

FASHION IN TRANSITION

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E/MOTION. FASHION IN TRANSITION
Elisa De Wyngaert



Cover image by David Sims, *The Face*, January 1998

'L'Anvers de la mode': This was the title of a thoughtful article in the style supplement of the *Libération* newspaper, describing a second wave of avant-garde fashion designers from Antwerp in 1998. The author wrote about how most headlines in Belgium had been about paedophilia, financial and political scandals, and the continued malaise and tensions in a country of divided communities.¹ In Belgium, she announced, the bright news was the work of the new generation of designers from Antwerp. The title, a playful spin on *l'envers de la mode*, or Antwerp as 'the back-side of fashion', or perhaps the reversal of fashion, still resonates today. In the early 1990s, the Antwerp Six and Martin Margiela introduced the world to a personal, 'Belgian' kind of deconstruction, surrealism, and unexpected craftsmanship in fashion. By 1998, these designers had established their international careers and namesake houses. Antwerp embraced its role as a kind of barking underdog of the fashion world, a small-scale city inhabited by designers who were nonetheless world famous for their financial independence and their disruptive collections.

Thanks to the international success of the Antwerp Six, succeeding generations had the confidence to launch their own independent fashion houses. Their rapid, indeed immediate success was challenged, however, between 1995 and 2000, when the entire fashion ecosystem changed. The emergence of major conglomerates, including the Gucci Group and LVMH, created a star system in which designers were hired as creative directors to bring new direction to heritage brands. From 2001, more and more independent fashion houses were forced to either close their doors or seek outside investment.

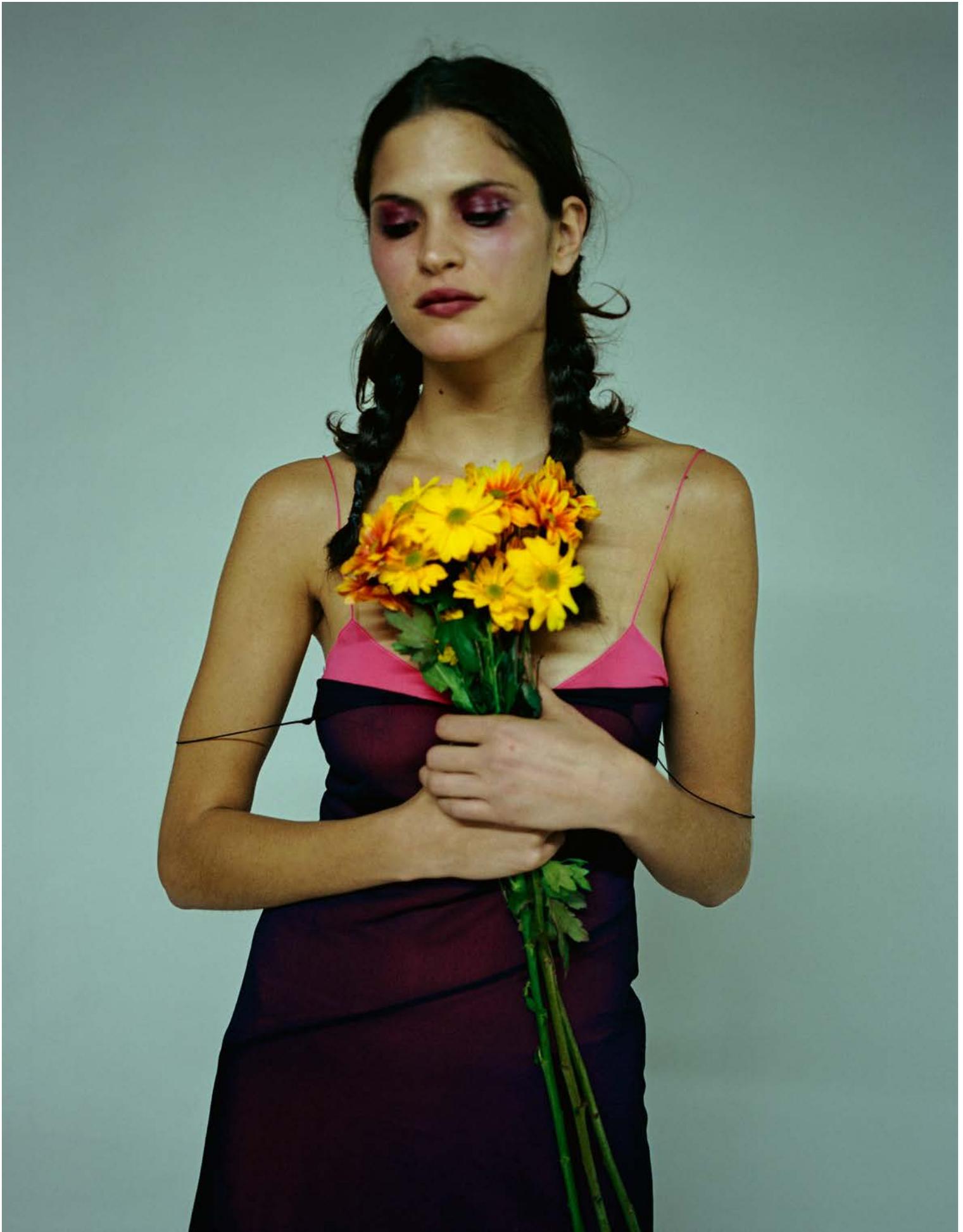
Over the last decade, fashion has become increasingly 'democratized' by fast fashion, e-commerce, celebrity endorsements and social media. The exciting characteristics that once catapulted the first generations of Belgian designers to such renown – including financial independence, surprising show locations and formats, and zero advertising budgets – were now humble hallmarks that were fading into the background. Today's young designers find themselves confronted with radically different choices. The fashion system as we have known it has reached its limits.

In *E/MOTION. Fashion in Transition*, the exhibition that celebrates the reopening of MoMu in September 2021 after a three-year building renovation, we reflect on three tumultuous decades, on the societal transitions that shaped them and on the artistic responses of fashion designers to these disruptions. Fashion sits at the very centre of contemporary life, and artists and designers play leading roles in constructing images and meaning in times of fundamental and systemic

Wolfgang Tillmans, 'Collum', 2011. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne







Editorial by Davide Sorrenti, *Detour Magazine*, March 1997

Chic look are declaring that they are going to move on, with a more upbeat mood that will be visible in July issues.¹¹ And indeed, after the turn of the millennium, that look was replaced by a tanned, toned and – in contrast to its predecessor – healthy-looking body.

The female body, however, never ceased to be under surveillance, as symbolized in the ‘Boxing Gisele’ editorial by Vincent Peters for *Big Magazine* in 1999. As a commodity, the archetypical glamour model of the early 2000s was on display to the eager gaze of passers-by.

Women have historically been required to maintain an external awareness of their own identity. In the past two decades, the quest for the perfect, ‘disciplined’ body has persisted in Western culture, as has a particularly female fear of imperfection and ageing.

Technology and digital filters, creating big eyes and a heart-shaped face in milliseconds, have rendered body modifications increasingly normal and accessible.

In the last decade in particular, social media have been awash with demanding fitness regimes and endorsements of fillers and surgical procedures, all presented as helping women achieve a toned and sculpted body. In her 2019 essay, ‘Always be Optimizing’, Jia Tolentino writes about the new popularity of athleisure and shapewear. ‘Shapewear is essentially the 21st-century corseting, controlling the body under clothing, whereas athleisure broadcasts your commitment to controlling your body through working out.’¹² Even ‘inclusive’ brands, such as SKIMS, Kim Kardashian’s shapewear collection that comes in all sizes and skin tones, still aim to mould the body into ‘mannequin-like smoothness’. Contemporary systems of continual self-broadcasting, such as reality TV and social media, enhance the need for continual self-scrutiny.¹³

LISI HERREBRUGH & RUSHEMY BOTTER

We both grew up with Dutch and Caribbean influences. The Dutch we got through our fathers, the Caribbean through our mothers. This mix of cultures made us look at the world differently from a very young age. It taught us to deal with distance and contrasts. The Caribbean plays an important emotional role in our design process. Curaçao and the Dominican Republic are alive in the colours, the materials, the styling and the stories we tell. In turn, our memories of Holland and our time at the fashion department of the Antwerp Academy influence our love of history, how we conceptualize and present ideas, and how we always want to explore our collections in depth. These different cultures and traditions made us who we are.

Since the first collection we designed, activism and a strong message have been at the heart of our work. Our collections are like a diary, where we let our feelings speak about climate and social issues, sometimes very literally and sometimes more hidden or subtle. We are currently very engaged in further developing our vision of the world. However, it is important that this does not just stop at words and an artistic expression, but that we actually contribute to change. For example, we are setting up a coral nursery together with a diving school in Curaçao, helping dying coral to grow back. We have also made 20% of our collection out of fabrics made of plastics retrieved from the ocean. With the proceeds of these garments, we fund the maintenance of our coral nursery. So as a buyer, you are helping to protect nature and the climate.

We complement each other. We work in a difficult sector, but one of the advantages of our intense collaboration is that we are always honest with each other. We experience a certain synergy, and both at Botter and at Nina Ricci, we discuss everything in detail. Working together makes us more efficient. Although our personal lives and experiences are translated into our collections, we also always maintain enough of a distance. We do not want to project our opinions onto people, but open a dialogue so that people can form their own opinions. We believe that we are only successful when we can touch people.

At Nina Ricci, we work with the legacy of the fashion house, which is an added value, but also a quest. The fashion house had several designers before us, each of whom interpreted Nina Ricci and the history of the house in their own way. For us, this rich history is a way to look to the future: we let go of the past during the design process to make sure our collections are relevant today.

Storytelling is the most important thing we do. We may miss the sensationalism of a real fashion show, but the new virtual alternative is more democratic than ever. Everyone can experience the shows in the same way and at the same time. There are new opportunities to communicate directly with customers, to build a bond. We developed an avatar called Aqua Novio, which embodies Botter. In a more intimate online environment, he shows you how our pieces can be endlessly combined.

The tactile, sensory experience of our designs remains crucial. Clothes are worn against your skin. They remain an extension of yourself. Fashion can be protective, reassuring, encouraging and motivating. Fashion may not be as essential as health and nutrition, yet it comes very close. We all need hope at this time. Fashion can give us that hope. The positive side to the current crisis is that suddenly the old rules no longer apply. Young designers with new ideas and visions are now in the game. The challenge is to find an emotional connection with your customers and communicate directly with them. This is more important than ever before.



END TIMES, FUTURE VISIONS
Caroline Evans



End times: the concept feels peculiarly of the moment, yet it is an old, long-lived idea, found in the eschatology of most world religions. Contrary to its ostensible meaning, 'end times' is, in fact, a vision of the future, albeit of the imminent end of the world. Uncertain and foreboding, it trails a sense of dread in its wake.

Something terrible is about to happen and everything will change as a result, but no one knows exactly what, or how. Bringing with it a strong whiff of millenarianism, the notion suggests doomy scenarios and dystopian visions. A zeitgeisty concept, in 2010 it was the subject of a book by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*. In it, Žižek argued that global capitalism was approaching its terminal crisis, and his four modern horsemen of the apocalypse would bring worldwide ecological crisis; biogenetics; imbalances in global economics; and 'the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions'.¹ Since the book's publication, these categories, especially the first and last, have gained a new visibility, urgency and relevance through activist movements that include Extinction Rebellion, #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Somewhat incongruously, Žižek's four horsemen also galloped onto the fashion runway in the decade following his book, in fashion shows which invoked a wide range of ideas about climate emergency, racism, gender fluidity and activism, to name but a few.

End times may be apocalyptic, but, as Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas argue in their introduction to *The End of Fashion*, 'A death opens the door to an afterlife', and to investigate the end of fashion is really to explore its new beginnings, as the 19th-century Western fashion system begins to falter and give way to new forms and paradigms in the 21st century.²

WALTER VAN BEIRENDONCK

Emotion is at the heart of everything I do. In every collection, I tell a very personal story. I am 100% involved in all the steps of the design process and the presentations of the collections, so everything I bring comes straight from my heart. Fashion for me is communication, and therefore a very personal outlet. My collections are statements in which I expose myself and reveal my interests and vision.

The biggest challenge for independent designers today is having to compete with the big players, whose mega budgets and an almost corrupt supremacy completely upset the balance of the fashion weeks. Why couldn't the fashion weeks have a separation between independent designers and the big luxury corporations? Independent designers should be able to focus on creative, small-scale collections.

From 1993 to 1999, I worked for Mustang, the big German jeans manufacturers, where I created the W< label, aimed at the youth segment and the growing streetwear market. In 1999, I deliberately broke with my W< past. In 2000, I decided to start up again from literally nothing, with my *æstheticterrorists*® label, in anticipation of relaunching a fashion house under my own name.

Less than a year later, the 9/11 attacks put an abrupt end to my *æstheticterrorists*® story. For obvious reasons, the name had suddenly become unusable. But at that point, I didn't feel anxious about it. I was mostly relieved that I could work independently again, be my own boss, and build a small-scale, flexible structure in which I could fully express my individual way of working. In the end, it turned out that such a structure is increasingly in line with how many designers are working today, or want to work again, with respect for the world and creativity.

Notwithstanding my individual approach, I find collaboration interesting. When a collaboration gives wings to the different parties so that the final result is better than their individual performances, it is a great feeling. I have experienced this in my various collaborative projects with Rei Kawakubo. However, when collaboration is exclusively about name-dropping, as it so often is, it is just nonsense, a pure waste of time.

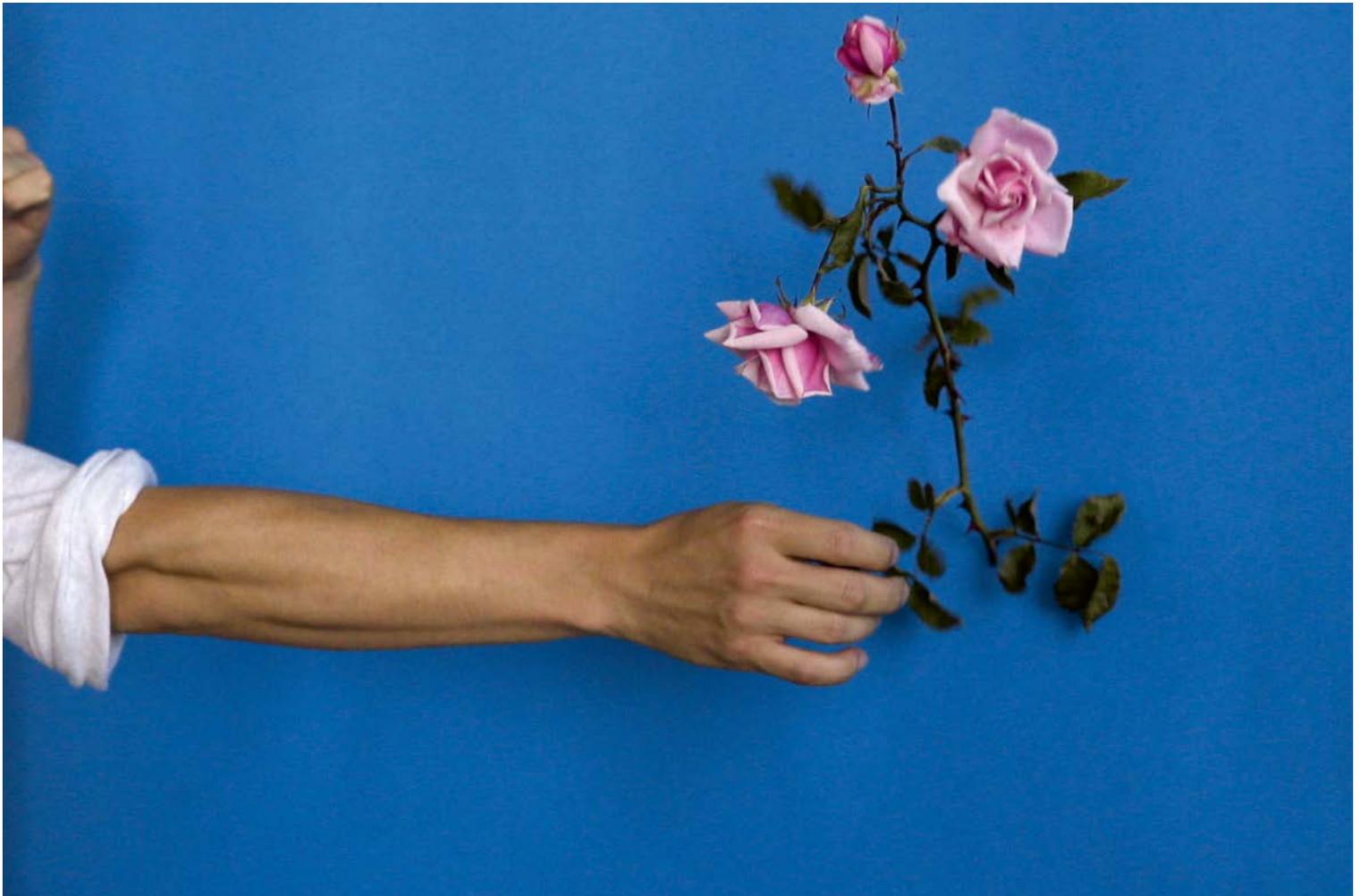
The COVID-19 crisis has forced me to present my collections in a different way. For my *Mirror* collection for Spring-Summer 2021, I decided to make the whole collection in miniature. That gave us time to complete the real collection. The presentation was done on miniature dolls, and was published and distributed online via a video. I communicated my second collection, *Future Proof*, during the first lockdown through a backstage photo shoot in the wings of a fictional show: the *Future Proof* show that in fact never took place.

These online presentations were very well received, and my online showroom has also had good results. I have put a lot of effort into personal contact with my customers. During the digital showroom sessions, I always give one-on-one explanations of my collections. Prior to each digital session, we make sure clients have received my sketches, colour cards and sales books. This energy and approach have been greatly appreciated by our customers.

Of course I miss the energy of a live show, the magical moment when all the elements of the story you want to tell come together. After reviewing the fashion weeks of the recent past, it is clear to me that this is not something that can be easily be matched online. On the other hand, over the past few years, I have also discovered how to use social media in my own way. The direct contact with my fans and their reactions also give me energy. That can be an enormous force, provided it is used well.



FASHION'S AMBIGUOUS NOSTALGIA
Elisa De Wyngaert



Dries Van Noten capturing roses from his garden for his Autumn-Winter 2019-20 collection, video still

On a glorious day in 2019, when we were not yet aware of the lurking shortage of face masks and hand sanitizers, I decided I would research an essay on fashion and nostalgia. While we were collectively adjusting to the 'new normal' in 2020, it appeared as if people around me had started casually dropping the word 'nostalgia' into every other sentence. Nostalgia has always been a core emotion in human psychology. I do love indulging in nostalgia to revisit old emotions and unsung passages in time and space. When manipulated, however, this emotion can turn dangerously political.

In the 17th century, both nostalgia and melancholia were considered illnesses, and they had a few symptoms in common. Although melancholia had a more philosophical and intellectual dimension, the sufferer was considered a disappointed utopian dreamer who had higher hopes for humanity.¹ The word 'nostalgia' first appeared in a 1688 study by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, used to describe the anxieties of displaced Swiss people struggling with severe homesickness.² In contrast to melancholia, nostalgia was a more 'democratic' condition that affected soldiers, workers and students studying abroad. Nostalgia was seen as curable, as dangerous, but not lethal.³ According to Hofer, nostalgia would cause people to confuse past and present, real and imaginary events, and to suffer from such symptoms as nausea, loss of appetite, fear of falling asleep, brain inflammation and high fever.⁴ The more advantageous side of the condition was that it gave the sufferer great ability in remembering the sensations, tastes, sounds and smells of the 'lost paradise', the minutiae of a place that those who remained at home would not notice.⁵

Sigmund Freud did not write a great deal about homesickness, but he saw it as 'the saddening loss of childhood' and consequently the loss of the mother.⁶ In Freud's view, homeland nostalgics more fundamentally longed for their childhood homes, the warmth of their mothers' wombs, a stable context tailored to the satisfactions of their desires.⁷

Although nostalgia is no longer seen as an illness, the idea that the past was a better place is closely connected to our anxiety about the present and the future. As we became unable to imagine or plan our future, 2020 became a peak nostalgia year on social media, leading to an endless stream of photographic flashbacks of happy moments from people's recent past or childhood. This relationship between nostalgia, time and personal memory was identified early on and most evocatively by Immanuel Kant. He wrote that when people who are homesick revisit the places of their youth, 'They are greatly disappointed in their

expectations and consequently cured. Though they think this is because everything has changed there, it is really because they cannot relive their youth there.⁸ The urge we feel to escape from everyday reality through nostalgia has also been described by Jean Baudrillard, who wrote, 'No escape is more radical than escape in time, none so thoroughgoing as escape into one's own childhood.'⁹

In the last 30 years, countless fashion designers have found inspiration and purpose in exploring their own origin stories through childhood nostalgia. John Galiano once said, 'I knew pretty quickly that I had inherited this whole Spanish pride thing from my mother. I never knew anyone with more outfits than her. She was the sort of woman who would dress herself and her children up to the nines and scrub us all with baby perfume until we sparkled, just to go out down the road for a coffee.... I can still remember the heads turning when we walked by.'¹⁰

**For fashion designers,
as for many others,
childhood nostalgia
is inseparable from
the memories of their
mothers. These powerful
emotions are precisely
what became key to
exploring their roots,
heritage and history.**

In interviews, Nigerian-born Kenneth Ize describes his fondest memories from childhood as the anticipation of seeing which Aso Odun outfits his mother had picked out for him and his siblings, months ahead of Christmas.¹¹ These colours and fabrics informed the way Ize started to conceptualize his own collections: 'I tried to reflect back to the time when my family and I were in Africa and how things changed all of a sudden when we moved to Europe. My mother stopped wearing African outfits every day, wearing them only on Sundays. On Mondays, she would go to work in corporate clothing and be a completely different person. She was always looking forward to Sundays, because it was the only time she could really express where she was from and her culture.'¹² Kenneth Ize's luxury collections have focused on a personal interpretation of Nigerian craft and artisanship, while supporting local communities of weavers and artisans.

