



Schooled in a nightclub, ex-model Etienne Russo has mastered the fine art of turning the spirit of seasonal collections into fleeting fashion shows that enjoy their 15 minutes of fame.

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Photos by2photographers



AR

FALL

FOOTBALL



I'm at Villa Eugénie, and the place is hopping. Scheduling an interview with artistic director Etienne Russo has already been the headache of the year; now that I've finally arrived at the epicentre of the Belgian events company in Brussels it's a matter of biding my time. It's late July, and Russo obviously has loads of decisions to make before he leaves for Bali tomorrow, where he'll be recharging his batteries for a few weeks – 'no parties, just nature and yoga'. Not that the scene in this minimalist one-time warehouse is chaotic. On the contrary. With the exception of a stack of printing paper and a row of toner cartridges on the subtly lit counter, an air of serenity fills the interior. It's easy to spot the hand of a professional designer in the styling of these surroundings: taking its cue from the dark-grey façade, the interior displays a harmonious palette of greys and blacks, combined with rustic railway sleepers, glass, iron and steel. Reflective objects have been strategically scattered throughout the space. Leaning back in an enormous black suede sofa in the waiting area, I gaze at the clouds through an ingenious glass dome designed by Glenn Sestig, the Ghent architect charged with renovating this building three years ago. Forced to leave the charming residence – Villa Eugénie! – that had been its home before proving to be too small for the growing enterprise, Russo's firm moved into the converted warehouse at that time. Since 1991, the year in which Russo orchestrated and staged the first show for renowned Belgian fashion designer Dries Van Noten, Villa Eugénie has been on a roll. Nowadays, the list of return clients is an impressive parade of hot labels that includes Maison Martin Margiela, Yves Saint Laurent, Chanel, Miu Miu, Hugo Boss, Hermès, Lanvin, Thom Browne, Sonya Rykiel and Y-3. In the high season, from the end of January to the first week of March, Villa Eugénie 'does' some 18 shows and events, from A to Z. The work goes far beyond a hasty veneer of styling: Russo's team of twelve, supported by a large group of regular freelancers, takes total responsibility for location, music, lighting, invitations, food, after party – literally every conceivable detail required to make the show a success.

## 'Certain things need to be spoken out loud, others ask to be whispered'

Some 20 minutes have passed when I notice Russo's head bob above a balustrade and hear him apologetically ask for another five minutes. Plans for eight fashion shows in Paris, already booked for late September, need to be completed before he's back in the office at the end of August. It's the kind of pressure guaranteed to push the stress button of most ordinary guys, but when I finally make it upstairs to his office, Russo is the picture of relaxation.

Still apologizing, he offers me his chair. 'It'll be September 3 before everybody in fashion is back at work, so we need to plan as far ahead as possible.' He and his team rarely receive a briefing from anybody. 'Yes, what's been put on paper gives us an idea of which

direction the fashion designer wants to take, but in some cases the last pieces of the collection are ready only five days before the show, sometimes two days – and once in a while not until the morning of the show itself. It's the system in fashion. People don't have enough time. We have eight shows in five days, and 21 days to put them together. We try to be as proactive as possible.'

Entering the room where he works, a space separated from the rest of his office by no more than a glass partition, I feel myself surrounded by the organized chaos of a creative perfectionist. 'First, I want to show you something. We'll talk later.' Peering around an ordered thicket of magazines and books, I catch sight of his Mac. 'Don't write,' he says, as I reach for my pen. 'It's more interesting to look. You need to feel it. I want to show you the first edit of the event we did for Hugo Boss Orange in Barcelona this summer. We transformed a bullfighting arena into a spaceship. You tell me if we succeeded.' In addition to the fashion show, which introduced the summer 2008 collection, Russo and his team staged the accompanying standing buffet and after party. The video featuring the new collection will ultimately appear in all Hugo Boss Orange shops. With a brief tuck into its name in his pocket, Russo and his client checked out some 15 locations in Barcelona. Knowing that the fashion designer had drawn inspiration for his collection from the sci-fi movie *Blade Runner*, Russo entered the 30-m-high Plaza de Torros and instantly felt the spaceship emerging.

The setting is colossal. Rather than sitting in the spectators' stands, the fashion-loving audience fills the arena itself, embraced on all sides by a circular catwalk crawling with creatures from outer space: models dressed in overalls made of light-emitting fibre-optic fabric, customized in collaboration with the designer especially for the show. Populating the stands are 18,000 sparkling LED 'diamonds'. No wiring in Russo's spaceship, for that matter, as this was battery-operated lighting. Placing one LED light on each chair in the arena took 80 people four and a half hours. 'We had to know how long the batteries would last, as the party went on until four in the morning. The LEDs would provide about six hours of bright light before starting to dim, so getting them in place was a last-minute job,' laughs Russo. Projected images of outer space hovered in all directions above the tens of thousands of tiny lights, an idea based on the team's study of 65 or so sci-fi movies. Russo calls himself a 'light freak'. In Barcelona, he and lighting designer Ignace d'Haese tried to 'build architecture with light. The lighting made people lose all notion of where they were,' he says. 'Some things can't be seen on the video: by directing beams of light from above, for instance, we created a black hole in the sky. Light moved up and down in the air.'

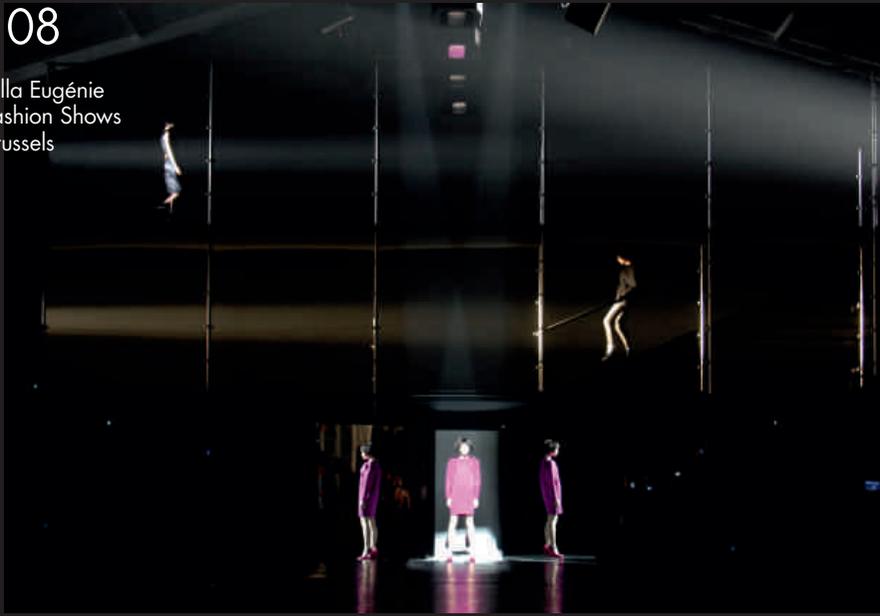
A staff of 500 worked on the project, and the show reached its finale in exactly 12 minutes and 30 seconds. 'That's what it takes. It's all about image. Everything we do contributes to the image of the collection and of the company behind it.'

At the end of the fashion show, automatically operating trolleys move along the catwalk. On them are ice sculptures illuminated from within. Everything is staged; even the people who clean the catwalk after the show are part of the performance. Dressed as spacemen





Chanel fashion show, Prêt à Porter, Autumn-Winter 2007/08, Grand Palais, Paris. Clouds, snowflakes and ice give the show its distinctly wintry look.



Lanvin Women, Autumn-Winter  
2007/08, Paris. Scaffolds, stair-  
ways, mirrors and gantries form  
an immaterial and visually fragile  
structure criss-crossed by models.



in white overalls and armed with high-pressure nitrogen machines, they prepare the catwalk for the buffet.

Dressed in a dark-blue T-shirt and casual trousers, Russo keeps apologizing for the mess, which I hardly notice. He picks up a fabric-covered black book with gold-edged pages, a monograph on the work of Dries Van Noten. In another life, he used to model for Van Noten. Now he's put together all 63 shows featuring the fashions of the Belgian designer, with whom he has a good understanding. 'We've been working together now for 16 years. I tend to build up longtime relationships with most of my clients. I start by assimilating the person in front of me, penetrating his or her world. It's not like watching a flower open its petals; we need to talk, to eat a meal together, to meet again. In the beginning, it's an extremely slow process, but once I get to know someone, things go fast. In the case of my regular clients, the fastest we did was to put a show together in three weeks.' He says it's also important to know that 'we don't do the same thing for every customer. Sometimes it's full service, sometimes executive production, sometimes a fifty-fifty creation. What you're looking at here is one of our larger events.'

Russo spends about a quarter of his time in Brussels. 'I pay taxes here, but that's it. I live out of my suitcase for the most part, sometimes for two or three months at a go.' Travelling is a vital part of his success. 'In my head, I carry a thousand little boxes. When it's time to do an event, one or more boxes open and from there it's a kind of domino effect.'

For a man who's worked side by side with the Big Names in fashion, Russo has a remarkably strong aversion to name-dropping. Nor does he like cluttering his projects with rife references to the client. The Hugo Boss Orange logo, for example, is seen only at the beginning and the end of the video we're watching. What he's selling is an *experience*. 'I hate branding. I can't stand it. People don't go to a party to see a logo all over the place; they go to experience something. This is where I enter the frame. It's my job to give people shared moments.' He laughs. 'I'm a sponge; I swallow, see stuff, read things, put it all together. I'm sometimes asked why I stare at women. It usually has nothing to do with sex appeal but with some other trigger – maybe her shoes, maybe the way she walks.'

He educated himself while working in a nightclub in Brussels. 'I was the art director there, changing the set every once in a while. Once I transformed the whole club into an underwater world. Everyone, even members of the club, had to pay 50 cents to get in, and the money was used to sponsor a save-the-whale project. Kind of unusual for a chic club. I like coming up with the unexpected. Cutting people off from reality.' His eyes gleam with content. 'The creative part is what I find so amazing. Even when you're throwing a party at home, the preparation is always the most fun. And I love to share ideas with people – therein lies the treasure. Who are you when you're all alone?'

Russo will turn 50 this year, but he still questions himself at the end of each season. 'I don't want to repeat myself. And questioning yourself is part of being in the fashion world.' Yes, he'd like to do a long-term project – perhaps an installation or a touring event – although

he worries about pulling it off. 'My booster is fear. The fear of failure makes me want to work ten times harder.' It's a pity, when you're such a perfectionist, that there's never the time or the opportunity to refine your work. 'What you saw on video earlier is work that feeds my frustration. Someone told me that a dance production by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker [Belgian choreographer] was preceded by six months of rehearsal. Prior to the final performance of the tour, which was in Belgium, she still had time to work on the details of the dance, whereas we have one lighting rehearsal and maybe time for two walk-throughs. We tend to the details as much as possible, but once the show starts, it's out of our hands. It's a source of constant inner conflict, this inability to refine and adjust things. Whatever the project, it can always be more perfect.' He pauses before adding, 'The beauty of a temporary event lies in its fragility. I think that's what turns me on.'

## 'The beauty of a temporary event lies in its fragility; that's what turns me on'

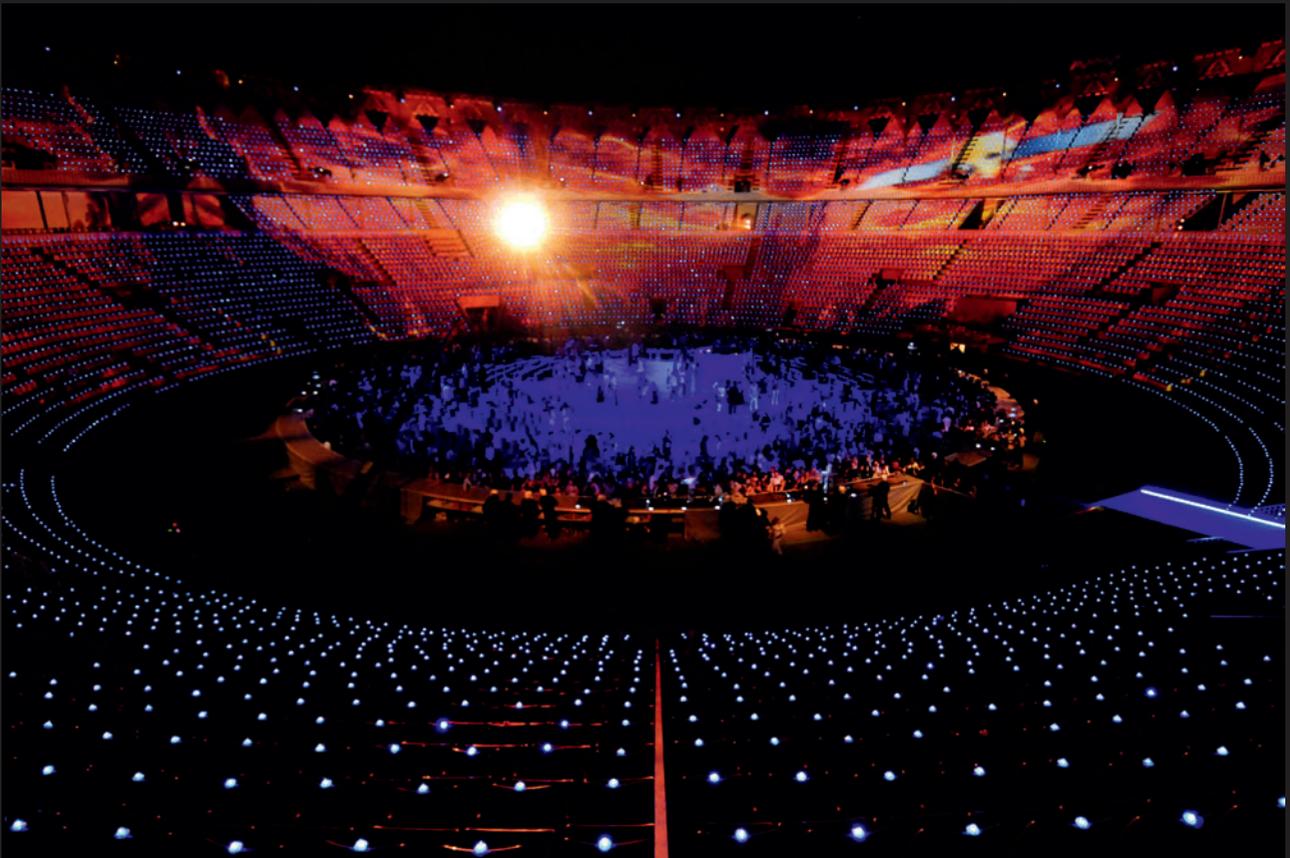
Russo says he's a man of vision. 'When I entered the arena, I could smell that this was the place we wanted. Choosing a location is based on what you want to communicate,' he says. 'A warehouse? Possibly. But only if it's got that dilapidated look. Some collections call for more intimate venues. Certain things need to be spoken out loud; others ask to be whispered. But it all starts with letting the space talk to me, with absorbing the vibrations. I see more with my instinct than with my eyes.' He lacks design skills and admits he doesn't 'know how to draw a straight line. That's why I surround myself with people who have such skills.' He stresses the importance of human interaction. For a show featuring Lanvin, he and Alber Elbaz (creative director of Lanvin) were so enchanted by the people hired to scrub the floor that he used them as an opening act. 'It looked like a ballet. And you might shake your head and wonder why I'd do such a thing, but a spotless floor is key to the success of the whole show. It's a chain reaction, and each link is essential.'

He likes the speed in fashion, the ease with which it responds to changes in culture and society. 'Some feel the fashion industry is superficial, and it is in some ways, but it also reflects and analyses society: moments in time are frozen in fashion.' Fashion is about sensing what the future will bring us before anyone else is even aware of it. Surely he finds it reassuring to realize that what's true of the fashion industry is true of Villa Eugénie's creations. 'I don't know if I'll still like them five years from now. Who knows? I may think they've fallen out of fashion.'

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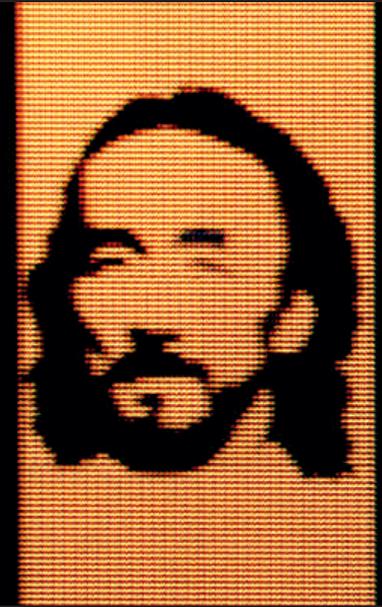
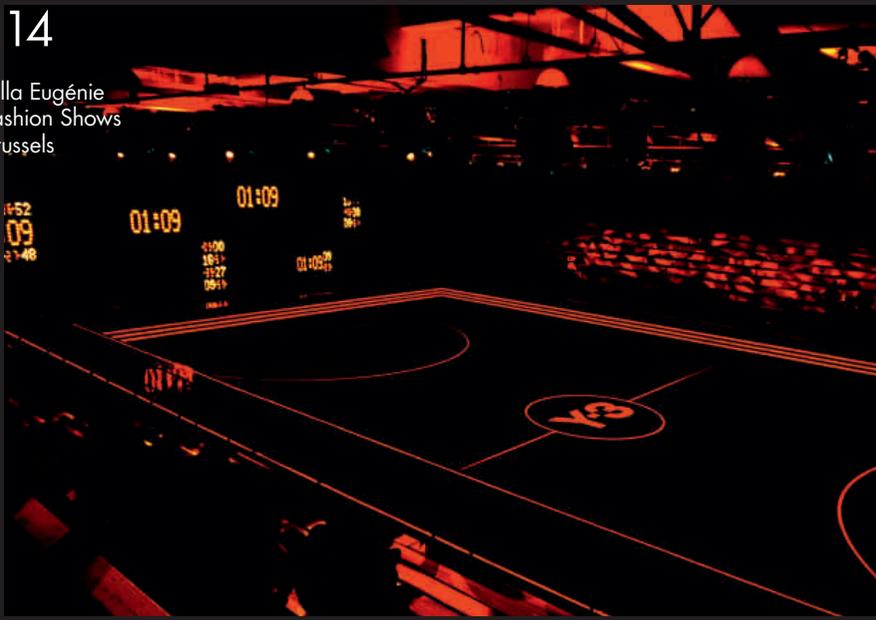
Hugo Boss  
Orange, Autumn-  
Winter 2007/08,  
Barcelona.  
Following a puff of  
smoke, a helmet-  
clad model appears  
on the catwalk.



Hugo Boss Orange, Autumn-Winter 2007/08, Barcelona. A total of 18,000 LEDs turn the Plaza de Torros bullfighting ring into a spaceship. The audience fills the centre of the arena, which is embraced by a circular catwalk.

'I'm a sponge; I swallow,  
see stuff, read things,  
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Y-3, Autumn-Winter  
2007/08, New York City.  
A basketball court, its playing  
surface framed by the trade-  
mark three stripes of Adidas,  
forms a fittingly sporty décor  
for the Y-3 fashion show.

'The fashion industry reflects and analyses society: moments in time are frozen in fashion'

