



JURGI PERSOONS

In conversation with Silvia Bombardini

On days when the fashion world shakes with seismic quakes and no one quite knows what to expect of seasons to come, it's wise to seek the guidance of experts: from 1996 to 2003, Jurgi Persoons' collections were dissident, rebellious darkling gems presented via unique happenings like his *Glass Cages Girls* on Quai de Seine, that still found their way on the Paris Fashion Week calendar. Now his archive resides at the MoMu in Antwerp, bits and pieces in the selected closets of lucky few – bearing the signs of time and wear, he hopes, to fully fulfil their purpose. Jurgi meanwhile leads the fashion course at the KABK in The Hague, and we get in touch to talk future, past, and creativity that's driven by emotion and fuelled by courage. He speaks of his everlasting soulmate-bound with a legendary makeup and photography duo, and the geographies and challenges of a job – métier, he would say – at a radical time of transition.

Silvia Bombardini: Let us begin from the very start, your 1992 graduate collection: admittedly, there's little around to fact check my source, but people still whisper of “topless models in fetish fashions holding back savage dogs on leashes.” 23 years later, we've grown so unused to such heartfelt rebelliousness that it easily becomes legendary. On the recent 50th anniversary of Antwerp's Royal Academy's famed fashion department, the students' work was described as cautious, safe even. Their reasons are understandable, but the trend is worrisome. In your experience, is it possible to strike a balance between idealism and convenience?

Jurgi Persoons: In 1991, my third year collection was about the radical neo-liberal politics of the Thatcher period and the traditional British style icons that presented this way of thinking, living and dressing so beautifully. During the show dogs accompanied the models to emphasise the socially accepted but quite aggressive signs of this power setting.

My graduate collection was inspired by the fact that the aspiration of “beauty” in all different cultures often leads to quite extreme aesthetics and how a diversity of expressions or treatments in relation to the human body often plays an important role in this language. What is completely socially accepted, standard or iconic in one culture seems controversial to another culture. Often this is most obvious when it comes to a power-related setting or an attempt to distinguish a social status. When it comes to the idea of differentiation or “power,” the characteristics and symbols of a certain dress-code are used in an almost fetish-like way, even without being conscious about these strong signals.

These collections have to be considered in relation to the period they were made. The late eighties and early nineties were a very audacious period for fashion. Radical and avant-garde designers made amazing statements and they were absolute high days for creativity. Designers such as Claude Montana, Thierry Mugler, Jean Paul Gaultier, Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, the Antwerp Six, Martin Margiela... changed fashion completely. They were our heroes and their influence on our generation was huge. I realise that we were

all very ambitious and engaged. The motivation and drive of fellow students certainly accelerated our boost. This was combined and supported with a strong and amazing visual culture through magazines like for instance i-D, The Face... we believed anything was possible and this inspired and certainly motivated us.

In more than twenty years the world changed drastically. The international fashion scene is now completely different and in many ways more convenient. The influence of the fashion industry and big companies became very strong and visible. The industry absorbs many designers and uses them for their commercial or business-related causes. It certainly became much more difficult for young designers because the resources needed to release their own collections are extremely high. They are forced into a sort of high level financial competition with other brands no individual on their own can possibly afford. Any kind of low-budget improvisation is not an option anymore. This is certainly not a stimulating perspective for ambitious and talented students.

Times have changed and so has the whole world. The impact of the internet is very important. This is certainly exciting in so many ways and offers opportunities and challenges, on the other hand it also makes young people literally more exposed, and vulnerable in a way.

Twenty years ago, only few people saw our graduate collections. I didn't think about what kind of reactions my work would provoke to the limited audience. Beside the positive comments there were also negative reactions. Totally normal of course, but that doesn't take away that the sometimes negative comments have an impact. Don't forget you are dealing with artistic youngsters who are often very sensitive and still looking for their own creative identity. These days, the whole world is looking at students' work, the scale of exposure is immense. It can cause more stress, but young people have to learn to deal with this new reality. You cannot fight this exposure, it also offers a lot of opportunities and it is totally related to the time we live in. It is our task and responsibility as educators to make them as confident as possible about themselves and their work. And most important: to encourage them to have no fear at all. I say this often to our students!



Innovation can't develop when they risk to be paralysed by fear. "Creativity takes courage": the legendary, wise words of Henri Matisse! It is obvious the fashion world is waiting for a new kind of fresh idealism or some amazing signs of innovation. Students are aware of this. I am not worried at all. The fact that students have a more realistic idea about the profession is not something that should hold them back from more idealistic points of view. On the contrary, it provides them with a much stronger and solid base to make an alternative point. It is about finding a proper and personal recipe to combine in an appropriate way creativity and actual business opportunities. This is an important challenge for young designers nowadays. It will certainly take some time to figure out how to deal with this issue but in many ways it is a very clever position! The desire for innovation is a drive that can't be beaten.

Silvia: As for yourself, you started presenting collections under your own label from 1996, but rather than comply with the system of runways you did so off schedule, with eerie tableaux vivants in the most beautiful settings – models in Plexiglas boxes on the banks of the river Seine, or softly lit pellucid eggs at the Jardin des Tuileries. Which presentation was your favourite, and how did the performative aspect of these attest to your vision?

Jurgi: Of course I liked them all. But certainly the first one, at the banks of the river Seine is very precious to me. The atmosphere was truly underground, rebellious and intense. The setting was the car park next to the river, where some hardcore evening scenes of the cult movie Les Nuits Fauves were shot. As it had rained a lot on the days before the presentation, the police obstructed the entrance to the parking lot because there was a real danger the river would overflow the car park. We ignored the police obstruction, which certainly raised a kind of "illegal" and free radical tension. The models were standing in Plexi boxes near the water. Security agents with dogs were standing next to them, it still was a kind of risky nightlife location. Since the water was very high, the light reflections had a most magical effect. This was an awesome visual advantage we couldn't have expected! The audience were picked up by late night taxis and driven to the car park, viewing the standing

models out of their cabs. It was a very powerful, dark but also magical setting, which made our presentation the talk of the town during Paris' fashion week!

It was a particular aspect to show our collections in a completely different setting from the traditional runway show. Consider it as a proposal of an alternative situation. The creation of a strong and even controversial or atypical identity for our brand was a logical decision for me. To show the clothes in a different, maybe less convenient context, was such an exciting challenge. It worked because it added value to the clothes. The reversal of the role of the models, who were often standing, and the role of the audience, who were not sitting but walking among the models, was part of this total concept. Including leaving behind the protocol of a typical VIP setting or front-row. The goal was to create a more relaxed fashion performance: people could arrive and leave when they desired. The implementation of an impressive visual concept, where both emotional aspects and the ambience of a certain location played a crucial role, became an important element in the presentation of the clothes. But again, this was completely inherent to my universe, the clothes and my identity as designer.

It was a logical choice but certainly not an evident choice. Runway shows, venue and audience still play a key role in the presentation and releasing of a collection. I don't have anything against that. A fashion show is a very effective way to show a collection to the public and to create a particular atmosphere. It definitely works and communicates the message very well. There are also important practical aspects: a well organised sequence of runway shows helps when it comes to the hectic structure of a fashion week, including the very busy schedules of press and buyers. I saw an opportunity to present my work in a more alternative and personal way, and I just took this chance. Honestly, I wasn't much into the glamour side that some runway shows represented either. The glam culture, sometimes cultivated around a designer, wasn't exactly my cup of tea. I'm not a designer who works for that ultimate goal, the five minutes of fame because their clothes are under the spotlight of a catwalk. I always liked to see my clothes on real people, in real life, worn in combination with other clothes.

winter 2000-01 collection; make-up Inge Grognaard

summer 1997 collection; photography Ronald Stoops; styling Oliver Rizzo



This represents a true emotion, an authentic human expression and that's what I find interesting! We hardly used professional models in the presentations, the majority of girls were found by street casting. It was obvious that I would not create separate show pieces that were not for sale, and a commercial collection on the side intended for retail. The complete collection was always for sale.

Although I was requested on several occasions to organise a more convenient catwalk show, our presentations became cult happenings and very quickly part of the official calendar among runway shows during Paris' Fashion week, which was a quite unique situation!

Silvia: The presentations toed the line of performance art, but you also stress the notion of fashion as an article of use, and thus perhaps of decay. Fashion, renewed seasonally, is maybe the most transient of all design fields, the one that most minutely considers the present moment – yet we strive for timelessness, in both materials and craft. How do you negotiate between these extremes?

Jurgi: Both aspects aren't necessarily opposite to each other. Fashion is not art, it is design. Clothes are objects that have to be used, especially worn. There is an important industry behind it that turns on the simple fact of consumption and needs a hectic rhythm to survive and make money.

The term "timeless" is quite relative. The industry often uses this term in a commercial, misleading and totally superficial way, with the purpose just to sell some pieces or styles... even more, "timeless" is used in order to re-release some former iconic or retro pieces, often with a kind of fashionable makeover that you hardly can describe as timeless!

Of course the notion of "timelessness" sounds very politically correct especially in times where a responsible behaviour towards overconsumption and sustainability are important and real issues.

The true timeless pieces are the clothes that you actually love to wear for many, many years and that still look modern, without being ridiculously old-fashioned or becoming completely out of date. If we all look

carefully at all the clothes we bought over the years, this is probably only a precious minority. These are important pieces and the fact that they show the signs of being worn for a long time often makes them more beautiful!

Silvia: You've led the department of Fashion & Textiles at KABK for almost two years now: recurring themes in the collections we've seen at the graduate show in June, appeared to be the threats and promises of the world wide web, and the idea of an identity in transition, that multiplies. Abstract selfies in pleated chiffon, hackers, pin codes and passwords. How would say that your students' creative process differs from the time when you were one? What were the main concerns back then, of yourself and your classmates?

Jurgi: Our students are very aware of the time they live in. This includes plenty of opportunities, challenges, but also less positive evolutions or actual risks. This is important because fashion needs to have an accurate, contemporary and contextual relationship towards the actual society we live in. I am convinced students these days have a great sense of professional reality, certainly much more than we had and that's great. This awareness has to do with the fact that nowadays people are much faster and better informed about what's happening in the world. This is certainly an advantage and a challenge to deal with. The better informed you are, the more stimulating and relevant your story can be. Information and research provide tons of material and a diversity of nuances for interpretation. We are surrounded with information, relevant and sometimes completely absurd or irrelevant. A curious, open-minded but also critical position is crucial for a designer.

When I was a student our world was much smaller, there was less information and what we did have came much slower to us! We had to make more efforts to look for the documentation we needed, but actually we often found it as well. I remember issues such as environment, politics, sexual identity, the influence or position of art-related themes... were certainly also relevant elements that inspired my classmates. But we hardly knew for instance what was happening in Russia, China or the Middle East or what concerned fashion students in other countries...



winter 2001-02 presentation; photography Ronald Stoops; make-up Inge Groghard



winter 1999-00 presentation; photography Ronald Stoops; make-up Inge Groghard



Silvia: Social media, for all their faults, surely bring transparency to the forefront, illusive as that may be. There's also a demystification of the fashion system, a democratization of the spotlight, and in the best-case scenario a certain raw, gritty honesty, virtual courage and candour. Aside from their talent, what is in your opinion the key skill a fashion designer should have to be noticed today?

Jurgi: A fashion designer needs many skills. It's a very complex, specific and exigent professional situation. Of course a fashion designer should be a creative genius, with a very wide range of interests including being familiar with a diversity of expressions. Awareness of the present and a sensibility for evolution are required in order to be able to propose a significant alternative for the upcoming future. He or she should be aware of the very specific position of the target group they want to reach. A designer needs a brave personality combined with an open mind, the curiosity to discover and explore the unknown. And certainly a strong personal and critical opinion. More than ever, communication is essential. To communicate through the design or the label is just one aspect. Being aware of the relevance of their PR is equally important. Being capable to communicate to all collaborators is mandatory. A designer needs plenty of social and organisational skills, in the first place to surround themselves with a complementary team of diversely talented collaborators, and afterwards to motivate this team permanently. A fashion designer has to be able to collaborate, that's very important! Being a clever representative and salesman of their own work is definitely useful. It will create and develop important opportunities.

Important technical knowledge and respect for the métier is also essential: fabrics, techniques... and interdisciplinary interests are becoming more and more important too, they provide crucial information for innovation. A fashion designer needs to have a special feeling for the right timing: the exact moment of releasing a design statement cannot be underestimated.

A capacity to be flexible in a smart way and to deal with stress and pressure. Also the wisdom to make the right decisions, in the right circumstances, at the right time and with the right partners in the perspective of a constructive planning of their future career has become a vital aspect. Therefore a thorough knowledge of the profession and its important actors including a no-nonsense vision is indispensable.

Silvia: You've said not long ago that “inspiration can be something that disgusts you”, and browsing your archives one often notes a dark, sometimes macabre touch: bloodstained invites and your trademark nervous stitching, titles like Resurrection of eighties Ungaro tramps out of their graves or “Escada Trauma” the nightmare of every perfectionist working girl. Did they reflect a personal penchant for the spooky and gory? If fashion is indeed a language globally understood, what was your message then, and for whom?

Jurgi: I always loved strong visuals. Visual communication is an essential tool in fashion. Working with inspiring concepts is also crucial during the process of creating a collection. For me beauty and can indeed be found in anything, most certainly in things that aren't generally considered as conveniently beautiful. What is considered “ugly”, wrong or confronting is often much more exciting. People should have a more open mind! It would enable them to find inspiration in situations they definitely didn't expected to, or that initially they may not even have liked.

Just dare to take a step further than the traditional concept of beauty and dare to surprise yourself. At that moment it becomes truly remarkable. Visuals should have an engaged message. They need to evoke an emotion to the audience, whatever that emotion is, or make the viewer at least think, wonder. It is all connected with the search for new aesthetics.

I am not very interested in superficial, decorative or standard situations or things that don't touch me in any way. Whatever the source of this emotion, it is the emotion itself that matters because this is the drive of creativity.

Silvia: A dedicated collaboration with photographer Ronald Stoops and make-up artist Inge Grognard, from the early days of your brand to the poster of the 2015 KABK show, contributes to this impression. Would you tell me a bit about this perfect match, how did you find one another at first, how did you grow together?

Jurgi: I had the chance to meet Inge Grognard and Ronald Stoops during my studies at the Antwerp Academy. Inge and Ronald always have been very close to the academy and also to the students. They always have been and still are very interested in students' work and in all kinds of avant-garde fashion. They are enthusiast, and sensible to creativity. They have and will always support this in the most affirmative way. It is an amazing opportunity to work with Inge and Ronald: it always results in astonishing and forceful images.

They both are amazing talented people and we became very good friends. It is indeed a perfect match, we share the same opinion! They have strong personalities with a very authentic and bold point of view. They are able to assimilate a designer's universe and concept, with a mutual aspiration to achieve an exquisite result, always beyond any standard. No effort is too much for them, the drive and focus is totally impressive. Usually we sit together and do some brainstorming about the content and it is striking how fast this brings up a very strong and engaged concept where fashion, beauty and image not only come together but raise one another to a higher level. That's typical about working with Inge and Ronald: they add an important personal value, but in a very respectful way. This includes a lot of openness to each other's universe, input and views. For sure



summer 1998 collection; photography Ronald Stoops; styling Olivier Rizzo; make-up Inge Grognard



collage by Jurgi Persoons

invitation winter 1997-98; graphic design Paul Boudens

