

RUNWAY

The Intersection of Art and Fringe Fashion in the 1990s Is the Subject of a New Book, *Fashion Work*



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Photo: Courtesy of DIS

Nostalgia doesn't look at history with a loupe but rather through rose-colored lenses. This edited approach to the past (whether lived through or only longed for) works very well in the digital age, where platforms like Tumblr and Instagram serve up attractive, bite-size portions of what has been. While the 1990s are at the top of the menu because they happened in a pre-internet era, it's not possible to "eat a rainbow." But a forthcoming book by the Danish-born, New York-based curator Jeppu Ugelvig, *Fashion Work: 25 Years of Art in Fashion* (Damiani), certainly seasons our understanding of the subcultures that grew up around the genre-blending practices of Bless, Bernadette Corporation, DIS, and Run (Susan Cianciolo), about which Ugelvig dishes up new and detailed information from disparate archival sources.

One of the reasons the 1990s remain a constant preoccupation within fashion today is because, to some extent, they mirror our times of uncertainty, the tension between convention and new ways forward that often do away with existing boundaries—like those between art and fashion. To Ugelvig, the distinction between the two fields—an endless topic of conversation—should not be focused on "aesthetic categories" but rather "systems of labor," i.e., how things are made. (Hence the *work* in his title.)

Generally speaking, fashion is associated with mass, industrial production, and art with individual, artisanal endeavor. In the 1990s, notes the curator, "the shift in the fashion industry to postindustrial production (outsourcing garment manufacturing, the rise of branding, freelancing), as well as its mass popularization as a global form of entertainment (think: *America's Next Top Model*, *Style.com*, *Project Runway*), made the millennium a chaotic time for fashion workers, hence all the innovation." Necessity breeds invention, in other words. In the 2020s the motivation behind change and inventiveness is being driven by the climate crisis. Designers focusing on upcycling and creating one-offs, for example, are adopting new ways of making that are "artlike" and often community based. Here is another echo with the brands Ugelvig has focused on, which became the nexuses of overlapping subcultures that challenged conventions in terms of approach and message while existing at the meeting point between fashion and art.

Having emerged from years of chasing archival materials in "photo albums, storage boxes, diaries, hard drives, and the backs of closets," Ugelvig shares his thoughts on nostalgia and things alt-1990s.



Red Rover collection by Run Susan Cianciolo. Photo: Cris Moore / Courtesy of the photographer

Why do you think there is such a huge wave of '90s nostalgia in fashion and culture today?

Fashion is loopy—we're currently obsessed with the '90s, which in turn was obsessed with the '70s (which is also very much felt in today's fashion). These currents come and go, but they are also always informed by larger social and economic changes in society. Having said that, I think we're interested in the '90s because of its resemblance to today: namely, identity politics, culture wars, and a revived interest in working independently.

There was an intense cross-pollination of creativity in the '90s, as well as a strong interest in making work within creative communities [and] for one's community. Today we're seeing a slow polarization of the fashion industry. The corporate is getting more corporate, and the independents are getting more independent. We become nostalgic of eras in search for meaning through resemblance—and indeed, I think there's lots to learn from the '90s.



Bernadette Corporation Photo: Cris Moore / Courtesy of the photographer

What was the relation of art to fashion in the '90s? What do you think it is now?

I would say that in the 1990s, there was a real interest in fusing production and distribution methods of art and fashion (pop-up shops, flea markets, magazines), whereas today, art is predominantly used as a branding tool in fashion. It's fashionable to be affiliated with art—its actors, authors, and social systems. Having said that, there are exciting practices like [CFGNY](#) and the [Women's History Museum](#), which are currently embracing the art system as a space for garment production. Practices [like these] do little to no retail and instead present (and sometimes sell) their work in art galleries while disseminating their work in museums and exhibition spaces and on the internet.

Why is this period of special interest to you?

The 1990s and 2000s remain a very unexplored territory in both art and fashion history, despite the fact that many of society's structures underwent drastic changes in this time. The shift in the fashion industry to postindustrial production made the millennium a chaotic time for fashion workers, hence all the innovation. The '90s was also a time when art and fashion stood closer to each other. Fashion designers were featured in art exhibitions and biennials, and artists were interested in fashion production. We're seeing this again today, albeit in different ways, which makes this history all the more urgent.

Urgent in what way?

I think it's crucial to develop a proper discourse around the relationship between art and fashion, as it's often riddled with quite a bit of amnesia or historians fail to take it seriously and consider it important to art history. Artists have taken up work in fashion since its beginning, but it's somehow always presented as a total novelty and often seen as critically compromised, as pure commercialism. This couldn't be farther from the truth. Fashion often holds the key to cultural history.



Run Susan Cianciolo Drawn by Susan Cianciolo / Courtesy of the Artist and Bridget Donahue Gallery

How do archives fit into all of this?

Fashion curating has always been very focused on the garment itself, but so much of fashion's activities manifest as ephemera: publications, printed matter, video. In the same way that archives have become more important in art curating, fashion is discovering the potential of archives in telling its stories as they relate to fashion promotion, communication, image making, styling, and so on.

How did you select Bernadette Corporation, Bless, DIS, and Run (Susan Cianciolo) as your subjects?

I think these four practices are distinct in that they have quite directly taken up work in the fashion industry as professionals and not just made artwork "about fashion"—yet they all have a firm place in the art world, then and now. Susan's first fashion show was staged at Andrea Rosen Gallery, and Bless was included in the first Berlin Biennial, only two years after its launch. In very different ways, their work helped develop new forms of production, distribution, and exchange of fashion in art and art in fashion, forms that today seem really commonplace. They also represent two important fashion systems: New York and continental Europe (namely, Paris/Berlin), and it was important to me to think through their differences.



Shoe in Shoe infomercial by DIS. Photo: Courtesy of DIS

Can you talk about the role of technology, or the lack of it, in relation to these mostly pre-internet brands?

Technology is a huge theme in the book—three of the practices began in the analog '90s; DIS emerged at the beginning of the web 2.0. All four emphasize the importance of community, sociality, and working in and with your network, often in or adjacent to the art system. While the internet jeopardized many forms of fashion work (namely print publishing), it also spawned new platforms for work, and DIS is a great example of this. In many ways, *DIS Magazine* mimicked the community-driven, collaborative fashion production of the 1990s, but instead of being centered around nightlife, it was premised on digital technology, which allowed for a much more global community.



Bless no.52 Photo: Courtesy of BLESS

What surprised you in the making of the book?

I was amazed to discover how Bless developed traveling pop-up shops and did brand and sneaker collaborations almost a decade before anyone else in the industry, and how Bernadette Corporation assumed the position of omnipresent stylist/image makers across publishing and runway shows much like fashion talent do today. I think people like [Akeem Smith](#) and the [HBA](#) crew and [Avena Gallagher](#) are examples of people who are [operating in much the same way now.] Their sheer inventiveness of fashion work (often developed simply in order to stay alive in the city) is radical—and deserves attention.

Nostalgia often skims over the hand-to-mouth existence of many 1990s creators.

The book recounts how new hybrid modes of working in the art/fashion industry often sprang out of economic precariousness: hustling to make ends meet. Both the early 1990s and the early 2010s were characterized by deep economic insecurity in the wake of recessions, also in the culture industry. Here, young culture workers were forced to multitask and take up work in whichever system that wanted them: be it nightlife, art, fashion, or publishing, and often a combination of all of them. This is reflected in their entrepreneurship. Cianciolo drew on her friends from the art world for collaboration; Bless made corporate sponsorship the theme of its work (as it collaborated with Adidas, Galeries Lafayette, Levi's); DIS made advertising campaigns for Kenzo. Paradoxically, many of these kinds of impromptu strategies have become adopted by the mainstream fashion industry today.



Bernadette Corporation Photo: Courtesy of Bernadette Corporation

What are the aesthetics of these brands, and do they have points of convergence? They're all very different, but they also overlap and converge in interesting ways. Bernadette Corporation and Run spring out of the same DIY-downtown-NYC look of the 1990s, but Run opted for a much more ethereal, idiosyncratic, ragtag aesthetic. DIS really extends the corporate aesthetics of Bernadette Corporation: the preoccupation with logos, brand hacking, and stock photography. Bless represents a European perspective, but has close, personal, and aesthetic ties to Cianciolo (they have been close friends for more than 20 years). I think what connects all four practices is a healthy dose of humor: Their work is about poking fun at the fashion industry, producing something confusing, transgressive, weird, and radical, which forces us to reflect on fashion as a cultural form.

What did you want to achieve in making this book?

Beyond firmly writing these practices into art and fashion history and giving generous space to their incredible archives, this book is really intended for contemporary fashion students who are trying to develop critical ways to navigate the intersection of the fashion and art industries. The book recounts the struggle, hardship, and inventive entrepreneurialism required to "make it" at the fringes of cultural systems—a place that is often more interesting. So many young talents working today are interested in other ways of working than as a ready-to-wear brand or a traditional, contemporary artist, and this book hopefully offers some inspiration for other models of organization and production.



Glamour Furniture collection by Run Susan Cianciolo. Photo: Cris Moore / Courtesy of the photographer