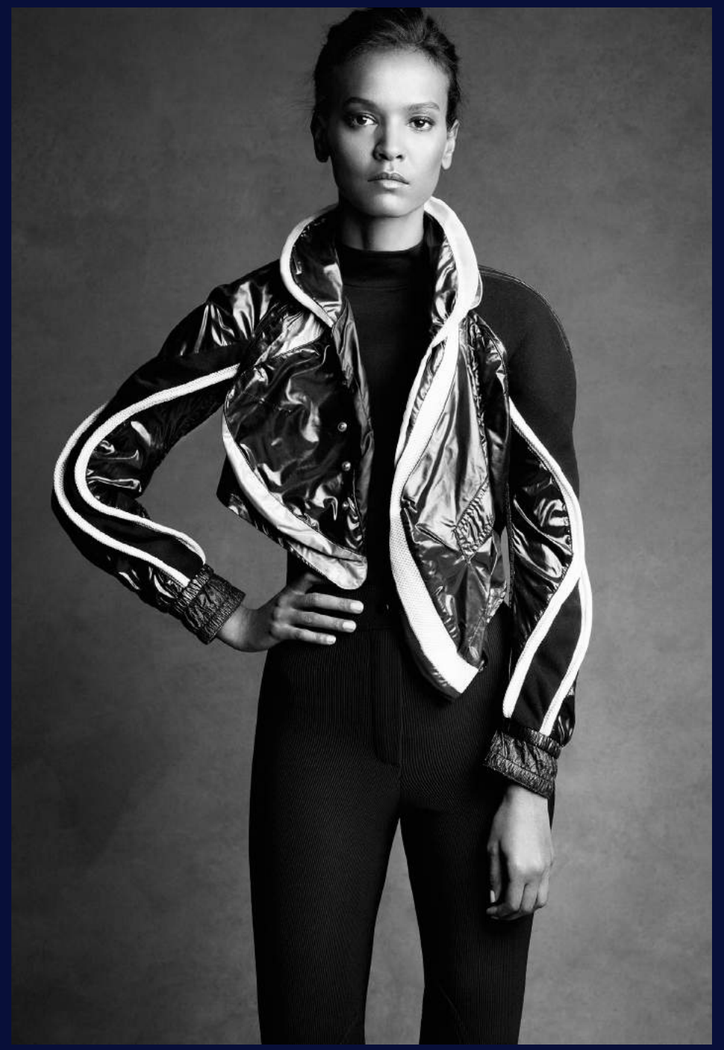
Portraits by Patrick Demarchelier
Styling by Marie-Amélie Sauvé

Sam Rollinson
Autumn/Winter 2001-2002

Sam Rollinson
Spring/Summer 2002

Linn Arvidsson
Autumn/Winter 2002-2003

Gaia Repossi
Spring/Summer 2003



Liya Kebede
Autumn/Winter 2003-2004

Kremi Otashliyska
Autumn/Winter 2003-2004

Julier Bugge
Autumn/Winter 2003-2004

Sonia Sieff
Spring/Summer 2004

Sam Rollinson
Autumn/Winter 2004-2005

Julier Bugge
Autumn/Winter 2004-2005

Farida Khelfa
Autumn/Winter 2005-2006

Kremi Otashliyska
Autumn/Winter 2007-2008

Linn Arvidsson
Autumn/Winter 2007-2008

Camille Miceli
Autumn/Winter 2007-2008

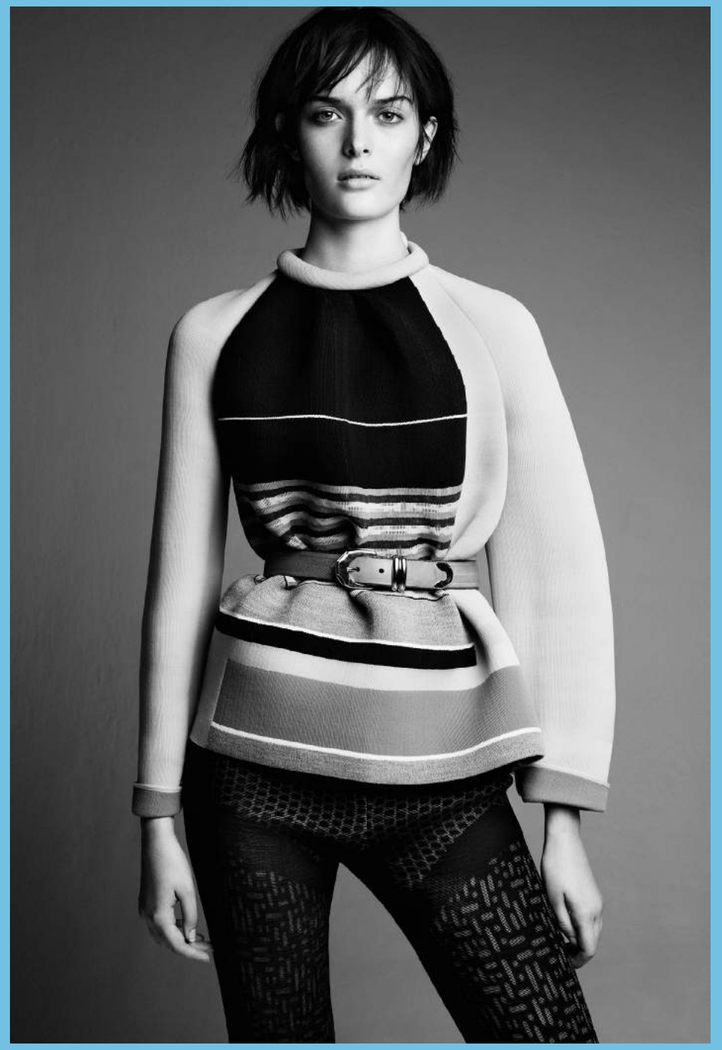
Delfine Bafort
Autumn/Winter 2007-2008

Kremi Otashliyska
Spring/Summer 2008

Cécile Winckler
Autumn/Winter 2009-2010

Marie-Amélie Sauvé
Spring/Summer 2010

Marie-Amélie Sauvé
Autumn/Winter 2010-2011



Sam Rollinson
Autumn/Winter 2010-2011

Delfine Bafort
Spring/Summer 2011

Natacha Ramsay-Levi
Autumn/Winter 2011-2012

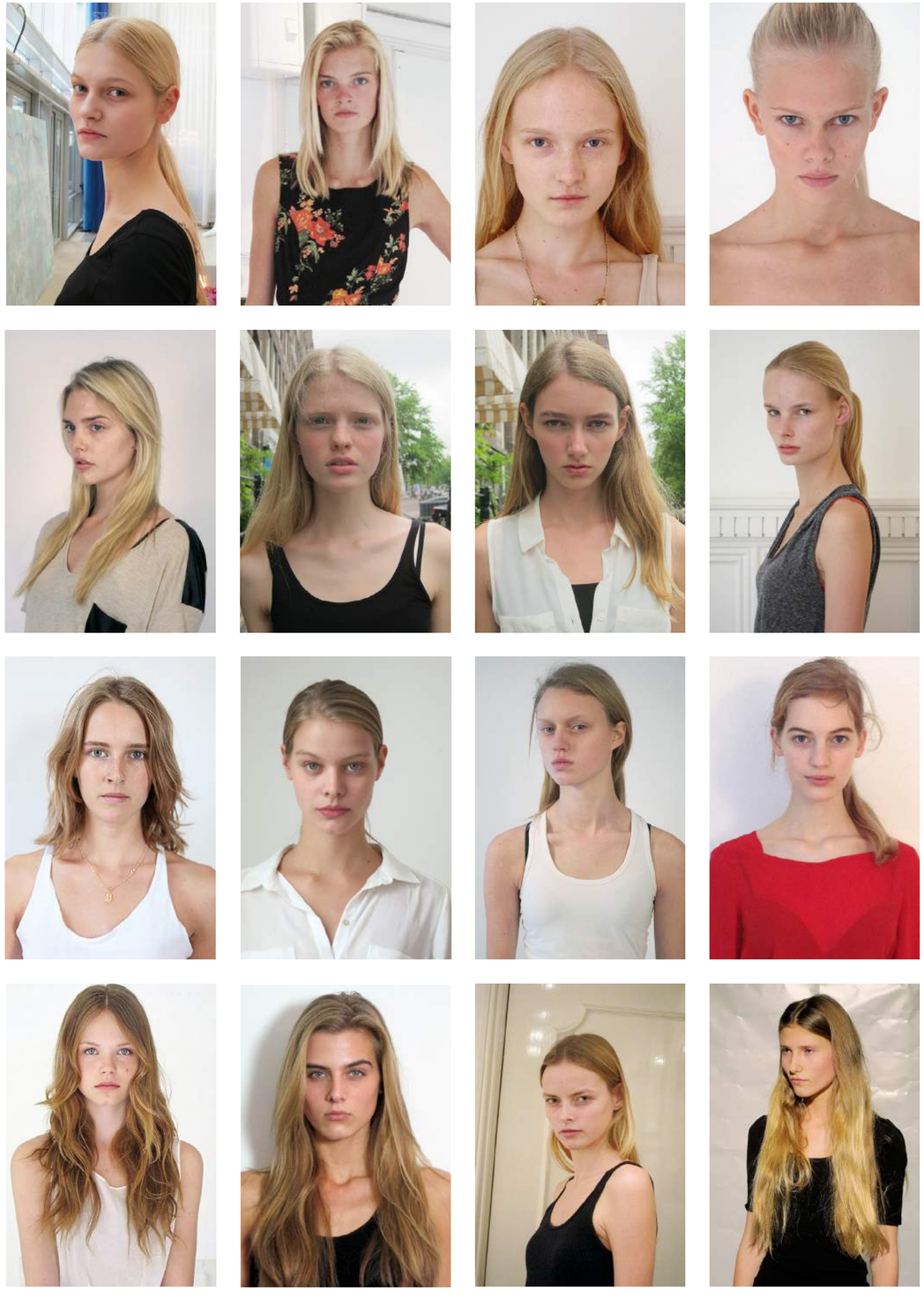
Hair: Tomohiro Ohashi @ Management+Artists, Jimmy Paul @ Susan Price, Inc.; make-up: Adrien Pinault @ Management+Artists, Fulvia Farolfi @ Bryan Bantry Agency; manicurists: Elsa Deslandes, Megumi Yamamoto @ Susan Price, Inc., Cristina Conrad @ Calliste; casting director: Ashley Brokaw.

Grace Coddington
Autumn/Winter 2011-2012

‘When she walked in, I was like, job done!’

Ashley Brokaw is the casting director other casting directors go to.

By Derek Blasberg



Ashley Brokaw and I first met under suspect circumstances: someone impersonating my assistant (which wasn't that clever, since I don't have an assistant) emailed her asking for the personal details of a new model she had recently cast. Ashley had a funny feeling about the situation, got my email from a mutual friend and contacted me, found out it wasn't legit and promptly shut it down. This sort of interaction isn't uncommon for Ashley. People have gone to great lengths to contact her, and not just because they have a crush (or creepy obsession) with a model. As she works with some of the most important image-makers in the fashion industry – most notably Nicolas Ghesquière, with whom she has worked since 2006, but also Miuccia Prada and Proenza Schouler's Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez – her perspective on the modelling and fashion industries is unique. She has helped foster some of the most influential careers we've seen in the past 15 years, first working in Steven Meisel's studio and more recently as one of the industry's most important casting directors. That's why other designers and casting directors want to know who she's booking, and which girls are on her radar. But, as I found out when Ashley and I recently met, one of the first lessons she learned was discretion.

I always like hearing about how casting directors start out. You can't get a casting degree at NYU or anything.
You're right. There is no course, and it's nothing that you can teach. It's just experience. I started when I was 17. I interned for Juliet Taylor, who was a movie casting director. She does all of the Woody Allen movies. I worked on this movie, which was a total flop, called *Shadows and Fog*. It was Madonna, John Malkovich, Mia Farrow, and John Cusack. *Everybody* was in the movie.

Really? Is it bad? I never heard of it.
That was… Oh gosh, in the early 1990s? And no, no one saw it. Around the same time, [Juliet Taylor] was working on *Cape Fear*, the film where Robert De Niro plays a psychopath with Juliette Lewis. I always found those kinds of movies really fascinating. I would watch a film and think, 'What if you put this actor in that role instead? Would it be better, would it be worse? How would it be different?' Then I interned at *Seventeen* magazine when I was 18, which was a huge deal at the time. I was there for Nikki Taylor's first cover. And then somehow the two worlds merged. I worked for Bruce Weber for two years and did those Abercrombie and Fitch catalogues, and then I started with Steven Meisel.

So you've been casting, literally, since you were 17?
Yeah, strangely. But it's not at all what I thought I was going to do!

What were you expecting to do?
I went to the Foreign Services School at Georgetown to become a Foreign Service officer – until my senior year when I was like, 'I can't do this.'

Did you graduate?
I did. I took a masters course in my senior year on diplomacy in the 21st century. This was right when the transfer of information came out in real time. That redefined what it meant to be a foreign policy officer. It basically meant the job I wanted didn't exist anymore.

Working in fashion is the ultimate political minefield, it was good training.
That's true! I have to be diplomatic every day of my life!

So you'd got up to the time when you were working for Meisel?
I left Meisel, and took a year off to move to Paris and do all those things you want to do at 30. I went back to school, the Sorbonne; I took cooking classes.

And after your year of soul searching?
I came back, and the first person to call me was Karl Templer, asking, 'Can you help out on this French *Vogue* story?' He started asking me to help out on little things, which became bigger things. He said, 'I really like this girl, Daria.' It was Daria Werbowy. Then he said, 'Can you put together a story around her and her friends in the Hamptons?' So I felt like I'd do these little jobs until I figured out what I was going to do. But I never got there…

And that's how you went from French cooking classes to casting Balenciaga.
I started doing shows in New York, and like anything in fashion, it's word of mouth. I did a show with Marie-Amélie [Sauvé] and got a call a week after that saying, 'Do you want to come to Paris and help on Balenciaga?' It was my first Paris show, and it was great. I ended up working with Nicolas for seven years.

'Nicolas is as obsessed with models as I am. When I find somebody that I think would be perfect for him, I'll send the pictures right away.'

How involved is he in the casting?
He is as obsessed with models as I am. I scout for him, and we're in regular contact. When I find somebody I think would be perfect for Nicolas, I'll send him pictures right away. He gets as excited as I do when we find somebody. He is very considered about everything.

Everything?
Everything. The hair and the nails and the make-up. For a lot of designers casting can be secondary, and they leave it up to someone else. They don't know what it means to put on a great show and make a great moment.

What else don't we know about Nicolas Ghesquière that's worth telling?
He's very kind. Fantastic sense of humour, which is so important.

You work with other designers, too?
I do Prada as well. There is a difference between a Prada girl and a Ghesquière girl. The Prada girl is maybe a bit more sexual, more sensual. For example, Vanessa Axente who is kind of a model-of-the-moment, I scouted her, she was very Prada to me. Even when Nicolas met her, he was like, 'She's very Prada.'

What's your scouting routine?
I don't do street casting, which is very difficult. Most places are very over-scouted, and you're stopping someone that's already been stopped a hundred times. I'll go to different areas of the world and meet with local scouts. Sometimes you're finding young girls, so you wait for them to grow up and see if they're right for shows. Other times it's girls who've been around for a while that are *just ready*. Look at Amanda Murphy, who opened Prada this season; she's been modelling for a while; I think she's 22. But she was ready this season.

Have new technologies affected your work – platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Twitter? Do you use them to scout? Does a model's social media presence impact the casting process?
New media is interesting. Sometime I love it, sometimes I loathe it! Some clients like it when models have lots of Twitter followers and have a big social media presence, while others see it as a negative – they can become bigger than the brands they represent. For a smaller brand it can be valuable, but for a bigger brand who wants to use the model as just that – a model – it gets tricky because they have such an established persona. I will say I have found some models through Facebook though!

Do you recognise certain current trends in casting?
I think that the moment you see a trend, it's going to change.

Do you have any favourite discoveries?
I scouted Aymeline [Valade] when she was a 24-year-old lingerie model in Milan. She came in sneakers, jeans, and a leather jacket; she probably thought it would be a waste of time. But when she walked in, I was like, 'Job done!' That was exactly what I was looking for. The particular show was for Nicolas, and he wanted tough girls and to cut their hair. I don't think she understood what it was all about. So I said, 'Would you cut your hair?' and she said, 'Well, I've got this lingerie job next week, and I don't know if I can cut my hair…' And I said, 'Listen, trust me.'

Being in one of these shows can make or break a girl's career. Are you aware of that responsibility?
Sometimes it works, sometimes not. You can be judged as much on the misses as you are on the hits. It's a moment; it's a show. Not all the girls turn into supermodels. Not everyone understands that. Sometimes you have a girl that will never do a show again, but everyone is very inspired by her in that look in that show in that section in that moment.

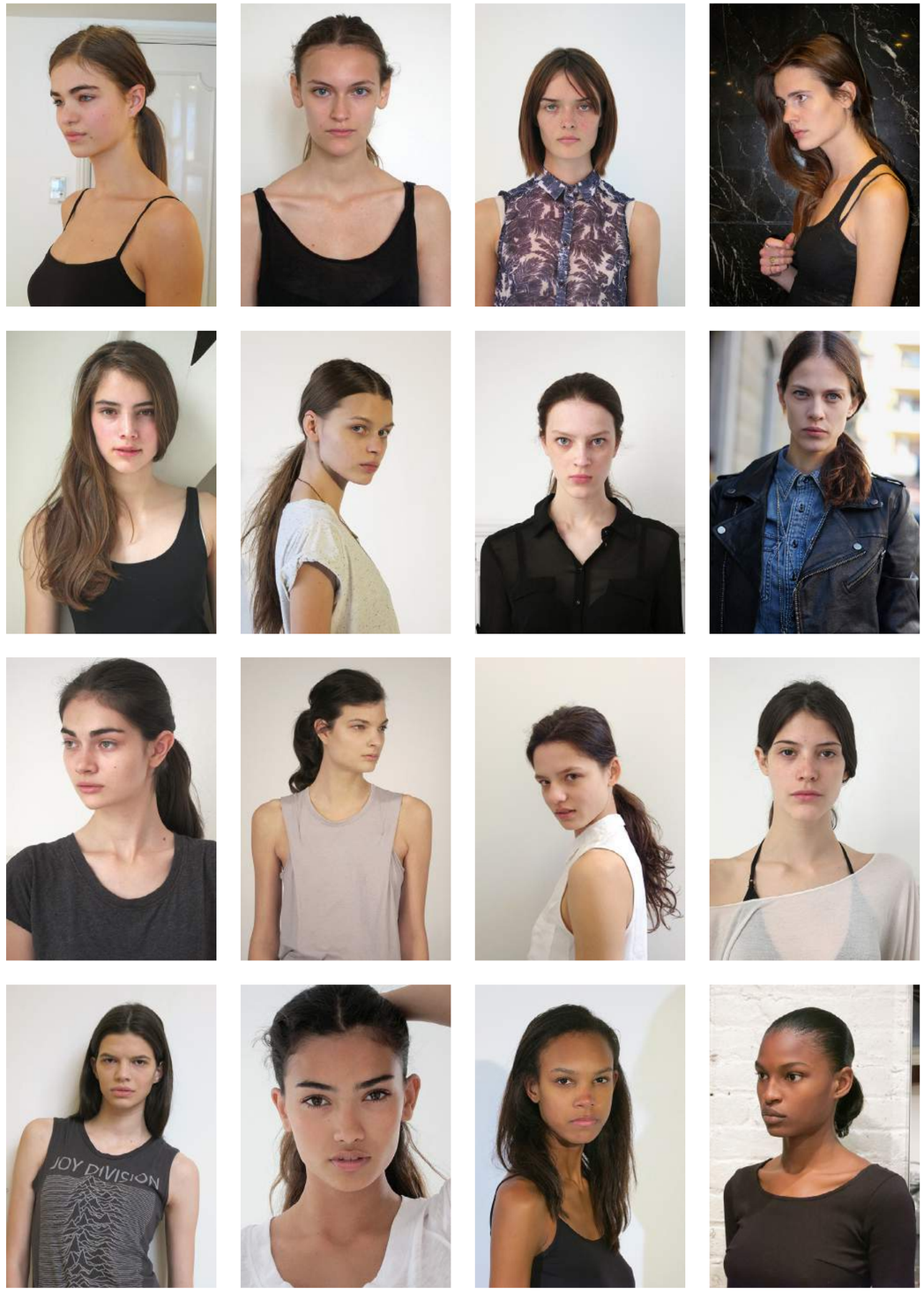
That's what fashion is: it's a moment.
And I'm happy to participate in the conversation of how that moment is going to appear.

'I asked Aymeline, "Would you be willing to cut your hair' and she said, 'Well, I've got this lingerie job next week.' I said, 'Trust me, it's Balenciaga…"'

How would you define a typical Ghesquière girl?
Great personality, a bit of masculinity. He loves a tomboy. But one who can still dress up and look beautiful.

A tomboy who can wear high heels?
Exactly. Never soft or mousy. Always has to have a strong sense of self within. They all have that X-factor in terms of toughness. There is nothing precious about a Ghesquière girl!

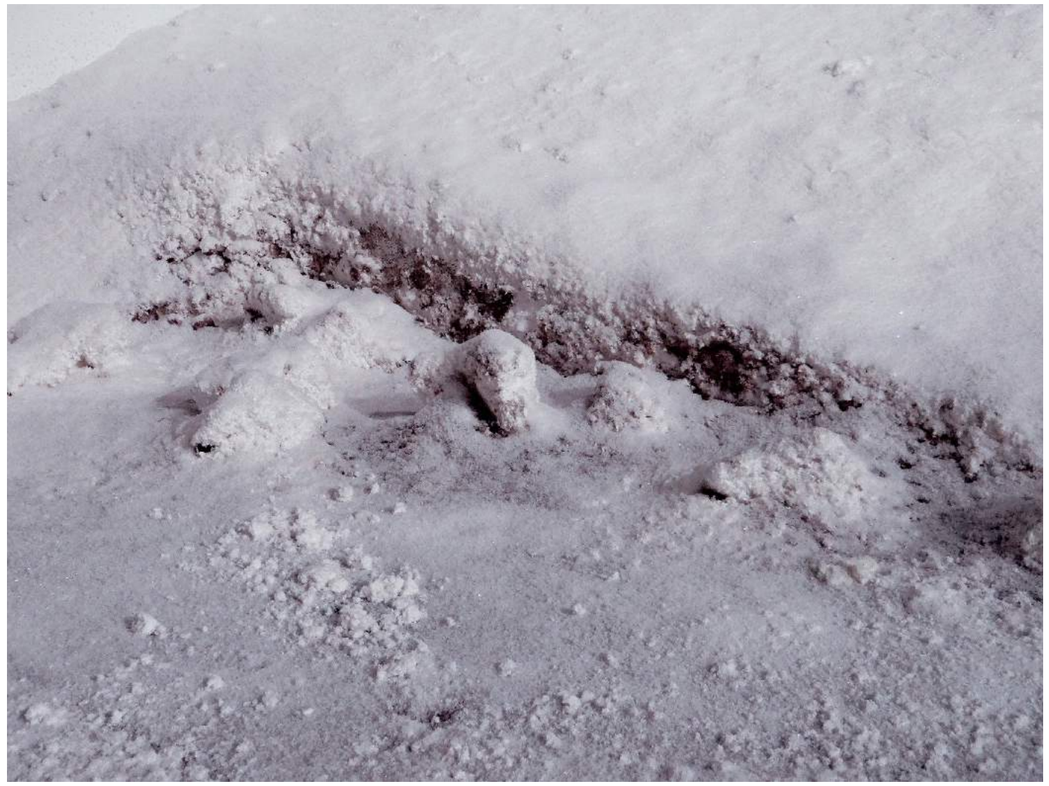
That was the thing about his Balenciaga shows. Every girl was just *cool*. I hate to use that word, but these were girls you wanted to hang out with.
That's what he did so well. Some designers could take those same girls, and it doesn't necessarily translate. He makes girls look cool and authentic.



Fake or/and real snow

By Philippe Parreno

Gorky Park, Moscow, March 28th, 2013
Reality and fiction are a pair of trees that grow together, interwoven, each sustaining and holding up the other. It suggests a kind of mid-air transfer of strength, contact across a void, like the tangling of cable and steel between two lonely bridge posts.



Gorky Park, Moscow, March 28th, 2013, a few minutes later inside the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture
A derived sense of fruitful exchange, or reciprocal sustenance, of welcome offered, of grasp and interrelationship, of a slender *envergure* of bilateral attention along which things are given and received, still animating the world in its verb form.

The art of bribery

In China the gift of fashion isn't quite what it seems. By Hung Huang. Illustration by François Berthoud.

A gift is usually a token of love or appreciation, but not here in China. Here, a gift is normally an invitation to enter into a business deal, possibly shady, definitely under the table, and most likely illegal.

Gifts in China are the currency of bribery. The term in Chinese reveals a little more about this practice. It can be referred to as '*gao ding*' which means you have literally nailed someone. This is often used for gift giving with an ulterior motive.

There is a whole sophisticated system of gift giving. For example, if you give a gift, it is accepted practice to leave the business card of an evaluator. 'In case you want to learn the history of the object,' is what you say. The evaluator will then call and make a cash offer for the gift, transforming what seemed to be a shared cultural interest into shared financial interest.

Popular gifts are usually highly valued objects. Chinese Pu'er tea and the Chinese spirit Maotai are favourites. In the past 15 years, European luxury goods have also joined the pool of deal-making gifts, with products from all the usual suspects – Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Chanel, Tod's, Prada, and Cartier – being the most prized. As government officials are generally male, man bags were the first items that became popular as gifts, known locally as 'armpit wallets'. Eventually, the stakes became higher and gifts more valuable, such as watches and even cars.

But for the powerful man it was different. The gift giver had to find a discreet way for the gift to be turned into cash. So it is now customary to provide the business card of a 'cashier' along with the gift. This person is usually disguised as a connoisseur of art, antiques, watches, wine, etc. He is prepped to offer an amount way above the purchasing price of the gift to the receiver. Once the deal is done, the gift giver knows that the receiver is in his pocket. He can move on to raising the real business issue.

Unlike government officials, pretty women also get gifts – except they cannot cash them in. Most luxury stores have caught on to the game, so there is a no cash return policy. Only store credit. Needless to say, there are some pretty well-dressed mistresses, but thanks to the internet now they can open an online boutique and cash in on their unwanted gifts this way.

This has been standard practice in China for the past 20 years, with luxury sales maintaining double-digit growth each year. That is, until the case of the 'Watch Brother', Yang Dacai, a local quality inspection official from Shaanxi Province. In September 2012, a photo of Yang laughing at the scene of a tragic traffic accident went viral. Within hours, a close up shot of his Rolex wristwatch surfaced, sparking debate on corruption in the government. Yang panicked and actually responded publicly that the watch was a gift from his wife. Within hours, more photos of Yang appeared online showing him wearing at least 15 different watches, and Yang became known as the 'Watch Brother', a symbol of corruption in the Chinese government.

If this whole circus had happened in 2011, there would have been thorough censorship on the internet, posts would have been deleted, and people would have had visits from the state security. It was bad timing for Yang: he created a stir when the government was changing hands. No one bothered to censor the public outcry against him; in fact, even the state-owned television media joined in.

Following the affair, an anti-corruption campaign started on Chinese social networks. It was mob justice and payback time. Officials stopped wearing short-sleeved shirts and watches. They also stopped wearing designer belts and shoes. And with this came a sharp downturn in luxury sales in China, putting an end to the gifting frenzy.

The problem is systemic: an authoritarian regime which employs nearly 10 per cent of the nation's workforce on low salaries, coupled with a robust market economy where millionaires and billionaires are crawling out of the woodwork. The rich and powerful are constantly cooking up all sorts of business deals, and gifting is merely the icing on the cake.

But bribery is also cultural and historical. My own grandfather, who practiced law in Shanghai in the 1930s, used to say that the only way to win a case is to lose gracefully at the mahjong table to the judge.

Traditionally, gift giving happens in September on the Moon Festival, a holiday for family reunions. The gift is supposed to be moon cakes: a pastry filled with sweet bean paste stuffing and egg yolks. However, the moon cakes eventually had diamonds and watches as stuffing, and the government banned its employees from receiving them several years ago. So you see, this is a Chinese thing, not a Communist thing.

To bribe gracefully, effortlessly, and most crucially, discreetly is an art that has been practiced for centuries – if not millennia – in China. We have indeed made an exquisite art out of human greed.

Rubles from rags

Why does Russia's fashion industry depend on imported goods? By Miroslava Duma. Illustration by François Berthoud.

It may be hard to believe today, but fashion and appearance have not historically been an integral part of Russian culture. Seventy years of lean consumption and unpredictable market behaviour after the 1917 revolution made economists all over the world question whether Russia would ever make the Great Leap Forward.

In the times of the Soviet Union, there was nothing in the shops. Literally nothing. No food, no clothing, nothing… The average Russian *tovarishch* (comrade) was taking home a meagre monthly salary of 120 rubles, and everyone had to play their insignificant part in the anonymous grey mass. The Soviet leaders held tight to their communist ideals. Then, thanks to Gorbachev, Yeltsin and, more importantly, West Siberian oil and gas capacities, over the space of a decade our country became the fastest growing economy in Europe.

The modesty of Soviet people was replaced with a wanton desire to buy all the luxury brands, wear them all together at the same time and look like a logo monster. In 1992, as a seven-year-old child, I was in Geneva with my mother and her friend who was wondering why on earth I would want to try on a Baby Dior jacket that didn't have the logo all over it. 'What an absolute waste of money!' she uttered. This perfectly sums up the mentality of Russians in the 1990s.

Predictably, an economic crisis took hold, and Russian consumers were forced to alter their newly formed shopping habits and turn to mid-priced brands for salvation. Suddenly, international companies like Zara and H&M dominated the market, opening stores in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

The Russian market still represents enormous opportunity to international designers. Russia's recent membership into the World Trade Organization has allowed its retail market to become increasingly open, and now is the right time for foreign brands to pursue expansion here. The downside, however, is that we have yet to create opportunities for our native designers. Unless of course they change citizenship, move to France and start working with Russia from 'the other side'. The Russian government has still to support young fashion talent. Nothing like the CFDA or the British Fashion Council exists here. There are no grants. There isn't even a higher-education fashion institute. Despite this, there are many talented designers from Russia, the Ukraine, and Georgia, but unfortunately none of them have the power nor money to overcome Russia's questionable customs regulations and practices, and consequently none of our designers can deliver on time to international shops. One time, Lane Crawford sent me a Burberry trench to customise for a charity project. Customs called and told me I had to pay 40 per cent tax on the coat; it came to $400. I tried to explain to them that the coat was for a charity project, I had not purchased it for myself, and it would be sent back, to which they replied, 'Russian customs don't know the meaning of the word 'charity'.'

Meanwhile, French, Italian, and American designers are ubiquitous in Russia. The hype surrounding the Antwerp Six has now shifted towards London – Peter Pilotto, Christopher Kane, Erdem, Mary Katrantzou, Meadham Kirchhoff – and to the Asian/American community – Jason Wu, Phillip Lim, Derek Lam, Alexander Wang – but still no one has heard of Russian designers such as Vika Gazinskaya, Ulyana Sergeenko, Alexander Terekhov among others. The 'Made in Russia' label could be a great project to invest in – so anybody who is going to conquer the new market should, as Steve Jobs said, 'Think different.'

For the time being though, the entire fashion industry in Russia depends on imported goods. Russia's main luxury import monopolist, Mercury, grows bigger and more powerful by the day: it represents more than 700 brands with standalone boutiques including Céline, Chloé, Tom Ford, Lanvin… It also owns Russia's main historical department stores, TsUM and DLT. Clearly this all demonstrates that Russia's buying capacity remains extremely high.

Nonetheless, investors most likely believe that Russia lacks a sustainable economic course. Or perhaps they are frightened and put off by high profile incidents like the trial of Pussy Riot, or the sickening story of Sergei Filin, the Bolshoi Theatre's artistic director, who was attacked with acid on the streets of Moscow near his home.

Still, in spite of its size, power, and riches, Russia is definitely ready for something new, dramatic, and historical in terms of fashion. Maybe a Russian Coco Chanel? I happen to know one, by the way. And she would be a perfect fit for one of the major French fashion houses and could blow our minds.

Unveiling a Shop Girl

How to feminise a Saudi workforce in six months. By HRH Princess Reema Bandar Al-Saud. Illustration by François Berthoud.

In May 2000, Harvey Nichols Riyadh threw open its doors for the first time, granting Saudi consumers the western luxury retail experience they so craved. Choosing Saudi Arabia's capital as the brand's first foray into international expansion seemed curious. At the time, pickings in Riyadh were slim for the fashionable and discerning; there were only a handful of small, isolated boutiques, and no major international department stores. But of all the emerging luxury markets in the world, Harvey Nichols gambled on mine.

Our nomadic Bedouin heritage makes us Saudis natural consumers, constantly searching for whatever is new and more useful for our survival. In the past that could have meant a new saddle, but today it may mean a car or a handbag. In today's Saudi Arabia, there is a trend driven by a young population who have inherited this Bedouin outlook, a generation on the hunt for something for now, not necessarily for something lasting. As a result, Saudis are not known to be thoughtful consumers – but this is not because we're thoughtless. As Muslims, we aren't meant to have attachment to the 'stuff' of life: so while we easily consume, we easily give away. When you see a Saudi woman buying 10 versions of a shirt in every size and colour, she plans on distributing them to her 'tribe' of loved ones, just like her Bedouin ancestors did.

It seems a confusing paradox, just as confusing perhaps as when people realise I am a female CEO of the company that owns Harvey Nichols Riyadh. Just like the rest of Saudi Arabia, it's not what people expect. However, CEOs face the same challenges everywhere, irrespective of gender, but being a woman executive here requires a certain level of resilience.

Our culture has strict traditional beliefs about interaction between the sexes, and the laws of our nation reflect that. In an effort to employ more Saudi women and simultaneously observe the cultural and religious morals of our society, this January the Ministry of Labour issued a series of guidelines that businesses must meet over the course of the next six months to accommodate the new mixed-gender staff. Six months! Our unofficial national motto is 'Tomorrow, God Willing', so this time frame is frankly culturally unsympathetic to our collective tendency towards procrastination!

These new guidelines dictate everything from the distance a stockroom manager must keep from a sales girl, to the relegating of all-male groups of clients to specifically designated 'ManZones' within our store. Despite this, there are still many questions and ambiguities to be addressed in trying to fulfil *ta'neeth* (the Arab word for the feminisation of the labour force). How, for example, is a salesgirl to go into the stockroom where she has to deal directly with the male warehouse manager if the Ministry of Labour mandates they can't be within two metres of one another? Solution: a wall with openings for communication and the retrieval of goods. And what will happen to men's cologne sales? Cliché notwithstanding, they account for a significant portion of our sales! So do I really have to move colognes from their counters to a new isolated 'ManZone'?

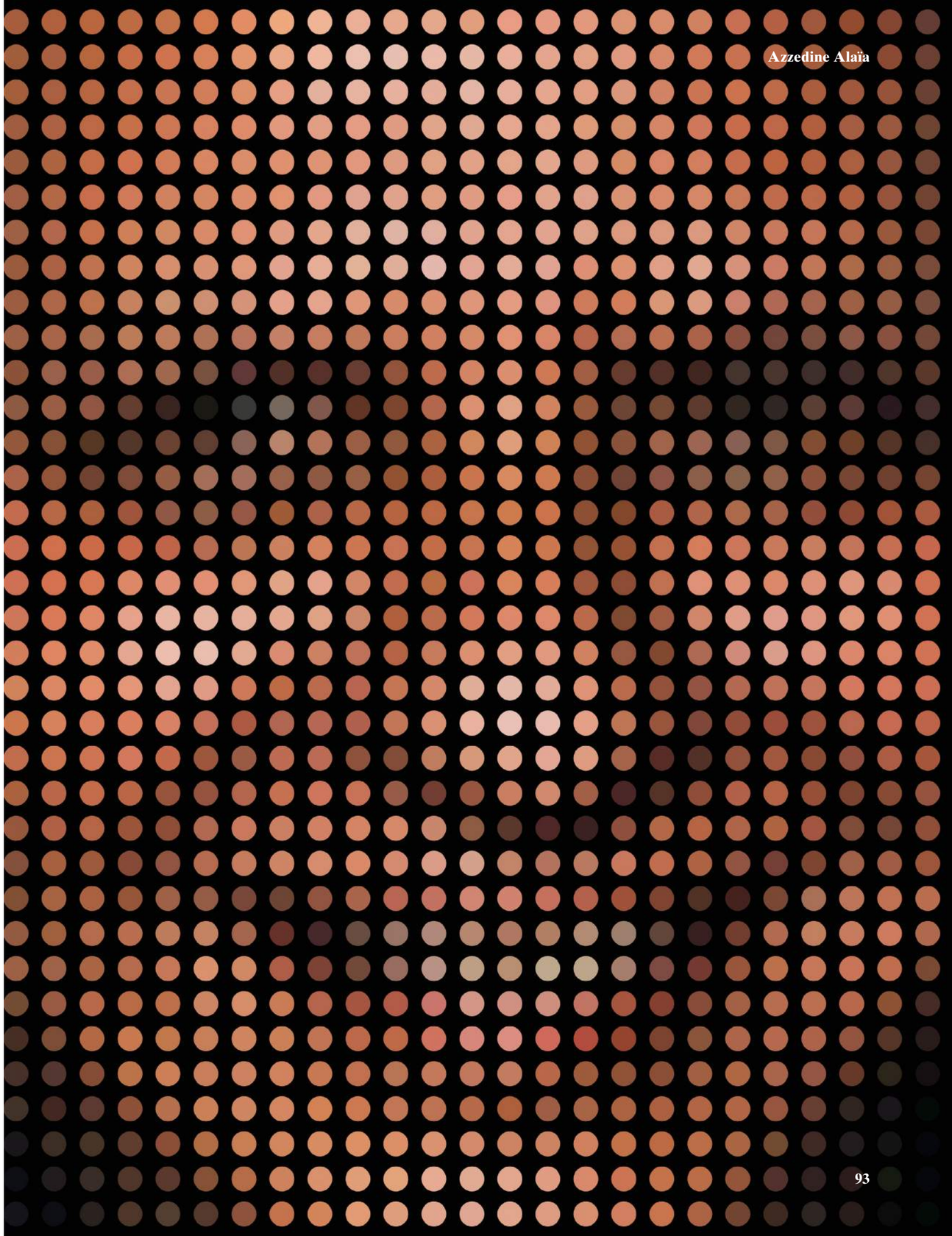
Staying ahead of and surpassing the mandates of the Ministry on hiring, training, and employing more Saudi women is perhaps my biggest daily challenge and greatest reward. Saudi women aren't used to selling, and our numbers reflect that. How do I motivate a salesgirl to provide excellent customer service? Most of these women are not accustomed to communicating directly with strangers, and now we are asking them to not only enthusiastically engage customers but also perfect the art of the upsell. Seasoned female trainers from Lebanon will train this new sales force, teaching them the finer points of customer service. It's a massive expense, which includes the cost of flights and housing for a two-year period. For every five girls I train, three will leave me for a slightly higher pay cheque. Many, however, will stay for our perks, including foreign language instruction, in-house day care and personal chauffeurs – as the current laws prohibit women from driving.

The trade-off for these advancements is the forced firings of seasoned ex-pat male staff. From a business perspective, these are men who carry a depth of knowledge of consumer trends and buying habits, and I am effectively obliged to let them go. But the sooner young Saudi women enter the retail job force, the sooner they will climb the wealth ladder and grow into my future customers. It is a welcome change and will be a boom to our business, and our country too. Some days, I walk the store, and it's not just a retail operation I am looking at. I see great social and economic change, and it plays out on my sales floor every day.

‘They could put me in prison, but I’d still feel as free as if I were outside.’

Azzedine Alaïa is the only man in fashion who continues to do it his way.

By Hans Ulrich Obrist
Illustration by François Berthoud



In the current era of fashion and commerce, Azzedine Alaïa's status outside the system has never seemed so attractive. He owns his own name, he doesn't advertise, he debuts his collections privately at his Paris quarters whenever he wants and yet still maintains the discreet support of the luxury holding group Richemont. The designer who has determined his own creative existence is fashion's only homme révolté: a slave to nothing except his own artistic impulses. All that's not to say he isn't hardworking, but that in spite of possessing a level of freedom unheard of for designers of this era, he decides to confine himself in his combined atelier/apartment, where he works tirelessly day and night. In resistance to an industry characterized by it's ephemeral nature, Alaïa approaches his craft with the 'all or nothing' austerity of a true artist, driven to inhabit a constant state of pure creation, to continually immortalise his own vision as well as preserve the legacy of the old-world couturiers who came before him.

Wherever his clothes are stocked, they practically walk out of stores, price tags of up to $15,000 notwithstanding. His customers are loyal – it is said that an Alaïa woman knows that she needs him at every stage in her life, and indeed one steady customer is legendary 1950s haute couture model Bettina Graziani, now 87. According to long-time client Mathilde de Rothschild, Alaïa has the most intimate relationship of any designer with the three-dimensional reality of being a woman: 'Thanks to his dresses a lady already has 50 per cent of her work done for her, whether her aim is to do business or to seduce a man.'

The to-go choice for the world's supermodels, who are happy to walk for Alaïa in exchange for an outfit, he has had the death knell sounded on his career more than once. But the man responsible for getting women into leggings, tight black dresses, studded leather and bodycon maternity clothes is still standing, and is stronger than ever.

I don't think there could be a better way to start this interview than by asking about your childhood. Could you tell us some of your most vivid memories from your early years in Tunisia?
I was brought up by my grandparents [in Tunis]. My grandfather was a police officer and worked in the passport and ID card department. From the age of 10, on the days I didn't have to go to school, he would take me to work with him, and I'd spend the day sitting next to Mademoiselle Angèle, the girl who made the ID cards. She'd always ask for three photographs: the first would be stapled to the file, the second went onto the card itself, and the last would be thrown away if everything worked out okay with the other two. In order for the photo, which was quite thick, to fit nicely into the identity card, you had to delicately cut the film off the back using a Stanley knife. She taught me how to do this, and I was very careful not to make any holes. I'd have a box between my legs, and I'd slip the spare photos in it. At the end of the day, Mademoiselle Angèle would give me an envelope, so I could take them away. At home I'd lay them all out in front me, and then I'd start classifying them.

Brilliant! It's almost Oulipian. [1]
I'd spend hours classifying, un-classifying, re-classifying… so much so that I thought I knew everyone in the neighbourhood. When I'd see them in the street, I'd rush over to say hello, but at the last minute say to myself, 'Hold on, you only know them because of the photo.' I was particularly mad about the photos of the Italian women. They had hairstyles like Sophia Loren. They were so beautiful.

Does this archive still exist?
There might be some photos somewhere, but not many because I left them behind in Tunisia 40 years ago.

This fascinating story links to another memory from your childhood, one that I believe relates to cinema.
Yes, exactly. Sometimes my grandfather would take me to the ID card department; other times he'd drop me off at the Ciné-soir cinema where I'd spend the whole day. I'd even stay for the late-night showing because when my grandfather came out of work, he'd play cards at the café next door with the cinema owner. I remember the women who particularly fascinated me: Silvana Mangano in *Bitter Rice*, Audrey Hepburn in *Sabrina*, Rita Hayworth… I knew the films off by heart, including the songs and dance routines.

So you were already fascinated by movement.
At the cinema and in daily life too. My sister was at the Sisters of Sion College. When I'd go there with her, one of the nuns would give me a little pat on the shoulder, and I felt as if I'd been touched by grace. The nuns still wore cornettes [2] back then, and I thought they were so beautiful because they had such white skin when everyone else was tanned. I'd walk behind them in the street to watch their brown ankles and feet, which contrasted so much with their faces. And I thought the movement of their robes with their swinging crosses was lovely…

Do you think that's where your desire to create dresses came from?
Undoubtedly. I even made a wedding dress inspired by the nuns.

Who were the first female figures to really make an impression on you?
There was a woman married to a cousin on my grandmother's side. She was a dancer. Her mother was American and her father Tunisian. I was so proud whenever I walked around town with her! People would clap. She was a real star. She had a draped red frock coat with a black astrakhan collar and sleeves. Another woman who meant a huge amount to me was Madame Pinot, the midwife who delivered me. I'd go to her house at the weekend. There was a huge bronze Christ above the bed in the room where I'd sleep. At night I'd pray, 'Jesus, please don't fall on me!' On Sundays I would go to mass with Madame Pinot, and I'd pray with her, exactly as you were meant to. It was her who got me into the local Fine Arts School, even though I wasn't yet 16. She went to see the professor and said, 'Listen, it was me who brought him into this world. I can assure you that he is 16 years old.' And that's how I got in.

You studied sculpture at the École des Beaux-Arts in Tunis. And when I saw your exhibition at the Groninger Museum last year, I couldn't help but think to myself, 'This really is sculpture!'
That must be because of my studies.

Who were your heroes at that time?
My first heroes were painters. During the births, Madame Pinot would ask me to heat up the water, and then I'd draw while helping out with delivering the babies. She gave me books about the major painters, and I would copy the pictures. The one I most admired was Velázquez. At the same time we were being taught the history of France, and I was fascinated by Versailles and the history of the kings. Madame de Pompadour was my favourite. One day at art school, the professor took us to the sculpture room to teach us how to sculpt. He asked us to choose an element or a sculpture to copy. I instantly spotted a bust of Madame de Pompadour with her curls and cleavage. I settled down in front of it, and when the professor came over he said, 'You're going to attempt *that*?!' He was very curious to see the result. I've been devoted to Madame de Pompadour ever since. When I bought my place in Paris, I did some research on the building's origins, and guess what: in the 18th century this *hôtel particulier* belonged to the Bishop of Beauvais who rented it to Madame de Pompadour's father. She even lived here as a child. And that's how I ended up in the house of this woman I loved! When people say that I'm the owner, I answer that I'm only passing through. I'm not particularly fond of the word 'owner'.

It's interesting to hear about these different women and their importance in your life. Were there others when you first arrived in Paris?
I owe a great deal to Madame Zehrfuss, the wife of the architect Bernard Zehrfuss. They socialised a lot, and I met many people at their house: Prouvé, Calder, Tamayo, César… all the artists and architects of that era. So many people would frequent that *salon*. Meeting Louise de Vilmorin [3] was also very significant to me.

And she too held court in her own *salon*, I believe.
Yes, I was always invited to lunch on Sundays, the day she kept exclusively for family and close friends. There I'd meet up with her brother André, her sister-in-law Andrée, René Clair…

And even Cocteau.
I saw Cocteau towards the end of his life, at a dinner party. In the evening, the dinners were more open. Malraux would often come, as well as Orson Welles, who I met several times, and Anthony Perkins. Actresses, poets – everyone who was anyone at that time passed through her *salon*. And sometimes there'd be a waiter or someone else she'd thought was fun and had invited over.

It's funny because we're doing this interview in the kitchen of your home and studio which I've heard so much about, and it's sort of like a *salon*.
That's the spirit of this room because lots of people pass through, but they don't stay. I like that idea. Every morning I open my eyes, and I'm happy. I

'I'd happily sit in the corner drawing copies of Velázquez pictures while helping Madame Pinot the midwife deliver babies.'

'I've spent evenings here in the kitchen where queens and princesses have been rubbing shoulders with the atelier seamstresses.'

wonder what I am going to learn today and who I am going to meet. And today it's you!

That's wonderful.
I'm lucky because my work allows me to meet so many different people. I've spent evenings where queens and princesses have been rubbing shoulders with the *atelier* seamstresses. Everyone mixing together.

That's certainly the spirit of the French *salon*. What else did you learn from Louise de Vilmorin?
French chic, elegance, allure and *savoir-vivre*… there were many things to learn, and intellectually it was marvellous. She would pick up a book and read it to me when we'd go off travelling together.

was Garbo, sitting there in a big roll-neck with the sleeves pulled right down so you couldn't see her hands. I looked at her eyes, her nose, her eyelids… Amazing. She really was absolutely stunning. Cécile de Rothschild said to her, 'I don't need to introduce Monsieur Alaïa'. And I answered, 'Mademoiselle, it's not necessary'. We didn't need introductions. Garbo was charming: sitting there, looking around and not saying a word. She asked me to make her a large overcoat, even though it was the Courrèges period and coats were worn small then. I've kept the model. She wanted it to be really big, like a military coat, and in blue. It wasn't at all fashionable, but when I saw it on her, I knew she'd been right. She had her own style. I made her jersey sweaters, fitted straight trousers, flat shoes and three big overcoats.

until the 1980s, I only ever made dresses for my clients. Then came the inventions such as the studded dress. There was also a studded coat.

Where did the idea of studs come from?
We have a machine to make the eyelets in belts, and I was using it on a piece of fabric to test its resistance. I found it gave the fabric a nice drop and made it move well. I made that dress for a client, Madame Moreira Salles, the mother of the film producer Walter. Then she found the dress too hard to wear with the studding. So we made her a sheath dress instead. But the dress stayed, and I ended up keeping it.

Using studs was one of your inventions.
Yes, like the darted costumes that I created for the Crazy Horse in the 1970s.

'In the street I look at women from behind. That's why the photographer Jean-Baptiste Mondino claims I only look at women's asses!'

Meeting Garbo was also an important moment in your career.
Garbo came to my place for the first time in the 1970s with Cécile de Rothschild. Our first ever encounter was certainly a film-worthy coincidence. I'd just been to La Pagode cinema on the rue de Babylone where I'd seen that film which ends with a close-up of her made-up face beneath the brim of a hat. She wore flat shoes and radiated something very modern. It was a different woman altogether. I was captivated by that image. I went back to rue de Bellechasse where I had an appointment with Cécile de Rothschild for a coat fitting. The shop assistant came up to me and said, 'Monsieur Alaïa, Madame Garbo is here.' And as I'd only just seen the film I answered, 'Come on, are you kidding me?' I went into the *salon,* and there

She knew what she wanted.
A fashion designer should be surrounded by women. They are the ones who guide his eye. In the street I look at women from behind. That's why the photographer Jean-Baptiste Mondino claims I only look at women's asses!

So you've been influenced by a lot of women. But could you say exactly when your career started? With artists, it comes down to knowing where to start a *catalogue raisonné*. Given that you worked throughout your adolescence, I'm very curious to find out when you consider your *catalogue raisonné* began. Which was the first dress that wasn't a study, but an invention, an actual work?
That's a very difficult question. I've never seen my dresses as works as such. Up

It has to be put into the context of being suitable for a show like that; it's very different to the theatre or cinema. It was stage clothing in which the girls moved and which had to be taken off quickly. I remember making a skirt like that for an Asian girl who wasn't particularly beautiful or tall. Alain Bernardin [the original owner of the Crazy Horse] took me along to the fitting. I thought she was a secretary and not a dancer at all, when in fact she was a brilliant dancer. I've rarely seen such a body. You had to imagine her without a head or legs. Bernardin put her in a sort of frame on the stage with the lights focusing on her body. You couldn't see her head or her legs, only her hands. Bernardin kept telling me that the *derrière* was always more important than the bust in the show. And so I made the

skirt accordingly. When she did her act, she'd whip it off.

Perhaps that's one of the keys to the question I asked you about your first work, which actually comes from the world of art. You seem to have moments of invention like that.
In the same vein, there were also the bandage dresses from 1985 onwards. They were seen at the French fashion 'Oscars'. [4] I wound and wound and wound the bandages… Then there was Elle Macpherson's wedding dress.

Where did the idea come from?
Mummies! I had lots of books on Egypt, Egyptian art…

You can clearly see from many of your sketches that it comes from mummies.

country, it sounds really French. Like Bardot… For me France is the voices of these women.

Like that of Jeanne Moreau, whose voice I know well because of this funny episode I experienced with her. For the past two and a half years, I have been trying to set up an interview with her. A friend gave me Jeanne Moreau's mobile number, and ever since we have a chat every four or five weeks. Every time we make an appointment, she always has a *contretemps*. Literally *every* time. Each time she tells me the story behind the *contretemps*. We've probably spoken 150 times already! I know her voice very well, even though the actual meeting has never taken place.
Her voice really has something very French about it. I get the impression we

Collaborating with other artists was very important to Schiaparelli. Is it as important to you?
Thinking back to Schiaparelli's work with Dalí, who worked with her for a long time, and also Cocteau, it's true that surrealism did influence her. In my opinion when you work with an artist you no longer think about the dress as something to wear. It's an altogether different way of creating. For example, I always make dresses longer when they are going to be exhibited. In fact I'm currently re-doing lots of clothes especially for exhibitions. They become longer and leaner.

Can you explain a bit more?
It's all about the dream. Everyone wants to be tall and thin. It's like sculptures, which are always bigger than reality.

'The Balenciaga family sold everything for nothing to pay off their house debts. Sometimes the history of fashion just disappears.'

I've never made this connection with the mummies before, but now I know it, that's all I can see! And where did your famous zip dress come from?
It comes from an image that's always stuck in my mind of Arletty in *Hôtel du Nord*. I was totally struck by that image. Charles James had also made a zip dress. I was thinking about it again recently. It all depends on how you do the zip. Schiaparelli also tried. It was very modern for the time, very strong.

Could you tell me more about Arletty?
One day I went to see *Hôtel du Nord* at the Théâtre Le Ranelagh, which was showing it as part of a Marcel Carné season. I came out totally blown away by Arletty's voice and style. In the film she's so modern, and she has this tone of voice you don't hear in any other

don't hear such voices anymore today. Everyone has the same tone and the same language. Funnily enough the last time I went to New York, I noticed that the American ladies had a certain freedom and sophistication in their voices.

When I interview Miuccia Prada and other designers today, they all admit that you're their hero. You spoke of Velázquez earlier, but I was wondering if you had any particular heroes in the fashion world?
Yes, there are lots of them. Vionnet first of all, Balenciaga for sure, Dior, Schiaparelli, Madame Grès… and Gabrielle Chanel's character has always fascinated me. There was also Adrian of course, who made the link between fashion and cinema, and then Andrée Putman in the world of design.

Like the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* in the Louvre, which is huge. This is the perfect time to talk about your exhibitions. The first time I saw one of your dresses was in Florence, at your exhibition with Julian Schnabel during Florence's *Biennale della Moda* in 1996. Is Julian Schnabel the artist with whom you've most collaborated?
Yes, and he did the furniture for the boutique: rails, tables… And then there was also the exhibition of works on Tati canvases, canvases I used again for a special Tati collection – the first collaboration of its kind – with a large bag, a T-shirt, espadrilles and also the printed jeans for my collection.

The exhibition at the Groninger Museum in 2012 was in three parts. Was the idea of a trilogy there from the start?

No, it was an idea that came later. [Flicking through the exhibition catalogue] There, you see, I did an African themed collection for summer 1982.

You told me earlier about your trip with Peter Beard to Africa, is there any link here?
No. I can you show what was made especially for Africa. There were only two or three things. A coat that was like the Masai coats in fabric. Then the magazine *Elle* sent us to do photos in Kenya and we stayed for 10 days in a Masai village. It was an unforgettable experience.

At the first exhibition in 1991, there were several rooms, always with a painter and you.
Yes, that was done twice. The idea came from a fashion show which took place at the CAPC [the *Centre d'arts plastiques contemporains*] in Bordeaux in 1985, thanks to Jean-Louis Froment who was the director of the museum. There was a Dan Flavin exhibition on there. The girls walked around the neon lights of the exhibition. There were several clothes from different collections. It was a real fashion show event with girls brought in especially from New York, London…

It's interesting to think about the idea of exhibitions because we're here in your house which in some ways constitutes your archive because it contains everything, but it is also a workplace where you prepare your exhibitions.
It's true that everything for the exhibitions is prepared here in advance. The mannequins are very special; they are made from cut-out plastic. I put the dress on the mannequin then I draw the lines in such a way that only the dress remains visible after the cutting. Now others are starting to do this too.

Let's talk a bit more about this extraordinary venue where we are… We're in the kitchen, but this morning I also visited the workshops, and I saw an archive which I'd never seen before. It's an archive made up of boxes full of clothes you've created, but also pieces by other designers that you collect…
I would actually like to organise exhibitions here. I did hold one once during a sale. In fact a friend of mine, Françoise Auguet organised the sale of clothes from the Poiret collection. The family wanted to sell everything, everything that Madame had worn and that had enchanted all of Paris. It broke my heart. I admired her husband a lot and I think he ended up incredibly sad, having lost absolutely everything.

Why did it end so sadly?
Poiret was broke. At the end he had no more money, not even a bank account. Arletty told me how she'd organised a soirée with Louis Jouvet to raise some money to help him out. As soon as he got the money he went to a couture house and ordered 150 shirts, then on to a shoemaker to order a huge number of shoes. He said, 'It's because one needs two shirts a day and likewise for shoes. So now I am clothed for several years.' Several designers were told about it, and so was the museum. But the latter didn't want the collection, only two or three dresses, when in fact as a whole it had great historical importance. It's a real shame they didn't invest. So I offered my place to this friend as a base to choose the clothes, clean them and exhibit them. It represented a lot of money. I suggested inviting photographers to make sure there'd be some trace of it, more in fact than if the pieces had been shown in a room at [Parisian auction house] Drouot for a day and a half. In the end, the exhibition did take place. We discovered pieces of unimaginable quality, and there was even a catalogue. It was fantastic.

It was like a protest against forgetting.
Yes, just like with Balenciaga. The family sold everything to pay the house debts or something like that, and everything went for nothing. The history of fashion does sometimes disappear like that. A short while after the Poiret sale, my friend Françoise Steinbach came across the trousseau of a woman who'd been dressed by Schiaparelli. And it contained one of Cocteau's jackets… We absolutely had to do another exhibition.

It's a space that works as much as an archive office as an exhibition space.
Along with Didier [Krzentowski, Kreo gallery director], we invited Pierre Paulin for an exhibition here. On the evening of the installation Paulin came down for dinner and almost fainted: he was so shocked to see how many of his works we possessed. It was just before his death. All the museums, including the Mobilier National, began to get interested in him at that point.

'In the evenings, I'll drink a little vodka, watch the news on TV, snooze for a few minutes, then go back to work until 6am.'

I interviewed Paulin with Rem Koolhaas in Milan at the *Salone del Mobile* around that time. I thought it was marvellous that he'd been recognised again thanks to your exhibition. Didier told me this story about your exhibition with Paulin. On the night of the private view, Didier reportedly said that how happy Paulin must be, and Paulin replied, 'It's for my wife that I'm happy.'
It's true, he lived in the countryside, and he didn't want any contact with anyone. He was upset that people had forgotten him. He started to design furniture again for a project with me. We didn't think he was going to die like that.

So the drawings he did for you correspond with unrealised projects?
Yes, and those drawings are at his wife's house. He said something else to me about a big sofa he was re-doing: 'It's better now than it was originally, more manageable, more solid.' We always think the original is best and that it has to be kept no matter what, but if the creator is still alive, it's possible to do it differently. It's the same with my dresses.

It's the same with exhibitions… There's something that we haven't talked about yet but which I find fascinating, because I love insomnia, and it's this 24-hours-a-day story, because I'm told you don't sleep… very much.
I'll have time to sleep later! It's true that I don't sleep much. In the evenings, I slow down from 7pm to 8pm. I drink a little vodka. When I'm on my own, I watch the news on the television, I snooze for a few minutes and when I open my eyes again, I feel as though I've had a really good sleep. After dinner I watch *National Geographic* programmes or documentaries about history or animals. And then I go back to work. By midnight I'm wide awake, and until 6am I don't feel tired because I'm alone and calm. I prepare what needs to be done in the workshop; I leave parcels on everyone's tables… It's impossible to work during the day.

And in the morning, do you go back to sleep?
Not at all. But if I have to go somewhere by car, the moment I'm seated, even if the car hasn't yet driven out of the gate, I'm already asleep.

How many hours a day do you sleep?
Five hours maximum a day. But I could sleep more. For example, this summer I was in Tunisia with no work obligations. I pushed the bed next to the window, and I could see the sea in the distance, the garden… and I said to myself, 'What would I give to work like this!' But I can't do that here. Every morning between six and seven, I'm awake. Even on Saturdays and Sundays, I'm not alone.

The house is in a constant state of flux. That's brilliant. Among all your creations, are there projects that have yet to be realised? Any dreams or utopias?
There are so many! There's the foundation that will see the light of day. There are collaborations with certain artist friends that I'd like to devote more time to. Take care of them too, and boost their morale above all. There are so many things to do in life. Journeys too. I travel on my stool thanks to the Voyage TV channel. One day my friend Jean-Marcel Camard, who works in an auction house, came to see me before he left for Turkey and asked if he could bring anything back for me. I answered, 'Oh yes, there's an oil soap made in an old factory, it's cut just like this… And go to the Palace of Dance on the Bosphorus, its architecture is beautiful.' And I remembered another TV programme which was about the life of a taxi driver at the wheel of his impeccable chrome-and-blue Cadillac that people could hire. He was singing and showing the countryside to travellers. In the evenings, he took better care of his car than his wife and children. So I said to my friend, 'See if you can find him.' Just then someone else who was in the room and knows me well, looked at me amazed and said, 'But you've never been to Turkey!' I did go to Turkey later, and everything was exactly as I'd seen it on screen, except I didn't get the close-ups.

That's like Robert Wasler, the great Swiss writer from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, who wrote Parisian gazettes without ever having stepped foot in Paris. Or Joseph Cornell who wrote a wonderful story about his Grand Tour of Europe, which never actually took place. What an imagination…
I have an unrealised exhibition project on Adrian which is closely linked to the beginning of my collection. One day a New York journalist asked me which designers I was fond of, and at the time, in the 1980s, I didn't really know any American designers. So I answered

'When you're young, you should take advantage of everything: show off your body, reveal your cleavage… because it doesn't last for long.'

Charles James, Claire McCardell and Gilbert Adrian. Some time later a gentleman sent me a very long letter which said, 'Sir, I have the biggest collection of Adrian's work. I read what you said about Adrian in the newspaper. I am tired, and I would like to sell this collection. I think you are the only one who could understand it. I don't want to sell it to just anyone, and I am prepared to give you a good price. If you come to New York, call me.' I went to New York. I got to our boutique and asked the sales assistant Mark to call this gentleman who lived in Philadelphia. He invited me to his house. We arrived at a very ordinary building and found a gentleman who was unwell and living with his cats. You could sense it was the end of someone's life – that was one of the things that shook me up most. There were piles of photographs, paintings, drawings, costumes and a cellar packed with clothes, maybe 700 pieces. He said to me, 'I will give you a good price, and you can pay me when you want.' I looked and saw outfits made for Garbo, Marlene, with their names sewn in, and I said to myself there was no way that all this could be dispersed. I don't remember what the total price was, but I told him I would buy everything in several stages. He preferred knowing that it was all with me more than out on location. He'd even wanted to do a book and had been to see Adrian's son in California. The son was a petrol pump attendant and didn't want to know about either his mother or his father. So I bought the lot and stocked it in the cellar of the New York boutique, and every time someone came to Paris, I'd say, for example, 'Naomi, bring me back a suitcase!' So now I want to take care of that and do the book and the exhibition.

What a wonderful idea. One of my last questions is about something I've noticed comes up in all your interviews, and that's your freedom.
That's all I have.

So what is your secret to maintaining this freedom?
I have a lot of respect. I respect everything. I always say that I am free. The truth is that they could put me in prison, but I would still feel as free as if I were outside. Sometimes I can spend a month or two without ever leaving my place. I don't have to, but I do it happily and in good conditions. I do what I want. I refuse to do things that I don't want to.

So the secret is knowing how to say no.
I often say yes to projects, but if I can't follow through, then that's how it goes!

In art, architecture and fashion, there are also economic constraints which could hinder freedom. But you've understood how to keep your autonomy and you've never been dependent on another brand.
Even if people could 'own' me, they'd never be able to hold on to me. I let people believe they've got everything, but really it's me who decides. It's not complicated: that's how it is or I go. And they know that.

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a pretty little book, *Letters to a Young Poet*. What would be your advice to a young person today?
I don't really like advising young people because they should be busy living their era as it is, and they should keep their curiosity, freedom without older people telling them anything. Children should be allowed to go out and enjoy. When you are young, you should take advantage of everything to the maximum: show off your body, reveal your cleavage, live everything to the full, because it doesn't last for long. I had a friend who told me, 'When I was young, I'd eat an entire Camembert, wear my bikini, and my tummy would be flat at the beach. I had no money, but I could eat what I wanted. Now I've got money, and I can't eat anything.' You have to enjoy it while it lasts!

What a fantastic conclusion! Thank you so much.

1. OuLiPo, the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* or 'Workshop for Potential Literature', was co-founded in Paris in the early 1960s by mathematician Raymond Queneau and writer Francois Le Lionnais. Oulipian writers impose constraints that must be satisfied to complete a text, constraints ranging across all levels of composition, from elements of plot or structure down to rules regarding letters. OuLiPo thus pushes a structuralist conception of language to a level of mathematical precision; technique becomes technical when language itself becomes a field of investigation, a complex system made up of a finite number of components. The informing idea behind this work is that constraints engender creativity: textual constraints challenge and thereby free the imagination of the writer, and force a linguistic system and/or literary genre out of its habitual mode of functioning.

2. A cornette is a piece of female headwear that was especially popular in Europe in the 15th to 17th century. It is essentially a type of wimple consisting of a large starched piece of white cloth that is folded upwards in such a way as to create the resemblance of horns (French: *cornes*) on the wearer's head.

3. Louise de Vilmorin (April 4th, 1902 - December 26th, 1969) was a French novelist, poet and journalist. She was born in the family château at Verrières-le-Buisson, southwest of Paris, and was the heir to a great fortune. She was afflicted with a slight limp that became a personal trademark. Vilmorin was best known as a writer, and her most famous novel was *Madame de...* published in 1951, which was adapted into the celebrated film *The Earrings of Madame de...* (1953), directed by Max Ophüls. Vilmorin's other works included *Juliette*, *La lettre dans un taxi*, *Les belles amours*, *Saintes-Unefois*, and *Intimités*. Her letters to Jean Cocteau were published after the death of both correspondents. She adopted Alaïa at the beginning of his career and referred to him as 'my artist', thanks to whom 'I appear beautiful'.

4. Alaïa was voted *Best Designer of the Year* and *Best Collection of the Year* at the *Oscars de la Mode* by the French Ministry of Culture in 1984 in a memorable event where Grace Jones carried him on stage in her arms.

This September, the Musée Galliera in Paris will reopen with an Alaïa retrospective.

Also this autumn, a new Alaïa store will open off Avenue Montaigne in Paris.

With thanks to Didier Krzentowski.

‘It’s unbelievable to have as a dear friend, a living legend: Azzedine Alaïa.’

Nicolas Ghesquière

Photographs by Karim Sadli
Styling by Marie-Amélie Sauvé

‘Azzedine’s clothes are much like the man himself – sharp and precise, yet strong, generous, and above all genuine.’

Marie-Amélie Sauvé

‘You don’t understand, this is an Alaïa... It’s like a totally important designer.’

Cher Horowitz in *Clueless*

‘No other dress can make
a woman look and feel as good
as an Alaïa dress because
it cinches a woman’s body perfectly.’

Naomi Campbell

‘You are much more like an artist in that you don’t even think in seasons.’

Stephanie Seymour

‘Thanks to Alaïa a lady already has 50 per cent of her work done for her, whether her aim is to do business or to seduce a man.’

Mathilde de Rothschild

Model: Andreea Diaconu @ IMG. Makeup: Peter Philips. Hair: Damien Boissinot @ Jedroot. Manicurist: Typhaine Kersual @ Jedroot.

‘My friends couldn’t believe I’d become a travelling salesman.’

From selling sponges in his car to conquering China with a monogram, Yves Carcelle tells all.

By Jonathan Wingfield
Portrait by Patrick Demarchelier

This is the story of the CEO who had Madonna, Steve Jobs, and any number of Coppolas on speed dial. The CEO whose advertising campaigns featured Mikhail Gorbachev posing in front of the Berlin Wall. The CEO who embraced China when most others only had eyes for the West. But Yves Carcelle was never an ordinary CEO. Between 1990 and 2012, as top dog of Louis Vuitton, he oversaw the lightning quick expansion of the brand and was instrumental in breaking new ground: appointing Marc Jacobs as Creative Director in 1997, launching a prêt-à-porter line, and reinventing the company's leather goods with distinguished collaborations and a succession of 'it' bags that have changed the face of luxury forever.

With a retail portfolio that's grown from 117 stores in 1990 to a whopping 462 (and counting) worldwide, Carcelle has transformed Louis Vuitton and its ubiquitous LV monogram into one of the worlds' most recognisable brands. Research agency Millward Brown's 2012 study ranked Louis Vuitton as the world's 21st most valuable brand as well as the most valuable luxury brand – towering above the likes of Hermès, HSBC, BMW, Shell and Amex – and estimated its worth to be $25.9 billion. Mind-boggling facts and figures aside, it's always been said that Carcelle was a much-liked and respected boss by his 22,000 strong worldwide staff at LV. Indeed, it's a jovial Carcelle that welcomes System into his office deep in the heart of LVMH HQ. Switching off his myriad iPads and smartphones, he settles back into a comfy execu-chair and asks, 'Right, where shall we start?'

You were born in post-war Paris, light years culturally from the world of Louis Vuitton. Can you describe the Paris you grew up in?
I am a pure Parisian product. I was born near Faubourg-Saint-Denis, my parents lived in the Latin Quarter, and I spent my entire childhood within the vicinity of Pont Neuf and the rue St Benoit – where my nursery and primary schools were – then to the Lycée Montaigne. You couldn't have had a more typical Parisian childhood if you tried. Wednesday afternoons were spent wandering around town with my school friends, so I know the place like the back of my hand.

What about your family life?
I come from a modest family. My father was a civil servant in finances. My parents were very, very nice, but for an only child like me, they were a bit stifling. It's quite rare to live in the same place for 18 years, and I'm sure that triggered a longing to go off and discover the world.

What were your first experiences of travelling abroad?
Like every other French school kid at the time, my first trip abroad was to England on an academic programme when I was about 13. It was a rite of passage, like in that film *A nous les petites anglaises! [Let's Get Those English Girls]* [1]. Later on, when I was 19, I went to Cameroon with a backpack and my friends, which was a wild adventure. The following year, I went to the Indian Ocean, and I've been travelling the world ever since.

Were you a straight-A student, rebel or slacker at school?
I was good overall, but at the same time I didn't always fit into the mould of the model student. I always did well at maths and that helped me get into X [l'École polytechnique] [2] when I was 18, which made me the youngest in my year.

X has historically been the breeding ground for France's great industrialists and highest-level civil servants. What did it feel like attending this elitist centre of excellence?
To be honest, I still feel great pride because it's a school with a history: it was established during the revolution, it was militarised by Napoleon… Even if it sounds ridiculous, the motto was *Pour la Patrie, les Sciences et la Gloire* [For Homeland, Science and Glory], and we all felt a sense of privilege. On the first day I arrived, however, everything in my life changed. I clearly remember saying to myself, 'I won't ever become an engineer or a researcher or a civil servant', which was what's expected from the students. In fact, I told myself that so often that I didn't achieve much. By the time I left, I felt completely disconnected from the professional and social network that that kind of education provides you with. I think I always considered myself a bit out of the norm, which is probably why I was reluctant to accept what education expected of me.

What did you have in mind if you weren't prepared to work for TGV or France Télécom?
Around that time – this was the end of the 1960s – 'marketing' was just arriving in Europe. I'd read magazine articles about the big American consumer companies like Coca-Cola who weren't simply selling a product; they were trying to better understand their customers and the environment in which they existed. It was a real eye-opener.

What was consumer culture like in France at the time?
Companies like Danone were just starting to get interested in marketing. Around the time I started work, the French discovered supermarkets and mass consumption, which suddenly made everything seem possible. Don't forget, this was *les trentes glorieuses* [3]. In today's climate, it's difficult to comprehend the excitement of a booming nation… and then 1968 happened.

Were you on the frontline of student protestors?
Living in the Latin Quarter meant we were in the thick of the action. We'd go out every night to stand by the barricades at the bottom of the rue Saint-Jacques. Witnessing the wrongdoings of the state and experiencing the reaction from revolutionary minorities left a huge impression on me. For the vast majority of French youth, and even people from the older generation, there was a feeling of *everything* being possible. Beyond the anecdotes of throwing rocks and rioting, it really was collective liberation. People in the streets would stop and talk to one another.

Without sounding flippant, how has that so-called spirit of May 1968 influenced a CEO of Louis Vuitton?
People from that era who have subsequently gone on to have managerial positions are probably quite different to other generations of managers. I think it comes down to collective proximity and simpler rapport with one's peers; it was an irreversible factor that resulted directly from 1968.

Let's go back to your early working days. You'd just left X and decided you didn't fit the mould of public sector industry.
As soon as I decided I wanted to enter the private sphere, I had the idea in mind that I wanted to run a company. I didn't know who, how, what or in which country, but I knew that's what I wanted to do. My first move was to answer classified ads that weren't at all aimed at university graduates, and I found myself on the road selling cleaning products for a company called Spontex.

That must have been a culture shock for one of the educational elite.

My friends couldn't believe I'd become a travelling salesman! Literally selling sponges and window cleaning products out of the back of my car. But it changed my life forever. Because every single working day since has incorporated this notion of selling: selling to your bank manager, selling to your boss, your colleagues, your customers... So having learnt it first-hand by knocking on doors brings incredible experience that you'll never get from traditional education.

Were you one of these natural-born entrepreneurs who sells his football stickers in the school playground?
Yes, that was me exactly, but my 'product' was marbles. I'd ask myself, 'What's the best technique for increasing sales?'

Do you think one is born a salesman?
I think so, yes, but that's not enough. You can have a certain aptitude and the desire to sell things, but sales techniques and marketing are things you have to acquire and develop. It's like anything: you can have a sporty physique but if you don't train...

Is selling in the Carcelle family DNA?
No, not at all… if you take my father and grandfather, there's no history of it.

Who was initially responsible for teaching you in a professional environment?
The director of sales at Spontex, who was my boss, was an old hand at managing his team of sales reps. He didn't exactly hold me – this young graduate from X – in high esteem at the beginning, though he helped me professionally, and I learnt a lot from him. But perhaps most importantly was the military service we had to do back then. Having done X, I automatically became a young lieutenant in charge of men 20 years my senior who'd served in Algeria or the Indochina War. It forced me to think about how I was going to impose myself on people, whatever their relationship with me was.

Has that scenario played itself out in your business career?
Constantly. I think luck is having experiences that mature you. That's why I've always encouraged young people who want to start working at Louis Vuitton to go and get a year's experience as a shop assistant, or as a manager at one of the *ateliers*. It transforms them and pushes them to go further, but at the right pace. There's no point in trying to become LVMH's Director of Strategy within your first year – it won't really do anyone any favours.

'I found myself on the road, literally selling sponges and window cleaning products out of the back of my car.'

Let's go back to your sponge-selling days…
After a few months I worked my way up to being Spontex's Product Manager. I then did an MBA at INSEAD business school, before five years as marketing and commercial director at a German group called Blendax whose business was toothbrushes and toothpaste.

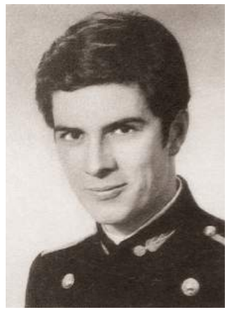
In Germany?
No, at their French headquarters, but that's how I learnt to speak 'survival German'. Being part of a foreign sector back then has obviously had considerable benefits to me ever since. There's an obvious obstacle – a cultural one – that you have to overcome if you are going to manage international affairs.

Did the fact that you were working with such mass-produced, everyday items make you want to explore rarer, sexier, more 'noble' sectors?
No, to be honest I had no idea which sector I wanted to go into. But by the end of the 1970s, I really wanted to manage a company myself. I'd been learning all these techniques for nine years, and I wanted more responsibility. At that point it could have been anything, and it was total chance that I got involved in textiles. In 1979 a head-hunter offered to place me as boss of Absorba, who were based in Troyes. At the time no one wanted to work in textiles because it was a sector in decline, and it also meant working in the provinces…

So what was the Absorba attraction?
While I wouldn't dream of comparing it to *couture*, it was a total revelation for me to be working with creative people. With all the excitement associated with creativity – even when you don't 'create' yourself but you're fascinated by creation – there really isn't a better job. But it was totally by chance; I never said to myself I'm going to work in fashion. It just so happens that from that point on, I never left this industry.

Was it difficult to acclimatise to creative culture when your background was straight up business?
I think you either have the temperament or you don't. When you work with creative people, you have to accept that you share the power. It's not just a question of green-lighting a toothbrush! At a company like Louis Vuitton, you are obviously surrounded by creative characters – designers, artistic directors, stylists, architects – so you're constantly dealing with their world.

What was it that led you to move on from Absorba? Creative limitations or lack of business ambition?



When the product began to be distributed further afield, I wanted to open stores, but the then-president didn't agree. That led me to leave and join Descamps where I had 240 franchises to oversee. Then, when I arrived at Louis Vuitton, I told myself we could have total control over distribution. When you start overseeing an operation to that level, you see how creative input has an effect on *everything*: the product, the store interiors… For me it was a long period of maturing: from my first ever experience in children's clothing to becoming the *idéologue* who takes control of everything that Louis Vuitton didn't already control ourselves.

Once you get involved in textiles are you naturally attracted to the luxury sector for its quality and *noblesse*?
Not necessarily. Look at the success of Inditex and Zara: Amancio Ortega is a man I admire a great deal, and he's never left his niche. So I don't think we're necessarily forced towards luxury. I think if Bernard Arnault had never given me the keys to the proverbial Ferrari, I probably would have stayed in mid-level retail. I was lucky enough though to be given the keys to a six-star hotel in paradise.

Do you remember the first time you met Bernard Arnault?
Yes, one day in 1987 he asked to meet me because he owned Boussac, a competitor. I was fascinated by the intellectual mechanics of the man, and I witnessed at close hand the way he took control of Boussac. At the same time he had this dazzling vision... I mean, he can be demanding at times, but you have to remember that back then very few people ever imagined luxury could become a global industry. That really was Bernard Arnault's vision. He started off with Dior and Le Bon Marché, then acquired Céline… and that was the beginning of the snowball effect. He saw the opportunity.

What was it about the luxury sector in particular that attracted Arnault?
You know what – I've known him for 25 years, but I've never actually asked him that question! At what point did he have his eureka moment regarding luxury? Was it before or after buying Boussac, the group that owned Dior? Now I think about it, he clearly had that vision of *le luxe* when he spoke to me in 1987. But was it already in his mind when he bought Boussac in 1984? That would be very interesting to find out. You should ask him the question...

Either way, you'd have to say his acquisition of Boussac was the turning point.

Well, at the time he was criticised for the way he controlled Boussac, and didn't hold onto the textiles when everyone expected him to. But if he hadn't done that, then the global luxury domain, as we know it today, wouldn't be French. That's not me being patriotic, that's simply an objective reality.

You've mentioned your fascination with creative people. Does Bernard Arnault share this fascination?
He is definitely interested in creative people – perhaps in different ways to me – but he couldn't possibly be passionate about his group 30 years on if he didn't share that fascination.

And is Bernard Arnault as open to the sharing of the power with creatives as you have been?

'Had Bernard Arnault never given me the keys to the proverbial Ferrari, I'd probably still be working in mid-level retail to this day.'

[laughs] I've never thought about that.

Do you remember when he first articulated his vision of luxury to you? Because obviously luxury in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s wasn't what it is today.
Well, the vision was already there, but it needed the maximum added value with everything we did: the products, the way we communicated, the environment. Bernard Arnault was already talking about Japan even though it was still a very small market. Through the developments in Japan, his vocation became truly international.

When you started at LVMH in 1989, what were you expecting? Bernard Arnault had his vision, what was yours?
Everything I had experienced up until then had had limits. Suddenly everything that I'd dreamt of doing seemed possible, without knowing exactly what, but there was huge potential, in terms of retail, in terms of conquering the world…

Were you given a specific mission or strategy?
When I started, Bernard Arnault had recently arrived, and he needed new collaborators who were ready to head off on an adventure with him. I became the President of Lacroix, which was pretty fascinating because Christian is a wonderful man who I still regularly see – even if at times it was complicated, and there are countless stories as to why things didn't work out with that particular business. Christian's main problem was that just after the house was launched, Bernard Arnault started buying LVMH, and I guess the love affair was no longer so exclusive. Once Lacroix came to a close, that very same weekend Bernard Arnault asked me if I would like to manage Louis Vuitton.

What had been your impressions of Vuitton prior to that?
Many of those who'd joined LVMH thought it was a tired house. I was convinced, though, as was Bernard Arnault, that Louis Vuitton had an incredible potential.

At the time Vuitton was only a leather goods company.
But it was turning over more than half a billion euros. It was already good, and then it multiplied…

And its global reach at the time?
There was already a significant presence in Japan and Asia, in part because the Japanese had started travelling everywhere. So luxury items started being sold wherever the Japanese were travelling to. Where Bernard Arnault and myself were in complete agreement was, 'OK, so we've convinced the Japanese, now we need to conquer the world.' The first store opened in China in 1992.

The term 'luxury group' has long since entered fashion and retail vernacular, but back in the 1980s how important was the concept of grouping together quite disparate companies – alcohol, leather goods, fashion, auction houses – to create a stronghold?
You have to remember that LVMH was already a succession of fusions before Bernard Arnault bought it and took the reins in 1989. Twenty-five years ago, most luxury families wanted to remain autonomous and independent, but the Moët and Hennessy families got together. Imagine champagne makers joining with cognac makers, it was quite incredible. Their power in terms of distribution by joining forces was extraordinary. They then bought Dior fragrances. Elsewhere Louis Vuitton fused with Veuve Clicquot and bought Givenchy. On both sides the families were saying it might be worth securing our futures by grouping several activities together. And in 1987 under bankers' initiatives, the two groups – which were already groups in gestation, actively searching diversification – fused. So both groups had the mindset that you could have several vocations while respecting each house and each

vocation. This fusion only strengthened that notion. Bernard Arnault arrived, he already had Lacroix and Le Bon Marché, then Céline and Kenzo joined the expanding galaxy.

What did Bernard Arnault bring in terms of ideology that someone else might not have done?
I think it's something that is very personal to him: when he wants something he will do anything to get it.

It has certainly worked.
If you really believe in something, then give it the backing it needs. An example I often cite is that very early on, in 1990, I proposed a strategy to him which involved a continued growth in travel and leather goods. At the time we didn't have much leather and there weren't enough lines. We also had numerous geographic territories to conquer outside Europe, America and Japan. So we both agreed that Louis Vuitton should aim to become a global brand, but not at that particular moment in time. We agreed to discuss it again five years later. Then, in 1995/96 we launched an operation with the monogrammed canvas, collaborating with people like Alaïa, Vivienne Westwood, Isaac Mizrahi... The world discovered it and the fashion industry agreed that the Louis Vuitton monogram was something magical. That was when we said, 'Ok, it's time to launch a global brand.'

So that really marked the beginning of Vuitton as we know it today.
Yes, exactly. At the end of 1996, we agreed that the time had come to establish Louis Vuitton as the global leader in leather goods. For several months we were contemplating maybe launching a pair of loafers or a jacket as a means to subtly broaden the product range. But then one Monday morning, Bernard Arnault said to me, 'I've been thinking all weekend, we're the global leaders in leather goods, there's no point adopting a softly approach, why not create an entire prêt-à-porter division? We should get an artistic director and do a show for the first season... We'll amaze everyone.'

Did that suggestion really come out of the blue?
Completely. For months we'd been saying how we were going to take things slowly. The conversation continued, and I said to him, 'Have you already got an artistic director in mind?' And he answered, 'Well, he's completely the opposite end of the spectrum to Louis Vuitton, but he is a very clever guy, so I think you should call Marc Jacobs.' So I went to my office and called him: 'Hi Marc, it's Yves Carcelle, Louis Vuitton CEO. Would you be available for a conversation about possible collaborations?' I went to New York that week, and it all started from there. I didn't see anyone else, only Marc. Although Arnault had said all of that to me, he'd done it with an air of not being totally convinced that it was the right move.

Can you describe the atmosphere when Marc Jacobs first arrived?
I'd done the deal with Marc in New York and then invited him and his partner Robert Duffy to come and see us in the office in Paris, which at the time was located in the La Grande Arche at La Défense. On the first day they arrived they went off to make some calls to New York, and then Marc came over to me and said, 'Ok, so where do we work?' I said, 'Oh, you don't like it here?' And he explained that most days they would arrive later in the office than 'the suits', but they'd often work very late, so there was no way his design team could leave at 3am only to find themselves stranded in the middle of this concrete urban jungle! So we instantly got in a car and went to find something in the centre of town, on the Boulevard Raspail. At the time we'd already started the construction of the Louis Vuitton headquarters at Pont Neuf, so the day it was completed, I told Marc, 'You're now moving back in with us.'

'You need a sensibility that allows you to translate creativity into business, but when the CEO starts thinking he's creative it's the beginning of the end!'

When did you first sense that the introduction of prêt-á-porter was going to have a major impact?
February 1998 was unbelievably intense: in the space of three weeks, we all moved to Pont Neuf, in the heart of Paris, which was a big deal; we opened our first global store on the Champs Elysées; and Marc did his first show. Then we opened a store in London eight days later. That was when the gamble began to pay off. You have to remember that Louis Vuitton had never existed according to the rhythm of the fashion seasons before. We would launch a bag with a 10-year life expectancy.

How did that impact manufacturing?
Oh, there was deep questioning going on. But it didn't happen from one day to the next. There's no doubt that Marc's arrival brought everything together; today there aren't two Vuittons, there is only one, which expresses itself through all these different professions.

How did Marc Jacobs' arrival impact your position as CEO?
Initially it meant a bit more creative compromise!

Was that a shock to you?
I'd thought I was ready for it, but you know…! We agreed from the off that he had *carte blanche* for the show; that was his territory and I would never interfere. He knew the size of the house and he never tried to claim control of everything – unlike other people.

Nonetheless, did you freak out when Marc Jacobs arrived one day with the idea of getting Stephen Sprouse to graffiti the bags?
Well, he didn't present it exactly like that. Marc knew the culture of Louis Vuitton well enough; he'd spent months going through the archives, visiting the *ateliers*. He said, 'Right from the beginning, people have painted their initials on the trunks, it's an integral part of the house DNA.' He said he wanted to revisit this tradition but in a modern context, in street language, and collaborate with an artist. By presenting it like that, it happened effortlessly. I think it was the first powerful collaboration.

Considering the success of the Sprouse collaboration, were you actively pushing Marc Jacobs towards future collaborations with artists like Takashi Murakami?
Murakami derived from an approach that wasn't overly thought out. We first discussed the idea in 2002, just a few months after 9/11. Marc said to me, 'As a New Yorker, what has happened has really affected me, it's really affected my neighbourhood, it was my show that got cancelled… we can't carry on like this, we need a revolution. So I'm warning you now that my next show is going to be an explosion of colour and naivety. It might shock you, but that's how it's going to be. That's how it *has* to be.' He then said the message would be even more powerful if he were to collaborate with an artist. That's when Murakami's name came up.

Were you pleasantly surprised by his choice of artist, what with Murakami being an artist from the Far East?
No, that had nothing to do with it. Nothing at all.

But it must have had a commercial impact. I remember going with Marc Jacobs when he first visited Murakami's studio in Tokyo and realising the cross-cultural significance and commercial potential it was going to have.

© Louis Vuitton

But at the same time, he could have easily done it with Jeff Koons, and it would have been just as strong. He needed a 'factory' artist for the scale and Takashi perfectly suited what Marc was looking for at the time.

As someone who's obviously worked closely with Marc Jacobs for many years, what would you say is his greatest talent?
Marc has an incredible ability of sensing the zeitgeist and transforming it into this thing called fashion. It's as though he has antennae, which give him this perception as to how the fashion world is going to be in six, nine, 12 months time. He is so in the zeitgeist that sometimes his world is almost too ephemeral.

You mean, he's already moved on to the next idea before you've had a chance to commercialise his creations.
When you talk to Marc a day or two after the show, he'll often tell you that if he did it today, it would be something completely different. I mean, it's only 48 hours later, but he's already absorbed something else and moved on.

And his biggest flaw?
He smokes in the office! [Laughs] He gave everything up, drugs, everything... but the fool continues to smoke!

Which of his creative proposals has had the greatest impact on the company?
I think that would be when he invented patent leather, at the end of 1997. When we took him on we assumed that he would be the man for prêt-à-porter and fashion, but that he wouldn't really get involved with the leather goods. But within just a few days he'd immersed himself in an evolution of the leather goods by inventing a patent leather that was totally in keeping with the monogram, yet incredibly modern.

Was that another of his carefully planned revolutions?
I will always remember it because it dates back to the time his office was on the Boulevard Raspail. We'd often go for lunch in a little Chinese restaurant on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, and in between two bowls of fried noodles, he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and showed me this thing that he'd been working on by hand with his team. I told him to eat up and we jumped into the car and went straight to Asnières[4]. We gathered together the designers we have there, and in just a

few days he'd launched the programme. We knew that he would bring a sense of modernity to the fashion, but he also brought it to the leather goods. With the patent leather, he hadn't just flirted with the periphery of Louis Vuitton, he'd gone straight to the heart of the company, and totally spontaneously.

Have there been moments when you've not agreed with his creative choices?
To be honest, I think it goes beyond any one particular collection. Sometimes with Marc the difficulty lies in his own great pendulum movement, where from one day to the next he will go back and forth between ideas and impulses. That isn't easy to keep up with, for both the customers and for the house itself. But, you know, he is a genius, so…

These days creatives need to be more business savvy and businessmen need to be more sensitive to creativity. Discuss.
I think it's important for creative people to be interested in what works and what doesn't, beyond the turnover figures. Ultimately, we don't do fashion just for our own satisfaction, we do it to please the customer. Being indifferent to commercial success shows a sort of autism, but at the same time, I don't expect designers to read pages and pages of company reports and annual figures. But, you know, everything in good measure.

When things don't go as planned, do the suits automatically tell the creatives to wise up?
As the manager you have to convey to the creatives how the market is reacting to their ideas. Good or bad. That's not to say bad sales are solely the result of bad creative decisions. Things might fail because the pricing was unrealistic or there was a problem with the product quality, or maybe the quality was perfect, but it was delivered three weeks late. To do this, you need to show great intellectual honesty; I think that even if you're not creatively minded, you need to have a creative sensibility, one that allows you to translate the creative into the business and vice versa. But that shouldn't be confused with actual creative decisions, because if the manager starts thinking of himself as creative, then it's the beginning of the end!

Did you have this kind of conversation with Marc Jacobs?
For me it's more on a macro level. It's the same thing with the architect who is designing your stores: the space could be sublime, but if the chairs aren't comfortable then customers won't sit on them for long enough to buy the shoes.

This isn't simply a question of the manager saying, 'I like it or I don't like it.' When we talk about the management and the capacity for distinction, we're not judging things based on personal taste. We need to have complete confidence in the creative people, whether it's an architect or a designer. If not, you need to replace them.

It's often said that your greatest skill as a manager is human management; the fact that everyone at Vuitton both respected and liked you. Is that an inherent talent or is it something that you recognise as a strategy as being just as important as the product?
I think the principal role of the company CEO – as expected by both staff and shareholder – is to propel the business in the right direction and generate the means in order to do so. This obviously includes human means: selecting the right people and providing them with objectives in the clearest and most efficient way possible. As a CEO, you ultimately get judged on your vision and your effectiveness. How your company can survive, how it can grow. But if on top of that you have genuine empathy for the staff, for culture and for craft, then you add that extra bit of energy to a company's momentum. If you add empathy to a false strategy, it will require a lot more energy, and you'll probably end up taking the company over the edge.

Can you really be a friendly boss?
Let's be straight here: it's better to have a difficult boss with a clear vision than a boss who's pals with everyone but leads the company to ruin. But I think what the people working in the stores and the *ateliers* remember are those little extra gestures, a phone call, or a note.

And as the director did you feel fundamentally responsible for your employees?
Of course. That's 18,000 people. Having always gone to the stores and *ateliers,* I do know a lot of them; out of the 18,000, perhaps 90% of them have seen me in the flesh.

Can we talk a bit more about the mechanics of managing a company with 18,000 employees?
My job has always been fuelled over the long term by two things: a demanding majority shareholder and a long-term vision. We have the parallel situation of having the company on the stock exchange – so you have to deliver results – while at the same time having a majority shareholder. That's a very important point. Plus, we've never had that cult of the quarterly review; we're more concerned with what the group will be in 10 years' time.

What's the biggest fear with becoming such a big operation?
All organisations that expand have a tendency to become more complex. We open in new countries, we enter new territories, employ more people… so there are more layers of management. The real question in management is how to keep things simple while they become more complex.

How do you delegate while maintaining control?
You have to keep an eye on the macro structure… When there was no prêt-à-porter or footwear, it was a totally different organisation. When we didn't have the 22 other countries in which we've opened over the years, it was much easier to manage geographically. You don't have the same security problems with a 200m² shop as you do with one that's 2000m² and stocks fine jewellery. But it's important to resist simplifying elsewhere because things can end up backfiring.

Has there been an era or a year when you clearly remember entering into such a complexity?
In 1998 with the beginning of the prêt-à-porter and the catwalk show. There was certainly a sense of there being a 'before' and 'after' – that the company would never be the same again.

How do you define the difference between fashion and luxury? Are the two things fused at Vuitton?
I think that you can have fashion without luxury. Look at Zara, for example. Fast retailing gives the consumer fashion trends in a setting where luxury doesn't exist. Alternatively, you can have luxury without fashion: Graff diamonds are the height of luxury, but it isn't fashion. If you succeed at fusing the two then you've attained something magical – and very powerful.

What makes the fashion and luxury worlds different to other sectors, such as smartphones, computers and so on, in terms of business and strategy?
Luxury is something that offers extra emotional resonance because it should stir the feeling of being part of something genuinely magic. This magic could mean being part of the history of the brand, or being part of the extraordinary *savoir-faire* which is palpable, or the creative process which is much stronger than in other sectors.

What distinguishes Marc Jacobs' collections for Vuitton from those in what you refer to as the 'fast retailing' sector of the industry?
Well the fashion concepts that Marc uses to create the collections are the same trends used by the fast retailers three months later, but the emotion is the distinction. I think the luxury industry provides the customer with further layers of emotion. One of the successes of a brand like Apple has been to create objects that correspond to the consumer's desire to listen to music, to communicate while travelling and so on… They've created objects that bring this extra emotion through their very function. So in some ways that's a luxury value. But the ephemeral nature of technology brings a negative side too, where in six months' time it's worthless. A true luxury object is something you want to use two years later, 10 years later, a generation later. Then there are the brands where you find an extraordinary aptitude for creation, yet they aren't creating luxury items. Apple, with Steve Jobs, was a good example of that…

Did you know him personally?
Yes.

What was it like meeting someone equally successful but in a totally different sector?
It was fascinating talking management with him. I think he had great respect for what we did here, and we certainly had a great deal of respect for what he did too. We also collaborated together: Steve would send us their product shapes and forms before they were launched so we could make things like iPad cases before anyone else.

In the specific fashion and luxury sector which other companies do you recognise as having been as successful as Louis Vuitton?
[pauses] It's difficult to say. Someone who really impressed me was Jean-Louis Dumas. But Hermès is not exactly the same without him.

Does managing a company like Louis Vuitton become an obsession? Do you find yourself checking emails in the evenings, during the weekend?

'It's 24/7, almost like a religion. It can be midnight and I'm thinking, 'Where in the world is there a store open right now? I'll give them a ring.''

I think it *has* to be an obsession. You think about it 24/7, almost like a religion. But that doesn't mean I'm checking my emails every 10 minutes. And in 42 years of professional life, I've never worked in planes either. The best ideas come in these in-between moments, like when you're driving.

Do you experience that same thing as creative people when you wake up at four in the morning with an idea?
Constantly. At midnight, at two in the morning, all the time! There are always ideas running around. It can be midnight, and I'm thinking, 'Okay, so where in the world is there a store open right now? I'll give them a ring.' You can't avoid the overlapping of your private life and your professional life with a job like this. You meet so many people around the world, and when they come to Paris, you inevitably have to socialise with them. It's an amazing opening onto the world, but it does take a toll on your private life.

Are you one of these CEOs or politicians you hear about that only needs four hours sleep a night?
Well, I sleep for four or five hours a night, on average.

Having travelled so much, what's your secret for dealing with jet lag?
No secrets, but when you're someone who doesn't need that much sleep you can grab your four hours here or there and it doesn't matter.

Have there been times when you've experienced great pressure and stress?
It's inevitable. But there are different types of stress. There are those times during fashion week when you've got all the department stores, the editors, the commercial teams in town and everyone wants to see you. And there are other times, like when the Gulf War began in 1991, and we had to make decisions about the coming days. Or when the tsunami hit Japan, we were all hanging on the telephone to find out if our teams were ok; we had to work out what decisions needed to be made and whether or not we should evacuate Tokyo.

Beyond the satisfaction of generating annual growth, did you feel that you had to make Bernard Arnault happy or prove yourself to him? Was that an important motivation for you?
Well, it was the condition for staying! [Laughs]… I think there's a pride in bringing about results, not just personal pride. Every time we've presented a budget and have made more than we thought, it's a great feeling. It's very satisfying to beat your own forecast.

As the CEO of Vuitton within the LVMH group, was there a rivalry – healthy or otherwise – between you and, say, Sidney Toledano at Dior or Michael Burke when he was at Fendi?
In all groups with multiple brands working within the same market, there is a degree of emulation. With a group like this, over the past 20 years there have been a few people that have come and gone, but generally speaking, most people consider any so-called rivalry to be a healthy thing. You're happy if your brand has performed better than others, but you always try to prioritise working together.

What was your greatest moment of pride during your tenure as President at Vuitton?
I think it has to be my vision for China and having opened there in 1992.

Was it instinct or was it based on research and fact?
It was the result of a very long discussion with a French politician called Jean-Francois Deniau, who was an excellent connoisseur of China. He convinced me from 1991 onwards that the modernisation and movement of Asia was under way.

And yet there was risk involved.
It was obvious that the once most powerful nation several centuries ago, would once again wake up. Jean-Francois Deniau convinced me of when to go in. When we were in China in 1990, 1991, 1992, you could only sense the transformation on the surface, but every six months we returned we saw things change. The economy was booming.

As someone who has been travelling to China for 30 years, what do you know now that you didn't know when you first started going there?
The historical vision that China has of itself as a superpower. It was once the centre of the world, and today it wants to re-establish its place. Put like that it sounds very simplistic, but it explains a lot about their behaviour and attitudes, in both business and social contexts. What I'm trying to say is that China was humiliated by the West. Faced with these historical humiliations there are two attitudes a nation can adopt: I'm going to hide, or I'm going to overcome this. There have been moments in the past which were extremely difficult for the Chinese, but I think their mix of desire and political pragmatism is helping them re-establish their place in the world.

Do you think that the good relationship France currently has with China can be maintained?
Yes, for two reasons. China and France are both countries with a very old culture. That creates a mutual respect. And because de Gaulle was the first to recognise the People's Republic of China, 50 years on there is still this goodwill. Ultimately, the Chinese are a very pragmatic nation, and that's why they won't necessarily buy a more expensive TGV train, or they won't change human rights overnight, as long as it suits them. But emotionally, the Chinese have an affinity with people who like eating. They have a taste for refined cooking.

Do you think that with China you've created a monster? Could China one day establish a company like Louis Vuitton but on a far greater scale?
I think we will witness attempts to create luxury brands that belong to other cultures. How many will emerge is difficult to say.

Turnover has been increasing year on year, but you must have thought that it will level off at some point, that the luxury business will reach its summit?
To be honest, no. There can be moments when it slows down, but these are more linked to currency and the state of the euro than economic conditions. But in the long term, I remain convinced that the thirst for luxury goods will continue to increase. The challenge is how to manage this growth; that's the great paradox of luxury. How do you grow and at the same time maintain this sense of soul and exclusivity, with high quality products and a service that is increasingly sophisticated? It cannot happen if you expand too quickly.

As someone who's created incredible global success with huge turnovers, you must be contacted 15 times a week by head-hunters looking to recruit you.
[Laughs] Well, when you manage the most beautiful company in the world…

Having been CEO, of 'the most beautiful company in the world', is it something that you deeply miss today?
Yes, of course I miss it; I'd be lying if I said I didn't. But life goes on. I had time to get used to it, I had a year to train my successor. It wasn't like I just upped and left. I was mentally ready for it to end one day. I guess I'd liken it to when my children left home: you know, one day it's going to happen, but when it does it still affects you. Similarly, when you run a business you always know that one day you will have to leave.

Let's talk a bit about your new role as Vice-President of the Fondation d'Entreprise Louis Vuitton pour la Création…
The Foundation is a project that Bernard Arnault has carried within him for a long time. We've been talking about it for more than 10 years. He met Frank Gehry and was deeply impressed.

Is there an official date for the inauguration?
We don't have a fixed date, but it should be around spring/summer 2014.

And what do think the future holds for Louis Vuitton?
It all depends on the people who are working here.

What's your advice for current CEO Michael Burke?
[Laughs] Hold on for 23 years!

'I'd liken having to leave my post as CEO to when my children left home. You know one day it's going to happen, but when it does it still affects you.'

1. *A nous les petites Anglaises!* [*Let's Get Those English Girls*] is a cult French film directed by Michel Lang, released in 1976. It follows the adventures of two French bourgeois schoolboys forced on an exchange trip to the South Coast of England and their attempts to conquer the local girls.

2. 'X' is the common name for the École polytechnique, France's elite college for engineering and mathematics. Graduates have typically gone on to manage top level state corporations such as France Télécom and SNCF. Notable alumni include André Citroën, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Bernard Arnault.

3. *Les trentes glorieuses* is France's self-proclaimed 30 glorious years between 1945 and 1975, or more accurately, from the liberation of France in 1944, to the economic downturn triggered by the oil crisis of 1973.

4. The Louis Vuitton *ateliers* at Asnières, to the North West of Paris, are where the company's leather goods are produced, thus earning their 'Made in France' stamp. From 1859 until 1977, this was the company's sole production facility, before increasing demand from new markets and for new products meant that additional workshops were opened. The craftsmen and women at Asnières saw their skills reassigned to only Louis Vuitton's highest end goods: the legendary hard-frame trunks, exotic leather bags, limited-edition bags for runway shows and the ultra-luxurious special orders.

‘You are the artist, I am the restorer.’

Make-up maestro Pat McGrath meets the Botox King.

By Pat McGrath
Photographs by Mathieu Perroud

For those seeking the light of youth, there is one man, a pioneer in non-surgical cosmetic treatments and injectables whose undetectable enhancements have established him as the Botox King. But prior to earning his reputation as one of the most sought-after cosmetic doctors in the world, Dr Jean-Louis Sebagh spent years rebuilding the faces of cancer and burn victims at the Hôpital Foch in Paris. Today with close to 5,000 patients and having a super-luxury cosmetic line of creams and serums worth millions, he is a staple in the beauty regimen of many of the world's most famous faces. With offices in London and Paris, and the occasional pop-up clinic – a fixture in LA during the lead-up to the Oscars each year – Dr Sebagh is always on the go. After turning her away at her first consultation, fashion's go-to make-up artist Pat McGrath finally has a chance to sit down with Dr Sebagh to discuss fish lips, vampire lifts, and what it means to be 'in frame'.

It's been so long! You look so young, Dr Sebagh!
I take care of myself, darling. I've got new products; I've just finished a new prototype. Oh my God, it's a facelift in a bottle! I'll send you some samples as soon as I can. Anyway, you look great, have you lost weight since I last saw you?

Yes, I've been going to the gym.
I can tell, it shows.

I always wanted to know, when you see a woman walking down the street, can you see the exact work she's had done? Like just now with me, you could immediately tell I'd lost weight.
Yes, more or less. If I know someone, I can tell immediately. I have terrible memory for names, but faces are imprinted on my mind. You know, if we use the analogy of painting, the contrast between the two of us is that I deliver the white canvas and you apply the paint. You are the artist. I am the restorer. My life is in black and white; I just see lights and shadows. Your life is in colour. My job is to deliver to you, the make-up artist, a clean slate onto which you can create your fantasy, from nude to cinematic, changing characters.

Exactly.
I only see women in the nude without their make-up. I have to make them feel comfortable and attractive as they are. For you, it's different. They ask you to create something. My job is not to create. That is the worst thing a plastic surgeon can do. If a plastic surgeon believes he is going to create something, it's a disaster! That's when it all goes wrong. My job is to restore. To give a woman the youth she had five or 10 years ago. I give a woman little tweaks, but when she has to go to the Oscars and wants to look completely glamorous, she has to come and see you, and you will create something amazing.

That's true. Sometimes women or men want to have something ultra-creative, but other times they just want their skin to look like it belongs to a baby, and then we have to create something completely natural and undetectable. Of course, if someone needs a little work done, they have a little work done. The thing I love most about Botox and fillers is that when it's done well, it's pretty much undetectable.
Yes. It just gives more highlights and shadows, that's it.

Exactly. I think plastic surgery gets a bad name for itself because what we see mostly are the mistakes. The work of a good plastic surgeon is when someone says, 'Oh, you look really well and rested. Have you been on holiday?' When in actual fact you've just had fillers.
That's exactly what I said 30 years ago. If you can point something out, it's wrong. Everything has to be undetectable.

Do you have patients who become addicted to your treatments? Do you notice and tell them when to stop?
It's very complicated. With the people who are addicted, I have two options: either I tell them I will not go further because it's too much, or sometimes I keep them on but try to limit the disaster by giving them touch ups to calm them down. I don't like doing that, but sometimes you can't fight the addiction because you know they will just find someone else who will do it, and it'll be much worse. So it's a tricky game that you have to play – although you don't enjoy playing it. Thankfully we don't have too many patients like that.

What sort of a rapport do you have with those kinds of patients?
I try to tame them and educate them, so they feel more confident to avoid this urge to do more. I tell them how often I need to see them and let them know they can rely on my judgement. Most of the time, they come back and ask for more, but I tell them it's not necessary. And if I see that they don't need more at their next appointment, I will postpone it. Sometimes I can be pushy and tell them, 'You can't carry on like this, it's too far!' I am extremely conservative, but in order to honour the confidence that my patients put in me, it's also my business to be honest. If my patients don't trust me, then they'll leave and find another doctor to do the job. If a patient wants to leave me and see someone else then that's fine – it's a free world – but I don't push them to do injections all the time. I'm lucky I don't need to be like that; I develop long, serious partnerships with my patients – I've had some of them for 30 years now – but unfortunately many doctors are only in this for the business.

'My job is not creative. If a plastic surgeon believes he is going to create something, it's a disaster. That's when it all goes wrong.'

'People laugh about cougars, but they're only 45 to 55. Who's talking about very attractive 55 or 65-year-olds? That's a whole new world developing.'

Do you do many corrections on people who have gone to bad doctors?
Yes and no. I'm fully booked with my existing patients, but some do stupid things, and then they come back with fish lips or something dodgy like that, and I have to repair it. They say, 'Oh, I am so sorry, I made a mistake! I promise, I'll never go see anyone else!' Unfortunately, 10 or 20 years ago when they used silicone, that would not have been the case – you were doomed for life. Now it's mainly hyaluronic acid which is easily dissolvable, so thankfully you can repair the mistakes. I don't like anything too permanent – that's why I only use dissolvable products. It's not good to do something long-term because ageing is a continual process, which you need to adjust around. Everyone is slightly different. What I do is permanent adjustment. It's like a moving puzzle, and it's about maintaining the balance.

So you can't do anything with silicone.
No, it's a nightmare. All these poor women who were injected with silicone 20 years ago are all disfigured for life. Although the big silicone lips can now be cut out; that's common practice.

Does it look ok?
Yes, but when they've been injected in their face, they end up with lumps and bumps everywhere, and unfortunately there's nothing you can do. Thankfully though, that's a thing of the past. The new generation won't have to experience those problems.

When someone does Botox, do their muscles become lazy or atrophy?
I honestly haven't seen many cases of that in my life. I have been doing Botox on my own forehead now for nearly 20 years. I was 39 when Botox came out in the early 1990s, and personally speaking I have perfect movement, no atrophy. Most patients keep it for five or six months, but some can keep it for eight to nine months. It depends, some are more resistant than others.

That's amazing. You only have to go twice a year. In which part of the body do people mostly have it done?
Most people think it's all about the forehead, but for me the most important area is the lower part of the face. This is the area I believe is really essential because you can prevent a saggy jawline and neck and therefore avoid the need for a face lift.

When should you start?
It's good to start on that area around 35 to 40; then you'll never need a neck lift which is the main issue at 50. I do more Botox on the lower face than on the forehead now.

You don't want that surprised look, right? You don't want to do it too much.
I've always had a soft vision on Botox. I dilute it more than is recommended, to make it softer. Twenty years ago when Botox came out, I came up with the term 'emotional Botox', because you have to maintain expression. I visit Taiwan twice a year, and I find that local people there don't age the same way Westerners do. In fact, throughout much of Asia, you notice that although people have the same anatomy as Westerners, they don't move their face muscles in the same way. I have always been amazed by this: they don't frown or squint as much, and subsequently Asian people don't really need Botox.

But an Asian person must age at some point and need Botox, no?
No, not much. Botox is for muscles: some people are very Zen and age classically, whilst others aren't or have strong expressions – this is called mechanical ageing. It's an unfair ageing process which essentially means the more expression you have, the more lines you are going to create.

So there are different types of ageing?
You have three types: genetic ageing, which very much depends on your genes, lifestyle ageing which is based on how you live your life, and mechanical

ageing – which has nothing to do with your lifestyle. Usually the problems begin when you go from hyper-expression to no expression at all. In a way, you have to be a good puppeteer and carefully pull the right strings in order to maintain natural expression and not kill it completely. It's very tricky though, you have to analyse the face, see all the different expressions and the way it moves before you can tweak anything or control the movements. In a way, it's an artistic exercise. It's not simple black and white, it's far more sophisticated than it seems.

Amazing, it's like painting under the skin with the muscles.
Yes, but it's also animated, so it's complicated. Also, we have to find the softness in the expression.

You have to make sure that the face moves correctly after it's applied. Sometimes when women get Botox and fillers, when they talk and smile, everything looks strange.
There's a sociological issue behind this. There's quite a difference between women in Europe and those in America. In America women want to be in control, they actually like the mask. When Botox came out, it was amazing for them because they could freeze the face into a proper mask where nothing was moving, and everything was pulled and tight. I am not saying that it's very attractive, but they felt more comfortable and in control. In Europe, we are a little more relaxed. I think this is why Botox tended to be so frozen in America for so long. Generally speaking though, American women have always been a little more concerned with their looks, and this corresponds to how they interact with make-up too; they want to wear more make-up than Europeans.

In the US, they go crazy over make-up. I love that.
Yes, of course you love that!

I do think that in the States there is a real obsession with beauty, thank God!
Yes, thank God! But it's driven by insecurity.

I think England is becoming much more like the States. People are increasingly obsessed with preserving their youth here, so I think eventually it is going to become a worldwide phenomenon. From my own experience, I can tell you that with my friends in England, we spend our entire lunch hour discussing this stuff – it's what we're all obsessed with right now.
Maintenance is the keyword.

So, it's definitely better to start early? How young would you say?
I would say 25 or 30. Taking care of your skin is essential from a very early age – I would say 15 or 16. Being careful with the sun, using the right moisturiser, exfoliating – all those sorts of things. It's important to have a very good skincare regime, applying the right products depending on what suits your skin type, understanding the concept of cleansing and exfoliation. The borders between skin care and make-up are diminishing now too, and there's a fusion between both worlds. It's important people educate themselves on how to look after their skin properly.

I agree. One thing I've got to ask you, what's the strangest request you've ever had from a patient?
I have a lot of funny stories! One time a man came to see me, and he said, 'I'm an emerald digger in South America. In the mines, they are tough guys. I want you to make a big, nasty scar for me on my face because I want to look like them.'

Are you kidding?
No! He said, 'I want a big, nasty, nasty scar on my face because I want to look like one of the nasty guys.' I said, 'Sorry, I can't do that to you.'

He really wanted that?
Yeah, it's crazy! Then he said, 'Ok, I'll have to get into a bar fight with a bottle!' 'If you want', I said, 'but I can't do anything for you.'

Oh my goodness, that's amazing, the best story ever. Who do you consider to have the most perfect face? Is it someone we know?
I was in LA three weeks ago for Cindy's 47th birthday, and she's amazing. She hasn't changed at all.

Wow.
I recently met someone else you must know very well – Tyra Banks. I found her so beautiful. She's soon going to be 40. Amazing body. Amazing face. I have a big crush on her. *Elle est belle*!

Very, very beautiful. I love her.
And you, who's your ideal beauty?

Oh, I can't think.
It's difficult. I mean, I'm only thinking about the people I've seen recently.

'A client said, 'I'm an emerald digger in South America. The guys in the mines are nasty. I want you to scar my face so I look like them.''

There are so many. Some of the models and celebrities I work with may hate a certain feature on their face, but I might find it very beautiful. The nose might be a little too big, but you're like, 'Without that nose, you wouldn't be you; you look exquisite like that.'
Absolutely. I was so impressed by Mrs Graff, the diamond dealer. She's 75 and absolutely amazing. She's not an actress or anything, but she looks so good. It's normal if you're a top model, and you've always been beautiful – it's God's gift, and you just have to preserve it – but to look amazing, attractive, and beautiful at 75, *this* is a challenge. This is the real meaning of maintenance for me.

I think we're going to have more beautiful 75-year-olds now.
Yes, more and more. It's going to be a disaster because there are no men to match these women. They are all definitely going to have young boyfriends! Attractive women between 55 and 75, and I mean attractive, *attractive* – never really existed before as a category. People laugh about cougars, but they're only like 45 to 55. Who's talking about 55 or 65-year-olds? That's a whole new world developing.

That's so true. And are you finding that more men are coming to see you because they're trying to keep up with the women?
Yes and no. I think men want to, but with them it seems to depend on the economy. Before the recession, I used to have so many men coming, 20 percent or more. Since the recession, this has decreased. So, when the economy is good, then yes.

They have other things to worry about.
At one time, I was so surprised by how many male clients we had. It was like a surge of men. And then suddenly, we went back to less than 10 per cent. But we will definitely have more and more. It's a future market for sure.

If they're going to keep up with the women, they're going to have to. Do you ever tell patients that they need to gain weight?
Yes. Put on weight, lose weight. Very often, I tell them to lose weight.

What about asking them to gain weight so as to make the face look a little bit more… plump?
For me, it's mostly losing weight for definition between the jawline and the neck. I have this lovely expression they sometimes don't understand: 'You're out of frame.' And they say, 'What do you mean, I'm out of frame?' 'You see the frame? You're out of it. So I cannot work. Get yourself back into the frame!'

When you tell someone they're 'out of frame', do they ever get mad with you?
Yeah, sometimes. I remember this famous songwriter in America. She was petite, but I told her, 'You're really too fat at the moment, you're out of frame.' She almost choked. Every time she sees me now, she remembers that. But you know what, she lost the weight – two or three kilos – and she came back in the frame.

So, when you sent me out of your office… [Laughs] Oh my God! I came to see you 100 years ago… Do you remember that?
Of course I remember, but I didn't…

…because I was out of frame!
But you know, the issue is that most of the rejuvenation we do without surgery restories volume. All of these non-surgical techniques are mainly done by volumising and not pulling. When there is too much volume in the lower face, we're in trouble – then we make the face huge. So it's really important that there is volume in the right places. We have a new concept now which is very interesting, and I love it. We do threading.

By threading, you mean, threads that go under the skin?
Yes, you can't just add volume, sometimes you need to pull you need tension if you don't want to have surgery because it's too early, we can use these dissolvable threads called Silhouette Soft from America. Ten years ago, the Russians launched the first threads, but I never liked them because they were nylon barbed wire and permanent. I hate anything permanent; I want people to be able to change their minds.

They would start to disfigure the face, I remember.
Yeah, but now we have very gentle soluble threads, and we can create amazing tension in the cheek, in the temple, in the jawline, in the neck… It's my new toy.

And how do they go in?

'Botox was amazing for American women because they could freeze the face into a proper mask where everything was pulled tight.'

They go in with a needle. They last 12 to 18 months, and you create the tension wherever. You can lift the eyebrow, you can lift the cheek, you can pull the jawline and the neck.

How long is the procedure?
Twenty minutes.
Do you have to go under completely?
Absolutely not! You take a little local anaesthetic, and it's in and out. It just takes 20 minutes to half an hour.

Are you kidding?
I'm not kidding. In half an hour, you can have your facelift done. Absolutely spectacular.

That is amazing! I love that. That is genius.
And it's FDA approved. The downside is that you create some skin gathering because you pinch, so you will have an excess of skin to hide which will even out and disappear within a week or 10 days.

And you've never had any adverse effects with anyone doing it?
No.

Wow.
If the thread breaks, you can pull it out from where you put it, or you can even leave it inside.

And it dissolves?
100 per cent, it completely dissolves. That's why I'm doing it.

And then you have to do it again?
Yes, they last about 12 to 18 months, and then if it's the right moment, you can adjust them. For those women who are around 45 to 50 years old, and who are in long-term maintenance – I'm not talking about the woman who woke up at the last minute at 50 but the women who have had Botox and fillers to prevent the sagging when they needed them – this still works perfectly for them and prevents or postpones the need for surgery. You always have to respond to what you see. The more tools you have, the better you are able to do your job. You have lots of tools at your disposal, not one tool for everything and you need to know how to combine them – a little Botox, a little filler, a little thread in order to do the job and deliver something nice.

That sounds like a real sculpture!
There's also a new technique with blood – the plasma lift – to re-firm the skin. It's a new technique we call the vampire lift. That's the best.

Oh my gosh, the vampire *lift*? I have never heard of this.
Really?

I've heard of the vampire facial from Kim Kardashian...
That's it, that's it! But the way Kim did it was the ugly way, very gory, but you can make it clean. That woman is obsessed. It's funny, she emailed me months ago and wanted to come into my office – I don't know why, maybe to do that. I said, 'I think I read that you're pregnant.' She said, 'Yes,' and I said, 'Stay away from me.'

Let me ask you more about the vampire in more detail. What is it? You take your own blood?
It's a very bad name… It's actually called the plasma lift or the PRP [Platelet-Rich Plasma]. To understand how it works: if you burn or cut yourself, your skin will repair naturally, right? Why is that? Because your blood contains something which we call growth factors. It's these growth factors that rebuild tissue to help you heal. So, you have this natural repair system in your blood. We draw the blood, just four tubes – 30ml – and then we centrifuge it with a special gel to separate the yellow and red parts which form our blood. The yellow is the plasma, and it is made up of two parts – the upper part, PPP [Platelet-Poor Plasma] and the lower part PRP [Platelet-Rich Plasma]. It's the platelets that are in fact very rich in growth factors. By selecting the parts of the blood naturally rich in platelets, we can create a concentrate containing 600 times the normal amount of growth factors. Then, we simply re-inject this concentrate back into your skin.

Amazing. So it's injected like Botox?
We have a very clean way of doing this with a mesotherapy gun – it's not that rough gore technique – we just place the syringe into it, and then tack, tack, tack, thousands of mini-injections – painless, bloodless, and no downtime. We can do it on your face, your neck, your chest, your hands – it's amazing. As humans we have stem cells in our body: not in our organs but in our bone marrow and in our skin. After a certain age, they fall asleep and don't manufacture new cells which means our skin starts ageing; but by using this procedure, if you're lucky, you not only repair and stimulate the skin, but in 75 per cent of cases, you wake up your own stem cells. When that happens, it's like a miracle of the skin. You see youth and new skin emerging. The luminosity and radiance is something unseen. Even with make-up, you can't create that. It's the light of youth. It's unbelievable.

Does it work well with dark or black skin? Sometimes I see scarring from the needles on the skin of friends.
I don't see why not. We have a lot of black patients. What you get – regardless of skin colour – is that occasionally the needle can make a lot of scratches. If you're not careful, you can make hundreds of little scratches on the face which take four or five days to disappear. You have to be really careful during the procedure to not be too heavy-handed, and to change the needle quickly if you feel it's a bit crunchy. Sometimes you only realise this at the end, and it's like you've been attacked by a dozen cats. It's more about the operator than the colour of your skin.

So there's no damage to darker skin. What about the effects of lasers on dark skin?
With laser and dark skin you have to be really careful. Fraxel is dangerous because it makes you photosensitive. The best and safest technology we use for black skin is radio frequency. We have many machines from Thermage to E Two that are based on radio frequency and are more concentrated on firming. That's what I have done on my own skin for years.

I've got so much work to do! [Laughs] I'll be booking appointments.
You have to maintain the firmness of your skin, you have to keep the layer and also maintain your muscles. It's a three or four layer problem. You have skin, fat, muscle, and bone, and everything is ageing. When you're young, everything is intertwined together – skin, fat, muscle, bone, it all sticks together. The problem with the ageing process is that all these different layers age at different speeds for different reasons, and things become destabilised. That's why I refer to it as a puzzle. It's your job to maintain the firmness and elasticity of the skin as much as you can.

So brilliant. I love it. When I told my friends I was going to be talking with you, everybody had so many questions to ask you! There was something about men… Do you have to use different tools or techniques on them?
Yes and no. The anatomical problem is the same – it's about skin, fat, muscle, and bone. All the techniques with Botox or fillers work amazingly on men, especially when they're 60 or 60-plus. Lots of young men are doing it, but unfortunately old men don't know about it or don't dare think about it. But honestly when a 65-year-old man redoes his lips to restore some volume, it's so nice, it's much better than any surgery! Women want to be flawless, but this is not the case for men – you play around with crow's feet or smile lines. Mainly, it's about volume because young men have a tendency to do too much sport – they're obsessed with the gym – so their faces become gaunt because they lose too much fat. Sometimes their faces look 15 years older than their bodies.

This is what you say with women: if they're too skinny, it ages them more.
The worst thing for a woman is to run.

Do you ever say to them, you need to eat? Just fill it up?
You know what the mistake is? Skinny women, the ones who don't eat, they keep their face most of the time. The ones who really destroy their faces are joggers, the ones who run too much; they really damage their skin because there is no fat padding anymore, and they become gaunt. It's really traumatic. Some skinny girls manage if they're young enough to keep a balance within the whole body.

Do you think that exercising can be ageing?
Yes. Too much can be damaging. It depends what exercise – running is the worst, but if you do yoga, Pilates, cardio training, it's fine. Intense sports and running are really bad for the face and for the breasts – saggy boobs. You can see that all of these running girls, they really have the gaunt face.

That's amazing to know.
They run too much because they want the endorphins, but it's not good. You can walk as much and as quickly as you want, do Pilates, yoga, whatever, lift weights if you want, but you shouldn't run more than four miles twice a week.

Do you recommend facial exercises? Do you think they work?

'Ten years ago, the Russians launched the first threads, but I never really liked them because they were like permanent barbed wire.'

'You have to be really careful during the procedure not be too heavy-handed, otherwise it's like you've been attacked by a dozen cats.'

Not really. The only exercise you should be doing is smiling all the time, if you can. And chewing.

I love that.
All of the other muscles are depressor muscles. There is also one good yoga exercise – when you stick your tongue out 10 times, and you put your finger in and pull the tongue. Every woman complains about not having any muscle in the floor of her mouth – there are muscles either side, but in-between there is nothing. You can make it firmer by pulling out the tongue and keeping the neck high. It's good for double chins.

I'm going to be doing that all day. I'm so happy we're doing this. Have you heard of anyone being allergic to Botox?
Resistant but not allergic. Strangely, the only resistance I've seen has been from Russians, and I have a very international clientele. I think I have an explanation for it. Botox is derived from the botulinum toxin which is food poisoning. During the Cold War, the Russians had very few food supplies, so they used to receive expired cans of food from Europe. They used to eat out-of-date food, so they must have had a lot of food poisoning and became immune to the botulinum toxin! Weird, no? You can inject 10 bottles, and they won't react. Nothing! They really have antibodies.

My friend asked a question: if a woman is getting her lips done every six months, would you suggest that she just opted for something more permanent?
Never do anything permanent. Normally a good lip filler should easily last one year anyway. And when you build up, it should last longer up to three years. But sometimes you please some women and put a little drop in the lower lip – I call it 'the sexy drop'. The pout. Going back to your earlier question about the people who become addicted, someties you find these little tricks to please them. I say, 'I'll give you the sexy pout,' or they come and say, 'Oh, will you give me the sexy drop?' and I say, 'Sure' and it's just enough to make them happy.

That's a clever bit of psychology.
Why do they want such big lips? I can give them a nice shape to start with… but then you have the gloss and so much make-up to style the lips to make them anyway you want. I just provide a good base.

A lot of people have body dysmorphia. They think they haven't got anything, and they say to me, 'I've got nothing in, my lips are too small.' But they're huge!
You're right. Does that cause you problems with your work?

No, not really because I work with a lot of celebrities and models, and they know that they have to be very careful. The actual models are so young that most of them aren't doing anything. The ones who are slightly older are very careful, they take it to almost an art form. With the people who don't seem to realise how much they're doing, how do you cope with them and talk them down? It's like psychology because you really need to get into someone's mind.
I say, 'I want you to be the most beautiful woman on a Sunday morning.' You know when you wake up on a Sunday morning, and it's a day off, you don't put on make-up, you don't put on anything, and you look gorgeous.

Wow, I love that – a Sunday morning beauty.
Easy, fresh, natural. You have to be comfortable. I fully understand the woman wants fantasy. She wants to be extremely glamorous, to be noticed. At night, she puts on her dress and high heels and everything else, but I'm not part of that world; I'm part of the Sunday morning. The rest is fashion designers, hairdressers, make-up artists – it's a wonderful fantasy world where you can please yourself and have whatever kind of look you want. One day you can be punk rock or gothic and another you can be sexy and glamorous. That's the pleasure of being a woman, you can dress yourself in so many different ways.

Sometimes women are so afraid of make-up; I say to them, 'Don't be afraid, experiment! It comes off. It's not permanent.' You should have fun with make-up and be free.
It's an absolute fantasy, it's beautiful.

Fantastic. I love it. Oh well, this has been so much fun.
We should see each other more often.

Well, now, am I in frame?
No. [Laughs]

[Laughs] I thought you rejected me because I was too young.
I'm teasing you! You *were* too young. You didn't need anything.

'The worst thing a woman can do is run. Women who don't eat keep their face most of the time. The ones who really destroy their faces are joggers.'

Set design: Sophear Froment @ Total Management. Retouching: The Adrien Blanchat Company.

‘Art direction is more than just j’adore cette image.’

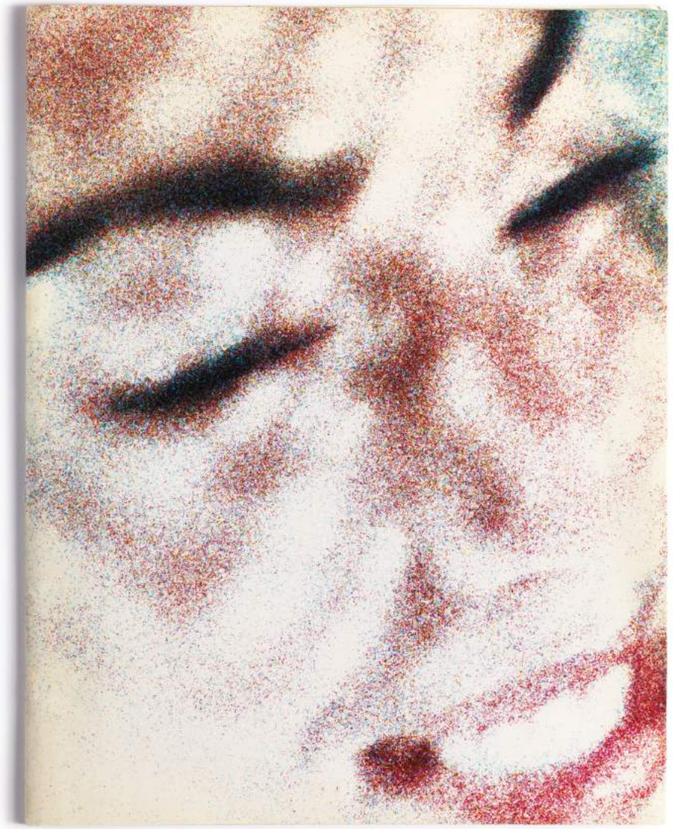
Why Marc Ascoli’s body of work is more relevant than ever before.

One of my first ever memories involved the sensuality associated with fashion. As a four-year-old boy growing up in Tunisia, my mum would often drop me off at my grandmother’s apartment while she went out shopping. My grandmother was a demon card player, and each week she’d organise bridge evenings for her friends. All these amazing-looking, blonde women would arrive and throw their fur coats onto my grandmother’s bed. One evening, when no one was looking, I dived onto the bed and started rolling around in the mass of fur. I can still remember the thrill it gave me, feeling it against my face and inhaling the fragrance of these women.

Fast forward to Paris in the late-1970s: I had a degree in law but was hanging out with people who worked in fashion, and this led me to Martine Sitbon. We met, started working together and moved in together within a very short space of time, and we’ve shared our lives ever since. Martine introduced me to a world of imagery: photography, film noir, *la nouvelle vague*, art exhibitions, contemporary dance… One day she bought me a book of Avedon photos, and that was it. Eureka. I suddenly realised that the energy and sensuality of women and clothes that I’d always been drawn to could be expressed through fashion photography.

Becoming an art director wasn’t a conscious career choice. It just presented itself to me, even though the role of the Fashion Art Director (yes, they are very much capital letters) hadn’t yet been defined. I probably could have ended up designing clothes or becoming a stylist, but as I’m very chatty I found I had an inherent skill in articulating my ideas to others. I also found that I had a good radar for discovering people who had something new and unique to offer: stylists, photographers, models, graphic designers, assistants. Although I’m quite a fragile person, I have the balls to know if I’ve got someone special in front of me. And when I do, I don’t let go.

For much of the 1980s and 1990s, I was particularly drawn to English photographers: initially Nick Knight, then later David Sims and Craig McDean. I liked their taste and their attitude: that mix of chic and rebellion. They were quite aggressive and provocative, in the way the English often are,



Jil Sander catalogue cover, Spring/Summer 1992. Photographer: Nick Knight.

and they wouldn’t bow down to anyone. People often talk about English street style, implying that it is something rough or ‘edgy’, but I always found the way Nick, David and Craig portrayed their culture was extremely sophisticated. That’s why I turned to them when I started working with clients like Yohji Yamamoto and Jil Sander, as well as Martine. It’s in my nature to take care of people, and I really cared about these photographers; I tried to provide them with the best conditions in which to create work that meant something.

Working with Yohji, Jil, and Martine brought out an experimental nature in me, and that in turn influenced the people I’d discovered: not just the photographers, but models like Stella Tennant, Kirsten Owen and Guinevere, make-up artists like Pat McGrath and graphic designers like M/M (Paris). We were extremely persistent in the search for creating new forms of beauty and imagery. When I use the word experimental, I don’t mean ‘experimental’ in a groovy-Andy-Warhol-Factory kind of way. It’s more a case of – I’ve got to deliver a catalogue or a campaign to my client, so let’s use this as a pretext to create something new. Something that’s never existed before and perhaps won’t work in the future but right now it’s the essence of the moment. Sometimes it didn’t work; sometimes it created images I’m really proud of. Sometimes, the attitude alone expressed how the client saw the world. We weren’t even showing the clothes.

I’ve always thought that if you don’t experiment, the work won’t be relevant or memorable. When I look at contemporary fashion imagery, I get the feeling quite a lot of it is constructed by fusing a bunch of references together. I believe a successful catalogue or campaign provides the future for the designer: it opens up their *esprit*, offers inspiration for the next collection and acts as a guide. Over the years, a lot of people have told me that my images triggered their love of fashion, or helped them understand Yohji’s revolutionary vision or Jil’s extreme rigour and sophistication or whatever. It’s not false modesty when I say my principal motor has simply been to create something authentic, something beyond just selling stuff for a client.

Martine Sitbon catalogue, Autumn/Winter 1991-1992
Photographer: Nick Knight. Model: Kirsten Owen

I first became aware of Nick Knight through a series of portraits he'd done for *i-D*: Stephen Jones, Daniel Day-Lewis, Morrissey, Paul Weller, Michael Clark, Katharine Hamnett… He was clearly influenced by David Bailey, but he'd updated that to create something fresh and modern. He'd got his portrait subjects to use their arms and hands to adopt poses; it could so easily have been horribly clichéd or naff but there was an elegance and simplicity that I was drawn to. It's also what makes this image of Kirsten so arresting. Nick and I first met in London, and when he started talking I sensed he had extraordinary talent. He spoke French, but with a slight Belgian accent because his father had been a diplomat, and he'd grown up in Belgium. Nonetheless, he remains the quintessential English photographer: reserved, delicate, attentive, intense, rigorous, refined, calm and persistent. A dandy in a white Oxford shirt and flannels, drinking tea. His photography is an authentic reflection of who and what he is, and that still comes across today on SHOWstudio.

Yohji Yamamoto catalogue, Autumn/Winter 1995-1996
Photographer: David Sims. Model: Stella Tennant

Yohji Yamamoto's brief was: there is no brief. I worked for Yohji for 12 years – on and off – and each season I just flew out to Tokyo and presented him with the final maquette. I never had to 'sell' a photographer or model to him. This might sound like the perfect scenario but it was extremely demanding: you have to have big balls and strong convictions to pluck something out of nowhere. I'd stopped for a few seasons and then Yohji asked me to come back for this catalogue. I was looking for something fresh and provocative and I sensed David Sims had something to say and wanted to shake things up. When I met him he'd just had his confidence knocked doing a big Calvin Klein campaign that didn't work out. He was disillusioned and a bit angry, which was perfect for what I was hoping to achieve for my Yohji 'comeback'. I didn't need to show David any references; Yohji was the reference. This was fashion charged with meaning, it represented the death of the logo. You didn't buy Yohji or Comme, you *collected* them.

Martine Sitbon catalogue, 1990
Photographer: Nick Knight. Model: Amanda Cazalet

When we started out, Nick didn't know that much about fashion photography, but he totally trusted me and absorbed what I showed him. As well as the obvious starting points – Avedon, Penn, Bailey – we discussed the work of Blumenfeld and Outerbridge and particularly Man Ray, which you can definitely sense in this image. Nick would shoot with a large-format 8x10 camera which was time-consuming, but that gave us the time to think and experiment. Plus, each frame shot would cost a fortune in film and Polaroid, so there was a sense that what you were doing was precious, which isn't the case now when you're shooting digital. Nick, by his very nature, is experimental, and back then the darkroom was where his printing experiments broke new ground. This picture was originally shot in colour, but in printing the model appears almost black and with an incredible sensuality. There's actually a lot of dignity in her pose: you can sense the formality of England, and the classical references are in there.

Martine Sitbon catalogue, Autumn/Winter 1997-1998
Photographer: Craig McDean. Model: Stella Tennant

Craig McDean had been Nick's assistant, so he too had absorbed the references I'd been showing. Where I guided Craig was towards an understanding of femininity, in the ways someone like Irving Penn did. Craig has an extraordinary gift for tapping into female beauty and attitude, and the way he captures Stella makes this such a modern-looking picture. Both Martine and Stella love taxidermy; I think Stella even studied it at one point. The stuffed animals were inspired by a Penn photo with taxidermy, as well as a Bailey picture in which the model is wearing a fluffy sweater and crouching down to look at a squirrel. We had a lorry-full of stuffed animals from Deyrolle, and we'd all take turns going out to fetch a fox or a crow or something. I have to say this was a great collection from Martine, and it had a lot of success. It's not by chance that most great fashion images feature beautiful collections. You can have all the budget in the world and get whoever you want to work with, but if the clothes aren't saying much you're not going to create magic.

Jil Sander catalogue, Autumn/Winter 1995-1996
Photographer: Craig McDean. Model: Amber Valletta

This was the era of the supermodel – Christy, Linda, Tatjana, Naomi – photographed by Lindbergh and Meisel. Then Amber Valletta came along as a bit of a tomboy. This was shot at the beginning of her career; she was a real beauty, but she didn't give a shit and just burst out laughing on the shoot. When you consider the formality and rigour that typifies Jil Sander – both the woman and the brand – the spontaneity of Amber's outburst is all the more incongruous. It's what makes the picture so memorable, along with the great M/M (Paris) layout. I had less freedom working with Jil Sander because these were images clearly designed to make people spend money in exchange for status and power. This was fashion for the uptown – not grunge – but with a twist of anti-conventionalism that comes from her sheer obsession with quality. Jil loved the campaign and, as she was advertising a lot in those days, I kept seeing the right-hand image plastered full page in the *International Herald Tribune*. The perfect setting for it, I'd say.

Yohji Yamamoto catalogue, Autumn/Winter 1995-1996
Photographer: David Sims. Model: Stella Tennant

Shooting fashion catalogues in the 1990s was born out of the Japanese culture of exquisite book publishing. Comme started doing small-print runs of catalogues in the late 1970s, and so it was natural for Yohji to do the same. Far from the power status of Jil Sander's imagery, these were not destined for glossy magazines; we weren't selling per se. David Sims is such a charismatic photographer, a real seducer, but not in a naff way. I remember it being really hot in the studio when we shot this, and David opened up Stella's jacket to reveal this hint of sexuality, even though her body was covered by the delicate black veil. The hot red background suggests an extra frisson of excitement, whereas the opposite page is constructed around this hideous shade of turquoise which was purposely out of step with the clean and considered tones of the 1990s. The still life with the Tupperware and human skull added further incongruity to the dialogue between the two images. Incongruous yet strangely harmonious.

Martine Sitbon catalogue, Autumn/Winter 1991-1992
Photographer: Nick Knight. Model: Kristen McMenamy

Creating images with Martine has always been about instinct rather than long discussions. The purpose of these pictures wasn't to elevate the clothes to *objets sacrés*, it was simply about creating a continuation of the emotions that we had found in the collections. Martine's photographic culture is extraordinary; she combines a sophisticated knowledge of photography history with the fact that she knew people like Guy Bourdin. She modelled for him, too. I had a sensibility for imagery, but she was the person who discovered it. I consider these pictures as the middle ground between dreamlike sequences and something a little unsettling, and Kristen McMenamy is the perfect girl to portray this. Nick was shooting with a large-format camera, and so Kristen had to maintain this extraordinary pose and expression time, and time again while Nick would be saying, 'Don't move it.' It's thanks to their collective commitment that we got this image that sits somewhere between fantasy and reality – *un moment suspendu*.

Martine Sitbon catalogue, Autumn/Winter 1991-1992
Photographer: Nick Knight. Model: Kirsten Owen

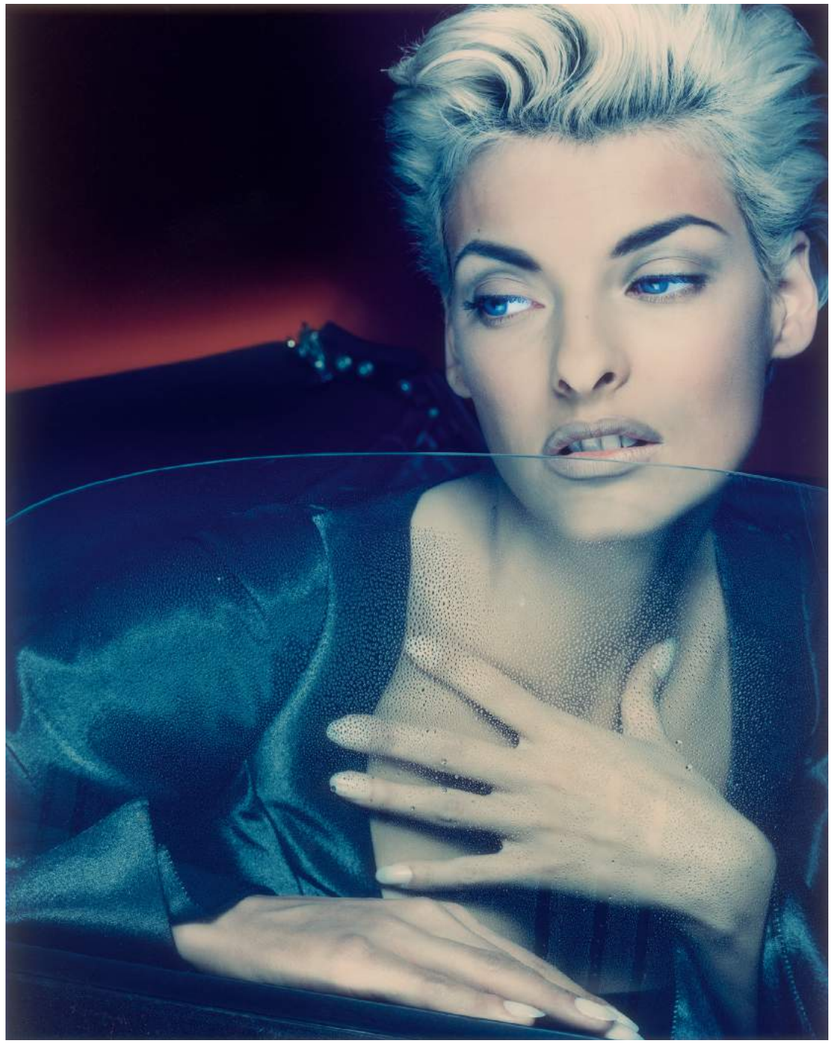
While Yohji adopts an almost asexual approach to women, Martine is far more sensual, as this picture shows. I cast Kirsten Owen completely by chance: I remember seeing her walk by at Pin-Up studios one day, and I just grabbed her and asked if she was free to shoot with us the following day, it was one of the first jobs she'd done. The resulting image is a mix of a number of different things: it's quite rock 'n' roll, but a bit like a weird 1970s David Bowie era androgynous albino, if such a thing could exist! There's also the sexuality of Donna Jordan posing for Antonio Lopez, although the hair actually comes from the Jane Campion film called *An Angel at My Table*. Looking at it today, I can see the combination of Martine's poetic side with the boldness of Nick. Martine's always been a gourmand, and I think we just spontaneously bought the cherries and started experimenting with them. When *A Magazine* did an issue curated by Martine, I cropped in on the mouth with the cherry to use as the cover image, heightening the sensuality.

Yohji Yamamoto catalogue, Spring/Summer 1996
Photographer: David Sims. Model: Stella Tennant

As well as having a wonderful character, Stella is extraordinarily proportioned. But why is her success as a model so long lasting? I think there is an omnipotence to her: she puts on the clothes, and she immediately becomes the perfect model; she has a natural sensibility, and she loves playing the role. I often go to contemporary dance performances, and I was a big admirer of Pina Bausch. The freeform energy of dance is something I've always tried to bring into fashion imagery it seems like a natural thing to do. The pose here is very Bowie on the *Heroes* cover, which in turn was inspired by Japanese performance but I think it's the amazing Roy Orbison grooming that makes this image what it is. I really wanted to take Yohji elsewhere that season – to give him a kick – but I don't think he was very open to these new socio-cultural changes that I was experiencing. When I went to Tokyo to show him the work, he looked at me and said, 'Culture shock'. We then went off to have a great dinner together but never discussed the images again. [Laughs].

Jil Sander catalogue, Spring/Summer 1992
Photographer: Nick Knight. Model: Tatjana Patitz

Over the years I was working for Jil Sander, I was always conflicted about whether we were selling clothes or wanting to give life and meaning to the collection. For me, this image was all about one thing: highlighting the sensuality at Jil Sander, despite its reputation for rigour. I had already imagined Tatjana wearing this dress as one of the key images of the season, and to create it I needed Nick to replace his conceptual approach with a sensual one. I brought in a hair stylist who I never normally worked with called Valentin, a guy who had worked with Newton and Bourdin. He made Tatjana look dreamlike, like Marilyn Monroe. The other exceptional thing about the image is the colour quality of the print that Nick achieved. The background in the studio was white, but once he'd experimented in the darkroom, he transformed it into an elegant and sophisticated tone, a bit like crushed seashells. I remember Jil turning up to the shoot; although she didn't have the patience to stick around all day, she loved this image.



Jil Sander campaign, Autumn/Winter 1991-1992
Photographer: Nick Knight. Model: Linda Evangelista

Why Linda for Jil? Nick and I wanted to take her extreme fame and play with it, interpret her differently by using the clothes of Jil Sander. Nevertheless, when she came to the studio, it was all about her. Which was to be expected. She was far more famous than Nick, she was a superstar! You have to remember this pre-dated the 'starification' of fashion insiders, there were no blogs called *I Want To Be A Roitfeld*. She'd worked all the time with Meisel, and then Nick Knight shot her blonde. I have to say that she was great; she arrived, and it was full on, but she played along with our concept, and there weren't any hissy fits. I think she wanted to prove to us that she was at the top of her game. And that's exactly what she did. We fell completely under her charm, and I remember being kind of starstruck to a certain extent, which is something you no longer really get with models because they all seem interchangeable. Frankly, Linda was born to be a model! This picture is a lesson in grace: the look, the pose, Linda Cantello's fabulous make-up.

Jil Sander catalogue, Spring/Summer 1996
Photographer: Craig McDean. Model: Guinevere van Seenus

The 1990s woman was of course 'grunge', and even though I'm not a slave to scenes, I was drawn to its radical sense of change. Once again, music had a huge impact on fashion, with brands like Prada moving away from minimal sophistication towards something more lo-fi. And while Jil Sander – with her luxurious silks and cashmeres – had never been particularly grunge in spirit, I felt it would bring the brand a new sense of distinction. This is one of Guinevere's first ever jobs, and she looks proud and sexy which creates a nice tension along with the banal wallpaper. This particular pattern has existed since about 1957, and you can probably still get it today; it's not even considered vintage, it's just the sort you probably find in reasonably priced hotels. Wrapping it around the sophistication of Jil Sander would create confrontation, and I was right: the then President of the company despised these images with a passion! But he still took advertising in American *Vogue* to make sure people knew Jil Sander was creating them.

Cool Pure Yohji

Photographs by Ward Ivan Rafik
Styling by Élodie David Touboul

I've always loved Yohji. In the current era of market-driven fashion, it's a luxury to see something so original, sharp, consistent - something which is again at odds to everything else. His designs have had a profound influence on my own aesthetic. His woman is not a sexualised object but an intellectual - and there is something deeper and more profound about his work. I stand behind the pure designers like Yohji, not the merchandisers who only copy and reference the archives. Back to the people who actually work. Back to basics. Back to the real designers.

Marie-Amélie Sauvé

T-shirt by Petit Bateau, Sneakers by Supra,
Baseball cap from Kiliwatch, Coat by Yohji Yamamoto coat.

T-shirt by Petit Bateau, Sneakers by Supra,
Baseball cap from Kiliwatch, Dress by Yohji Yamamoto.

Model: Marine Deleeuw @ Elite. Makeup: Eny Whitehead. Hair: Ramona Eschbach @ Jed Root. Set design: Sophear Froment @ Total Management.

Top by Yohji Yamamoto

‘She engaged in racial uplift through personal style’

Mrs Johnson, the woman who changed the colour of fashion forever.

By Alex Aubry

‘There aren’t many women who can say they were fitted for a suit by Coco Chanel,’ says Linda Johnson Rice, chairman and chief executive of Johnson Publishing and daughter of the late Mrs Eunice Walker Johnson; who during her 50 years in fashion and publishing was on first name basis with many of the reigning designers of the last century. As fashion editor of *Ebony* magazine and director of The Ebony Fashion Fair, the famous touring fashion show (which ran from 1958 to 2009), Mrs Johnson was a pioneer of black fashion – the first to bridge the divide between the world of high fashion and the black community. When *Ebony* published its first issue in 1945, one would have been hard pressed to find a single black designer, model or buyer, let alone an editor, working within the mainstream of the fashion industry. By the mid-1960s, Johnson was not only on the front row but became the largest buyer of haute couture in the world, purchasing some 200 garments a year from fashion luminaries such as Dior, Valentino, Saint Laurent, Ungaro, Lacroix, Cardin, and Courrèges. Yet despite being cited as one of the world’s best dressed women, few people within the fashion industry today know of Mrs Johnson, who personally purchased more than an estimated 8,000 garments and spent $1-$1.5 million per year on designer clothes. Through a series of intimate recollections, Linda Johnson Rice, looks back on her mother’s legacy, and industry insiders like Marc Bohan, Iman, André Leon Talley, and Oscar de la Renta speak about the woman who changed the colour of fashion forever.

Few people in the fashion industry today know of Mrs Johnson, even though she spent $1.5 million per year on designer clothes.

‘My earliest memory of travelling with my mother would have been to the Paris couture collections in 1965. I was around seven at the time, and I still remember my first show,’ recalls Linda Johnson Rice of accompanying her mother to Europe. ‘It was Pierre Cardin’s, and since I was very young I had to sit in the *cabine* [fitting room]. I can still picture the beautiful models rushing by like floating swans in a haze of vivid colour and rustling fabric. My mother, of course, sat in the *salon* on a gilded little chair.’ Curled up on a sofa in her elegant Chicago home, Rice flips through a family album filled with memories representing a virtual history of fashion over six decades. ‘The couture presentations were very different from today. It was a much more gracious, less rushed period. Back then people dressed for the shows, and the audience looked as chic as the models coming down the runway,’ says Rice, who lived through a glamorous chapter in fashion’s history through her mother.

Eunice Walker was born in Selma, Alabama, on April 4th, 1916, one of four children of Nathaniel and Ethel McAlpine Walker. Her father was a doctor, and her mother a high school headmistress. She graduated from Talladega College in Alabama in 1938 with a degree in sociology, and earned a master’s degree in social work from Loyola University in Chicago in 1941. She met John H Johnson in Chicago in 1940, and they married after she graduated.

Together with her husband, who passed away in 2005, Eunice Johnson helped transform Chicago-based Johnson Publishing Company into a media and fashion powerhouse. In 1942 with a $500 loan, the Johnsons began publishing *Negro Digest*, a magazine modelled on *Reader’s Digest*. Mrs Johnson helped stuff and stamp the 20,000 envelopes that went to subscribers to raise the first $6,000 for the publication. Within a year it had a circulation of 50,000. The success inspired the couple to launch *Ebony*, a glossy monthly for African-Americans. Today, *Ebony* has a circulation of 1.25 million.

The Ebony Fashion Fair was born a few years later in 1957, when the wife of Dillard University president Albert Dent suggested the Johnsons put on a charity fashion show in New Orleans. It would evolve into the world’s largest travelling fashion show. Over the years, it would become a powerful fundraising organisation that raised more than $55 million for civil rights groups, hospitals, community centres, and scholarships for African-Americans. Landing annually in some 200 cities, the show brought haute couture and designer ready-to-wear to African-American audiences across the United States, with stops in Canada, London, and the Caribbean along the way. In doing so, Johnson became one of the first to bridge the divide between a rarefied fashion world and the black community. But as Teri Agins, veteran fashion writer for the *Wall Street Journal*, has pointed out, ‘Mrs Johnson did not just bring couture to black America, she brought it to America. She came before Elsa Klensch – before fashion was accessible.’ In the days before the internet and mass media,

Model Pat Cleveland wearing John Kloss, 1973. Photographer Moneta Sleet Jr.
Previous page: Portrait of Mrs. Johnson wearing Yves Saint Laurent couture, painted by Roger Robles, 1989.

Grace Jones wearing a Courrèges haute couture vinyl cape over a short-sleeve nylon blouse and skirt. Featured in *Ebony*, November 1974. Photographer Herman Leonard.

the annual Fashion Fair gave the public a rare opportunity to actually see one-of-a-kind frocks.

'She engaged in racial uplift through personal style,' observes Robin Givhan, the Pulitzer-winning fashion critic and writer. 'Mrs Johnson gave her audiences access to a haughty world in an era before webcasts, websites, blogs and Twitter feeds. She had the audacity to believe that a black woman might be interested in Yves Saint Laurent and Valentino even if she could not afford it.'

In its first two decades alone, the Ebony Fashion Fair registered a number of firsts, filling auditoriums in the segregated South and staging the first fashion show at the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC.

Yet the Fair faced many challenges, and in the early days travelling with it was far from glamorous. Carole Preston who was a 19-year-old model with the first Fashion Fair in 1958, says in some Southern towns in the very early years, Mrs Johnson's husband arranged for food to be delivered to the bus

when one could wear many hats. In addition to producing and directing the Ebony Fashion Fair, she was an editor, buyer, writer and fashion director. That's an incredible feat when one considers fashion was a very different business when she first started out,' says Rice.

From behind a Plexiglas desk in her elegant, ultra-modern office, Eunice Johnson would plan and orchestrate fashion features that often displayed the clothes she purchased for the Ebony Fashion Fair. Conceived by Californian decorator Arthur Elrod, Johnson's office left quite an impression on visitors with its white etched plaster walls, thick cream-coloured shag rug and a plush cream sofa that cantilevered from the wall. She also had a passion for collecting art (Rice recalls that one of the most memorable events in her mother's life was on September 28th, 1974 when the painter Marc Chagall paid a visit to her Chicago home for lunch), and a number of important artworks featured in her office walls. 'I remember her purchasing a tapestry by Picasso when we met the artist on Paris' Left Bank,' recalled Audrey Smaltz, former model and Ebony Fashion Fair commentator from 1970 to 1977.

'She had the audacity to believe that a black woman might be interested in YSL and Valentino even if she couldn't afford it.'

'so we didn't have to go to any back doors'. She was one of two light-skinned models who were sent in to get food at restaurants that declined to serve blacks. In the still-segregated South, they weren't allowed to stay in hotels, so local groups would put up the models in their homes. And during the Fashion Fair's 1965-66 season, the Ku Klux Klan rallied outside a hotel where the models were staying. But the Ebony Fashion Fair carried on regardless. '[It] was both an aspirational and inspirational experience,' says American *Vogue*'s André Leon Talley. 'Mrs Johnson was one of the first to bring haute couture to small-town America at a time when fashion wasn't as readily available the way it is today.'

In 1962, while working as Johnson Publishing's secretary and treasurer, Mrs Johnson became Ebony Fashion Fair's producer and director. That same year she also became the publication's fashion editor. Under her direction, *Ebony*'s fashion pages were transformed into a showcase for black style and beauty, featuring regular articles and fashion stories that informed its readers about the latest international trends. 'She had a lot of energy and came into fashion at a time

Beginning in the 1960s, Mrs Johnson created some of fashion's most striking images; recently rediscovered by a new generation of tastemakers. 'As a fashion editor, she had a very discerning eye, and she loved creating bold and strong imagery. She was also very hands-on and paid attention to the smallest details,' recalls Rice, who assisted her mother on a number of shoots through the years.

'She was extremely perceptive and had the kind of fashion sense that could feel the pulse of the moment. You knew that her judgments would always be on target,' says Smaltz, who travelled first class with Mrs Johnson and Linda to attend the European shows for the better part of the 1970s. 'We would stay at the Dorchester in London, the Plaza Athénée in Paris, and the Grand Hotel in Rome. I got to meet all the top designers with her, including Yves Saint Laurent, Emanuel Ungaro, Valentino, and Princess Irene Galitzine.'

Today, as the company's chairman, Rice is focusing her attention on exposing a new generation to her mother's legacy. 'There is something timeless and sophisticated about many

of these images. She had a keen sense for colour and composition and never cut corners when it came to getting the best models and photographers,' she says. This unique collection of fashion imagery becomes all the more impressive when one considers that Mrs Johnson, a black fashion editor working for an African-American publication, had to compete with *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* to make these images a reality.

'After the collections were presented, there was a mad rush to get pieces photographed for the magazine. In Rome, we would shoot on location throughout the city with the photographer Franco Grillo. While in Paris we shot in the studio with the well-known jazz photographer Herman Leonard,' says Rice. 'Herman was my first exposure to a very hip world. Everyone around him was edgy and bohemian, which was very inspiring to me in my early teens.'

Mrs Johnson worked with other noted talents too, including Bill King, Michael Roberts and the Pulitzer Prize-winning African-American photographer, Moneta Sleet Jr. 'Hours were spent haggling to get the right clothes, as we were vying with other big publications. In some cases we had a mere 15 minutes to photograph a piece before it was whisked off by a courier to the next photo shoot,' says Rice. Shoots rarely ended before 3am. But Mrs Johnson was a perfectionist, and she would set up each image, styling the models and making sure they posed to her vision.

Throughout the decades Mrs Johnson also nurtured the careers of emerging black editors and writers. In addition to being an associate buyer for the Ebony Fashion Fair, Audrey Smaltz worked as a fashion editor for *Ebony* based out of the New York office. 'Working with Mrs Johnson provided me with the best education I could get,' says Smaltz, who today is the CEO of the Ground Crew, a company she set up in 1977 to produce fashion shows for the likes of Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, Oscar de la Renta and Michael Kors.

'She transformed the culture of fashion into an institution for African-Americans, and through the pages of *Ebony* she used the beauty of fashion and style to instil a sense of pride in the community,' says André Leon Talley.

Talley first met Mrs Johnson during the Paris couture collections in the late 1970s, as a young writer at *Women's Wear Daily*. In 1980, she hired him as a fashion editor for *Ebony*, and he often accompanied her on Concord to Paris and Milan. 'It was one of the most unique experiences of my life to go to the collections with Mrs Johnson and Linda. We worked as a team and had a great time,' recalls Talley, who during his brief tenure at the publication would produce in-depth stories on emerging black designers and models, while collaborating with artist/photographer Reginald Gray on fashion shoots featuring Mounia in Saint Laurent couture.

When the Johnsons first began going to Paris and Rome, they weren't welcomed with open arms and experienced resistance from some designers who feared they would lose clients if their clothes appeared on black models. But Mrs Johnson persisted despite these early obstacles.

'In most cases, she was the only African-American attending the New York and European collections in the late 1950s and early 1960s. People were brusque and rude, and often questioned why she was there,' says Rice, pointing out that Mrs Johnson's elegance, along with a deep pocketbook, quickly made her a respected figure within the fashion world. 'Money is a powerful influencer, and she used it to gain entry into many of the couture houses. She not only managed to walk in, but proceeded to walk out with a designer's most iconic pieces.'

'She had to do an awful lot travelling in Europe to these haute couture shows because nobody really knew who Eunice Johnson was, no one had heard of *Ebony* in Paris, in Rome, and in Florence,' says Rice. But her mother was tough: 'She was from Southern Alabama and had a very strong sense of self. She wasn't going to let anyone knock her down.' And as she became known in fashion capitals, designers began to look forward to her visits. 'I can't remember when I didn't know Mrs Johnson,' recalled the late designer Bill Blass in a 1991 *Ebony* interview for the show's 33rd anniversary. 'When I started out in this business, I was aware of the fact that there was this unique woman coming into 7th Avenue, into the market, and she was not borrowing clothes for her show; she was *buying* them. And the things she would buy would be the most

Mrs Johnson experienced resistance from some designers who feared they would lose clients if their clothes appeared on black models.

Pat Cleveland and model wearing Balestra couture during a photo shoot in Rome, 1972.

Mrs. Johnson with Audrey Smaltz, Ebony Fashion Fair commentator, and Yves Saint Laurent, 1973. Ebony staff photographer.

daring, the most avant-garde. And when I finally did see an Ebony Fashion Fair show, I realised why.'

Pierre Cardin, another Mrs Johnson favourite, recalls her good eye. 'Especially when it came to *Ebony*, Mrs Johnson had the ability to choose the most important looks from a collection,' he says. 'They were always the pieces that I would have selected myself, and she never tried to alter a designer's original vision.'

Marc Bohan, a designer Mrs Johnson had known since his early days at Dior, described *Ebony*'s fashion editor as an elegant woman with a very strong point of view: 'She had a great sense of fashion, and she knew exactly what she wanted after seeing a show.'

Despite her hard-earned success in the fashion world, Mrs Johnson faced barriers in the industry throughout her career. According to Smaltz, discrimination persisted even during Ebony Fashion Fair's heyday in the 1970s. 'Some designers wouldn't want us to come to the shows, and it was very tough to wrangle invitations. I would always bring some copies of the magazine with me to show them what we did because they didn't know who we were.'

'She believed that beauty can come in all forms,' says Iman. 'That was a pretty revolutionary idea for the time.'

Through *Ebony*, Mrs Johnson changed the fashion world by showcasing beautiful black models in the latest styles. 'Mrs Johnson gave us a sense of pride by using fashion and beauty to reflect who we are,' explains Bethan Hardison, the legendary 1970s model and agent, who has been a long-time advocate of diversity on the runways.

Iman landed her first modelling job with *Ebony* in 1976. 'Mrs Johnson didn't have an elitist mentality,' she says. 'She believed that beauty can come in all different forms, and that was a pretty revolutionary idea for the time. It's a legacy that we're all very proud to claim as our own.'

To convince designers to not only sell their clothes to her, but also use black models in their shows, Johnson would often visit showrooms accompanied by beautiful models of colour, as she did once with Oscar de la Renta. 'I first met her when she came to my showroom right after my collection with two beautiful, beautiful black women,' recalls the designer. 'I learned that she was producing this fashion show and wanted some clothes. I immediately said yes, because they were the most extraordinary creatures I'd ever seen.'

Sometimes Mrs Johnson was even more forthright. 'We were the ones who convinced Valentino to use black models in his shows back in the 1960s,' Mrs Johnson told *The New York Times* in 2001. 'I was in Paris, and I told him, "If you can't find any black models, we'll get some for you. And if you can't use them, we're not going to buy from you anymore." That was before he was famous.'

She scored another first when, in 1963, she found Emilio Pucci two black models that he used in his show. This was the first time black models had ever paraded down the runways of Europe, and the first time they appeared at the Pitti Palace. 'Until my mother went to Europe and really talked about having black models on runways, there really weren't any. She set the stage for all the top black models that were to come,' observes Linda. Mrs Johnson cast some of fashion's most iconic black faces in *Ebony*'s pages including Grace Jones, Naomi Sims, Gloria Burgess, Billie Blair, Peggy Dillard, Carol Miles, and Khadija.

The Ebony Fashion Fair also helped launch the careers of several models including June Murphy, Cathy Belmont, and Sonia Cole, who became fixtures on the runways of Yves Saint Laurent, Dior, and Karl Lagerfeld. 'Givenchy was very receptive to hiring black models to work in his atelier as well as on his runways. Throughout the years we sent many of our former Ebony Fashion Fair models to him, and he hired them immediately,' recalled Mrs Johnson in the show's 1995 program.

Pat Cleveland, who was 14 when she launched her career as an Ebony Fashion Fair model in 1966, continued to work with *Ebony* throughout the 1970s long after becoming internationally success. 'My mother had sent Mrs Johnson photos of me, and the next thing I knew, I was being chaperoned all over the country by my mother on the Fashion Fair tour,' remembers Cleveland. 'She was very ahead of her time and gave me,

a relative unknown, the opportunity to wear those beautiful clothes and represent *Ebony*.'

Beverly Johnson, who posed for *Ebony* at the beginning of her modelling career in the early 1970s, credits the publication's fashion editor with opening doors for aspiring black models: 'If it wasn't for Mrs Johnson's efforts to promote black women within the industry, I wouldn't have had the career I had.' She went on to became the first black model to appear on the cover of American *Vogue* in 1975.

According to Smaltz, Mrs Johnson set the stage for the kind of success these models experienced. 'In the 1970s black models became the rage, and designers such as Issey Miyake began using these girls in their shows. Billie Blair, Barbara Summers, and Pat Cleveland were hot back then and they became the women who ruled the runways and best personified glamour.'

African-American designers also felt Mrs Johnson's support. For New York-based designer Jeffery Banks, the Ebony Fashion Fair in the 1960s provided him with his first exposure to European ready-to-wear and haute couture. 'It was basically a white world of fashion and there were a handful of black designers making inroads into it, and Mrs Johnson provided us with a platform when few avenues were open to us,' says Banks.

Stephen Burrows, whose clothes regularly appeared on Ebony Fashion Fair's runway and in the magazine says that Mrs Johnson's early support proved to be invaluable. 'When I started designing, Eunice Johnson would come to my shows in the early 1970s and start buying the clothes. That exposure was very important to me as a young designer,' says Burrows, known for his distinctive layered jersey dresses sporting lettuce leaf hems.

'The fashion business is tough, and you see a lot of designers come and go, and when you are a black designer, it's even harder,' says Rice. Recalling her mother's enthusiasm when she first met the late Mississippi-born, Paris-based designer, Patrick Kelly – known for his body-hugging dresses embellished with buttons and bows – Rice says, 'She loved Patrick's spirit and talent. He was very warm and full of life, and that was reflected in the whimsical way he approached fashion.' Kelly created a custom dress for Ebony Fashion Fair's 1986 show. 'He was so inspired by the show's theme that year that he designed a slinky jersey dress with the words "I Love Fashion Scandal", spelt out in buttons down the back.'

Although Mrs Johnson maintained professional relationships throughout her fashion career, she rarely formed close friendships with many of the designers she worked with. 'Saint Laurent was her favourite designer, but I wouldn't say she was close to him. You know, my mother wasn't really close to many designers. For her it was ultimately about business, and she was very focused and disciplined about doing the best job. She didn't spend a lot of time taking designers out to dinner, and frankly they didn't spend that much time doing the same with her,' says Rice.

Nonetheless, over the years she attended several parties with her mother given by Emilio Pucci, Valentino, Pino Lancetti, Fendi and Rocco Barocco in Rome. 'Laura Biagiotti and the Missonis were particularly nice to my mother. I also remember wonderful cocktail parties at Dior, but she wasn't usually included in the smaller more intimate parties. I think she wasn't on those lists because she really didn't care about ingratiating herself with a certain crowd. For her it was about getting her work done.'

In the 1970s, black models became the rage, and designers such as Issey Miyake began using these girls in their shows.

Yet there was one particular party hosted by Pierre Cardin in 1977 during the couture presentations, when he had chartered a plane to fly the fashion press to Lyon for a tour of the famous textile factories, followed by a dinner prepared by the chef Paul Bocuse. 'Cardin was very ahead of his time. He wasn't simply a designer but a businessman and promoter, and he put on one of the most spectacular events I ever attended,' says Rice. 'I remember him coming to our table to speak to my mother, and I was so impressed by him.'

As one of a select group of women who dressed in couture, Mrs Johnson became part of an elite club. 'We would go to the couture salons after the shows, and in the *cabines* on either side of us would be Nan Kempner, Ann Bass, or Princess

Close up of two models in Yves Saint Laurent haute couture, 1983.

Model Sonia Cole, who began her modelling career in the Ebony Fashion Fair, wears a pantsuit by Christian Lacroix haute couture. Featured in *Ebony*, December 1989 issue.

Firyal of Jordan,' says Rice, whose mother would always select a few pieces for herself at the shows. 'Somehow she would find a way to squeeze in two or three fittings between shows and photo shoots. I can't remember there being any other regular black clients at the time.'

As a child, Rice would sit quietly observing her mother being fitted in luxuriously appointed changing rooms at Paris' couture establishments. 'She would take a garment and turn it inside out to see how it was made. She knew what good craftsmanship was and would explain to the fitters precisely where a hemline or sleeve should fall... My mother was very astute. She was very much interested in the catwalk as a laboratory of ideas and showcasing a designer's original vision instead of watering it down; and that is what she presented through the pages of *Ebony*.'

Buying samples that appeared on the runway was a common (and economical) practice amongst couture clients thin enough to fit into the originals. 'As soon as we entered the salon, the *directrice* would come up to my mother and say, "Madame Johnson, I know exactly what to show you," and would steer her towards the one-off pieces for the show that would never be reproduced, knowing full well that my mother would buy them. That's why there are so many iconic pieces in her collection,' adds Rice. Her unique collection holds rare examples of French and Italian haute couture. For his 30-year retrospective at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology in 1982, Hubert de Givenchy turned to *Ebony*'s fashion editor for one particular piece, described by Mrs Johnson as 'the prettiest dress in Paris'. A standout of the designer's spring 1974 couture collection, the violet-blue halter gown with matching cape dripping in hand-knotted fringe, was so difficult to make that it had never been reproduced. Johnson had the dress photographed for *Ebony*'s November 1974 issue.

Mrs Johnson was, however, a tough negotiator. 'She was very smart and savvy in the way she conducted business, and her negotiation skills were genteel and ladylike but tough. I will never forget watching her negotiate with a *directrice* who had quoted an incredibly expensive price on a dress. After going back and forth for a while, my mother pulled out her chequebook and began writing out the amount,' recalls Rice, who then watched her mother fold up the check and place it back in her purse. 'She looked at the *directrice* and said, "You know what, I don't think that's the fair price. So I'm going to put my cheque away, and why don't you think about it and get back to me." By the time we got back to our hotel there were flowers, perfumes and phone calls… and even then she would continue to negotiate over the phone.' Over the decades Johnson became fashion's unofficial historian, collecting pieces by designers she had known since the beginning of their careers, at a time before the term archive was used within the industry.

Mrs Johnson even found time to devise Fashion Fair Cosmetics in 1973, a cosmetics line that African-American women could buy, for the first time, in top department stores. Stars like Diahann Carroll and Aretha Franklin appeared in the ads, and within three years the growing popularity of Mrs Johnson's cosmetics inspired the cosmetics giants to join in: Revlon introduced the Polished Ambers line for black skins, Avon launched Shades of Beauty, and Max Factor produced Beautiful Bronzes. Another example of Mrs Johnson's lasting influence.

Johnson became fashion's unofficial historian, collecting pieces by designers she'd known since the beginning of their careers.

During her 50 years in fashion, Mrs Johnson would witness the evolution of the industry from one based on creativity and personal relationships, to a corporate model increasingly focused on the bottom line. By the mid-1990s many of the great designers she had nurtured relationships with early on in their careers were retiring or selling their labels to large luxury corporations. Despite this, her contributions continue to be felt throughout the fashion world.

When she passed away at 93 on January 10th, 2010, Eunice Johnson had accumulated a warehouse worth of priceless couture and fashion imagery representing a virtual history of black style. Yet as a pioneer who broke down walls for people of colour within the industry, her most valuable legacy was her ability to harness the power of fashion and beauty to create hope and change perceptions.

'Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair' is at the Chicago History Museum until 5 January 2014; chicagohistory.org

Euro Stars

By Juergen Teller

Anja Rubik introduced herself to me while boarding the Eurostar. I noticed her too, as a good-looking woman, but not as the famous model Anja Rubik. Anyway, a conversation started… we should maybe work together one day… And then I thought, why not do it now? I liked the way she looked, sitting on that Eurostar seat, and that Polish designer sweatshirt, with Anja's hair, looked pretty to me.

The Snob Questionnaire: Valentino

By Loïc Prigent

What is your favourite water?
Kangen Water.

What is your favourite champagne?
I don't like champagne.

What's the first lesson in politeness that you'd teach an impolite person?
Table manners.

What is the snobbiest thing you've done that you are proud of?
It's impossible not to be proud of this, but my only serious snob thing is when I am in front of Queen Elizabeth… I refuse to look at anybody else.

What is worse: a snobby woman or a vulgar woman?
Snobby.

What is the most painful dinner conversation you've had to endure?
Too many to remember.

And who was the best person to be seated next to?
Again, Queen Elizabeth.

What do you say to those people who say 'I love your work'?
Thank you.

What is your favourite emoticon on your phone?
I don't know what you are talking about.

What do you consider the perfect manicure on a woman?
Light colour or brilliant Valentino red.

What's the first snobby thing you remember doing as a child?
Having made-to-order shoes. I was crazy for them.

What's the worst fashion faux-pas for a woman?
Wearing one fashion designer head-to-toe.

Sunglasses inside – what do you think?
Great.

Do you like people who dress with visible logos?
Not at all.

Less is…?
Too little.

What's not enough?
Many things.

How do you snob a snob?
He knows me. I don't know him.

Who have you been snobbed by?
Luckily I didn't notice it.

On a scale from 0 to 10, how snobby are you?
4

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