

# On bringing depth to the superficial



Archivist and editor Laird Borrelli-Persson discusses the importance of history, balancing projects, and how fashion has changed.

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As told to Sarah Chekfa, 2118 words.

Tags: [Fashion](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Production](#), [Education](#).

## **What path led you to where you are today?**

Probably illustrated children's books which provided an entry into a different world of words and images. My mom also did some decorating, she always had these magazines around, and I was entranced. And I spent a lot of time in the library.

I studied English in undergrad and a bit of art history during my year abroad and then came to the city after college. I got an internship at Sotheby's, then I thought I needed a real job. Getting a Masters degree had always been important to me so I started thinking, "Well, what do I do in my free time? What is my passion?" It seemed to be going to exhibitions and fashion, so I got into the MA program at FIT for museum studies and fashion history. I was really lucky because [Valerie Steele](#) was teaching and became one of my mentors. We did a book together, [Bags: A Lexicon of Style](#). That's how I met my publisher.

When I graduated, I got a job at the Museum at FIT. I always looked up to Valerie who was always being called for interviews and doing articles, and I thought, "Oh, that looks like fun." I liked what I was doing very much, but after five years I thought I'd try and see what media is like, and I ended up at [Style.com](#) in July 2000. That was a huge change: I went from working with objects in my white lab coat with my white cotton gloves to working with pictures of objects. How we understand fashion has changed so much. Not so long ago, you could watch fashion TV, read magazines, go to a store—those were the main ways to interact with the industry, not everyone knew everything right away.

## **Fashion communication is so democratized today. What is it that can't be translated into a virtual format?**

The communal experience, like watching a movie in a theater. The way the music can move you, the storytelling. You can't replicate having conversations with someone that you haven't seen for a while or sharing a cab with someone who shares their perspective on what's going on. But the thing about shows—you're experiencing the clothes in person, but you are not touching clothes, you are not inspecting the seams. It is distinct from a showroom experience where you can manipulate a garment, turn it inside out and see how it's finished and the real quality of it.

## **So there's another tier—interacting with the clothes.**

Yes, you can do that in stores as well. I think physicality and multisensory experiences are very important and will continue to be.

**Where does your interest in archives come from?**

I have collected images for as long as I can remember, using pocket money to buy prettily illustrated cards at Hallmark and such as a kid. In 1990 I started doing these scrapbooks/visual diaries, there are about 80 of them. These days I don't have much time to cut and paste, but I still collect clippings and tears, coaters, candy wrappers, anything that catches my eye for further collaging. I collect postcards, books... It's a constant search for something that makes the heart beat faster, or makes me stop for a minute and think.

I'm fascinated by the concept of time. I think the past is with us. We're still living with consequences of things that happened before. For me, context is supremely important and I always want to know why. Nothing really comes out of the head of Zeus; most things are part of something.

I'll give you an example. When [Eckhaus Latta had their first show](#) I didn't know that they had a connection to [Susan Cianciolo](#) [a fashion designer and artist]. It was a déjà vu moment. Then I was in Stockholm, and a collective there was also doing something very Susan-like. It got the wheels turning: "Why was there a return to some of the things she was doing in the '90s?" I didn't think it was a case of copying—it would be really difficult to copy Susan even if you wanted to because it's so individual and it's not well-documented. That inspired an [oral history of Susan](#). My conclusion was that the appeal at the time was connected to her work being obviously imperfect. When everything's so glitzy and everyone's having, and documenting, the perfect coffee and croissant for breakfast, then maybe something a little bit more off and more handcraft-y has a renewed appeal.

Part of my job now is going through the Condé Nast Archive and digitizing shows. It's important to document what has come before, not to point fingers, but to show the roots of things and the cycles and continuity in design. By seeing, say an early collection of [Romeo Gigli](#), you can then trace patterns through reverse chronology and identify schools of thought. To me, it's exciting to see the cyclical nature of things and for new talent to understand that what they are doing is being woven into something that already exists and that they are extending.

**Are you always in the archives, or do you reference it in a more ad hoc fashion, like when you see a trend out in the wild that you're curious about?**

It varies. Digitization from slides takes a lot of time, so the approach is generally more topical. For example, when the Hermès Margiela show was on in Paris, it felt like a good time to add those shows to the Vogue Runway archive. That was an obvious sort of hook. Sometimes it's less literal and based on what I'm feeling and hearing.

Working on the web, it sometimes seems like history starts around 2000. It's really important that we have visual evidence of fashion from before then. A lot of important things happened before the Internet, like the grunge shows by Marc Jacobs for Perry Ellis, Anna Sui, and Christian Francis Roth, that are now added to the VR Archive so now everyone has access to them.

**When you're looking into something, when do you know to stop?**

Sometimes you could go on forever. I've worked on archival projects where we had to make rules like, "This is how many hours you have on this topic."

I subscribe to a newspaper archive because it's interesting to see how things are reported at the time, versus how we think they were. Perceptions change like memory does, the edges get softened, that's part of life. Grunge is part and parcel of fashion today but at the time many people were outraged. It takes a while for the eye to adjust, and retroactive perspectives differ from contemporary ones.

**Archives are the antithesis of topicality. How do you balance the everything-is-important aura of the archive with the more trend-driven nature of media?**

It's about responding to what's around and providing something that's missing. It's not that I wouldn't have

gotten around to digitizing Hermès by Martin Margiela, but it made sense to do so when the exhibition was up and it was top of many people's minds. It was a wonderful synergy.

It's like a rhythm in a song, and the melody swells, and you hear it louder.

**Has your process changed, working in media? It's such a... happening space. Academia and museums feel a bit more formal, stuffy even, in comparison.**

Yes and no. Because I'm looking at pictures, not actually interacting with objects, except, in a way when I'm in the physical archive and handling slides, which need cleaning because they can be really dusty. It's not glamorous, but it's glorious. Basically I curate what we're digitizing. I like to go deep on things rather than surface over a lot of things.

**I've seen you make numerous Barthes references in your work. What's your relationship to fashion theory?**

For my MA thesis, I used Roland Barthes' Language of Fashion to analyze fashion writing in *Vogue*. Currently I am trying to read Jean Baudrillard but can only read a few pages before I start to feel like it's beyond me; but I keep trying. Non-fiction is my preference: biographies, memoirs, books about a certain time or art movement. I'm always looking for connections. I might be reading about Picasso, and learn that he painted his lover in a Schiaparelli dress. I love those little nuggets. I want to know how things fit together.

**These days we have nearly unlimited access to fashion imagery online, but so much of it is decontextualized.**

But then there are so many valid ways to interpret things. For me, it's through a lens of fashion history, art history, and the history of *Vogue*, since I am on the team there. I was once told that I think in pictures and I think that's 100 percent true.

There is so much fashion these days, just given the magnitude of collections and looks, you could "prove" a lot of trends if you wanted to. Many people think trends are dead; it's true that serve a different function than they did in the past, still I think it's a human instinct to organize things. The past few seasons, deconstruction has been big; it also feels like the world is falling apart sometimes, too. Is there a direct correlation? Probably not. But one can certainly understand the metaphor of things falling apart, and clothes looking like they're falling off the body, or they're not finished, or they're in a state of in-betweenness, because a lot of people also feel like they're in a state of in-betweenness. It's a proposal, it's a way of suggesting maybe this is the "why." Maybe it's not, but let's consider if this is the "why."

**Does your process change when you're working independently on a book, versus when you're writing for a publication like *Vogue*, within a larger team?**

Not really. Every time I face a blank page or screen it's like the first time. The big difference is at work, you can talk to people and get their opinions. Book work is done in my personal time; on Saturday night at 11 PM there's no one to speak to.

**It seems like you might have more agency working on a book compared to working on an article.**

I don't know, a lot of the books I've done have been pitched to me, and it's quite congenial where I work. Not every story I pitch is green-lighted, but many, many are. I don't feel limited, rather I'm happy to have a good editor.

**What is the responsibility of a writer engaging with fashion today?**

Transparency. If there's something I don't understand, I want to have a discussion about it rather than just say everything's fabulous, and then sit at my computer and write that it's not all that. I always want to come at things with respect, to understand that the designer and their team have put their all into it, and I want to be

as honest and open as I can.

**There's this idea that fashion is superficial. And of course there's so much that validates that viewpoint: the fickleness of trends, focus on celebrity, eternal mandate to buy now. But there's obviously something there -Barthes wouldn't have written two books on the subject otherwise... how do you bring depth to the superficial?**

Fashion is artful—I don't know if it's an exact mirror of the times, but it does react to what's happening in the world, and it obviously changes with time. I love fashion, of course, but I also love people. For me, it's interesting to try to see the person through their work. Not everything is biography, a designer may choose to put on a mask, for example, but we each are an accumulation of different individual experiences that we filtered the world through. I'm interested in trying to understand what motivates someone to create something out of nothing.

One more thing: I think people are more interesting than what they wear.

**Laird Borrelli-Persson recommends:**

Shōnen anime. I just finished ONE PIECE and started Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War.

Sensory pleasure in the form of a spritz of Odin 03 scent or a dab of Chanel Allure body lotion.

Needlepoint and jigsaw puzzles as ersatz therapy.

Music by Jonatan Leandoer Håstad (his solo project, Död Mark, Yung Lean). Plus Drain Gang and Palmistry and '90s hip-hop.

Skåne, Sweden: Rolling hills, windy beaches with bathing huts, family.

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