

FASHION LIBRARIES

BETWEEN MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL SHELVES

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Abstract

This article represents a reflection extracted and reworked from my MA thesis titled *Beyond the Library: A Study of Fashion Documents' Archival Spaces*. With a reflection on the current panorama on the field fashion libraries, this paper aims to unpack the relationship that are at stake between social media archives and fashion libraries at large. Often seen as an unmatchable duality, with the opposition between paper and the digital that seems to be in constant contrast, I aim to demonstrate that the two fields can not only coexist, but also be of mutual benefit for the formation of a more actualised, inclusive and comprehensive definition of 'fashion library'.

Keywords: Fashion Library, Digital Fashion Library, Fashion Research, Archive, Fashion Collections

Introduction

In the last years the digital turn and social media platforms have challenged a reimagination of what a library can be. In this realm, in fact, everything becomes potentially a library. In 2023, we see an emerging fashionability around the institution of the library, especially in the field of fashion, through the means of digital platforms. On Instagram in particular, we witness an emergence of several profiles using and abusing of the terminology that belongs to what was usually identified as fashion's paper temples. To mention a few, @milanofashionlibrary, @garment_library, @queer_reads_library, @fashionbusinesslibrary, @veganfashionlibrary, or even @archived.dreams, @archivepdf, @archived and @a_r_c_h_i_v_i_s_t. These are only a few of the most popular profiles that, by appropriating of the terminology of 'library' or 'archive', seem to be addressing a large portion of the Instagram mainstream public, although the topic of the 'fashion document' does not seem to have the same appeal and interest for fashion insiders (and non) outside the social media realm. The use of terms like 'library' and 'archive' seems to,

in a way, legitimise some hypothetical knowledge that the profile seems to have over a portion of the fashion industry and to gain a certain institutional recognition from the platform, therefore gathering the attention of the public. What is compelling about these examples is, in fact, the use of a certain terminology that belongs to a fetishist way of looking at the document — like the words 'archived', 'grotesque', 'private' or 'hidden', applied for example when identifying simply vintage clothing shops such as @thegrotesquearchive, @hidden.ny, @thearchiviststore — and that somehow increases the aura behind these profile, as if the definition of 'archive' itself refers to something unreachable and to be deemed as a true cult. Why do these names sound so appealing to the public when almost no interest has been shown by fashion insiders, fashion institutions, fashion exhibitions, to what an archive or a library usually preserves? Why are fashion documents so overlooked by the fashion system itself and yet their secretive appeal seems to increase the value and popularity they can gain in digital platforms? Another proof of the proliferation of the popularity of the library as an institution — and therefore of the push towards the expansion of the concept of

the library and its practices after the digital turn — can be found in an emerging resurgence of the due to the loss of their materiality in the ever-evolving digital platforms. It is very common now to find on Instagram the profile of, for example, many museum or school libraries, in which they display new acquisitions or relevant documents from the collection. Some of the most notable are @costumeinstitutelibrary, @momulibrary, @bibliotecaiuav, @fitlibrary, all curated by their librarians. What these institutions have in common is that they represent places that tend to be quite exclusive in the way they are conceived.

Museums libraries and university libraries, similarly to archives and documentation centres, do not often seem easily accessible to most researchers, as people might have to be students, book appointments or give reasons for their visit to what is a portion of a bigger institution. The Instagram profile, however, can represent a shortcut for this. As materials and extracts of books are shared on social media, an interested researcher might not even have the necessity to leave the house to find what is looking for, thus pushing towards a more curated, and even superficial, type of research (as the only pages accessible are the ones that are pre-selected by the librarian). It is, however, a more inclusive way of looking at the collection of a library, which might represent a risk for this institution to be rethought through the digital realm. The online in fact, has become a democratic tool to approach a limited number of objects that can be rare, hard-to-find, or even private. Therefore, there seems to be a necessity to rethink the discourse regarding the nature of these places and the access to these types of documentation too.

An emblematic example of this tricky relationship between digital and physical library can be found in the case of the International Library of Fashion Research, that was founded in Oslo in 2020 by editor and publisher Elise By Olsen. This institution, now hosted in the rooms of the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design of Oslo, is open to researchers as a drop-in, free-access type of public library. It first gained the attention of fashion insiders by appearing as an Instagram profile and website in what seemed to be merely a 'digital library' (By Olsen, 2021). Now that the institution is running however, the webpage of the library still serves to its original purpose, being the database through which researchers can browse and discover what they could possibly find when accessing the shelves of the physical library. This,

I argue, demonstrates a possibility and elongation of how the two archives — the digital and the physical — can overlap and implement one another. It shows a possibility of the library to become a more actualized space. In addition, the website of the International Library of Fashion Research also serves as a space for micro-curation initiatives that can display a way of conducting research through the shelves of the library [Fig. 1]. In the page, in fact, while the materials can be searched by a simple search engine, they are also grouped and reimagined into curated sections, like for example by preference of the donor of the objects, or by thematic groups aimed to mimic a sort of exhibition display that the objects can partake into. Thus, these curatorial initiatives show another possibility of expansion that the digital realm can push. If in a physical archive objects and documents are carefully stored in proper boxes, acid-free cases and put in order in the fixed, stable shelf, in the digital archive this stability is often rethought, giving the possibility to the researcher to virtually witness the multiple ways in which one object can relate to the other and so on.

Therefore, this example showcases both a necessity and an opportunity to reposition and rethink the nature of the library in contemporary times and to reconsider the essence of the fashion knowledge it produces. While questioning the relevance of the institution of the library nowadays, my aim in this paper is to showcase how these institutions are still a necessity in the fashion industry and are not outdated or destined to be replaced by the apparent more dynamic reality of the digital realm. More specifically I aim to demonstrate how the two worlds tend to favour and exchange with one another, making the former fundamental to the latter and vice versa. I argue in fact that understanding the current stake and identity of a fashion library means also to understand multiple methods of conducting fashion research nowadays.

Unpacking the Terminology

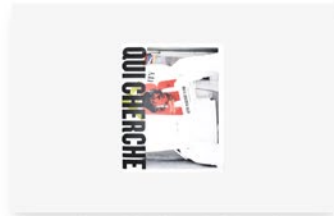
In order to re-define the institution of the fashion library in current times, previous studies and definitions of these types of spaces need to be taken into account.

In 1967, the French philosopher Michel Foucault outlined one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the space of the library, defining it with his concept of heterotopia. A heterotopia



Our selection for the exhibition "Printed Dialogues" in collaboration with Parsons Paris Library in May 2023. The selection focuses on five axes: bodies; actors; geographies; eventful shifts; and material matters.

Printed Dialogues



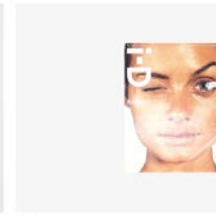
Parsons Paris "Qui Cherche Trouve?" Pamphlet 2023



Helmut Lang Autumn 1999-2000 1999



Rick Owens FW 17 Glitter 2017



iD Magazine March 1999 1999

A selection to showcase Louise Bourgeois constant influence, dialogue and exchange with fashion

Louise Bourgeois: Imaginary Conversations



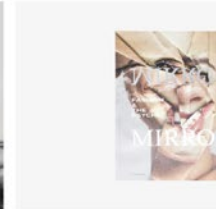
W Magazine September 2010 2010



A magazine curated by Simone Rocha 2018



Memoire de la Mode Comme des Garçons 1998



Mirror Mirror: Fashion and 2022

Fig. 01

is a real and concrete site, linguistically and conceptually opposed to the utopian one. These spaces have rules, expectations and power relations that define them and that need to be followed. He uses the library as a good example to understand the concept, since this place can be defined as a type of heterotopia that is linked to "slices in time" (Foucault, 1972; Miskowiec, 1986). The library in fact, just like the museum, breaks the relationship between men and the time they live in, and it constitutes a heterotopia that functions with the purpose of accumulating time:

"The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organising in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopia that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century." (Foucault, 1972; Miskowiec 1986).

The library is therefore the product of contemporary times, seen as a place that is thought to encapsulate other testimonies of multiple epochs and different spaces in a unique site. The relevance of the library lays in its physicality, at least

metaphorically. It is seen as a finite site whose space inside is bigger than the one of its own physical building or room. If we consider this definition in contemporary times, multiple types of libraries, that can be defined as heterotopia are emerging. Can the physicality of the library that Foucault is referring to be identified as a digital one too? I argue that, in order to be relevant in the realm of the twenty-first century, the physicality of the library needs in fact to include also certain digital platforms, as they can encapsulate different epochs and spaces in one whole, comprehensive space that accumulates knowledge while transcending the rules of time and space. By the means of an Instagram page, online archives like the one of @rarebooksparis, an online bookstore specialized in rare, one-offs contemporary fashion publications, becomes a heterotopia in the sense that its followers can easily jump from one fashion remarkable moment to the other by simply scrolling down the page [Fig. 2]. At the same moment, the act of stopping, recollecting, screenshotting certain images can let a person get in touch with a form of knowledge that would instead be distant and secluded from the mainstream public if the owner of the page did not decide to put it at service of researchers, for free, by also providing important information in the caption on who the practitioners related to that peculiar image are.

Thus, by applying the definition given by Foucault to the current stake of fashion libraries, I have arrived to consider that the margins and the physicality of the term 'library' need to be enlarged to become a more comprehensive device that gathers these variety of identities. In addition, there needs to be a further recognition of the materials that are normally preserved within its (virtual or physical) walls. By acknowledging these differences, we notice that oftentimes certain institutions that fall under the umbrella term 'library' may flirt with other type of institutions like archives and centres of documentation, a link that it is already much more evident in the digital realm since pages and profiles often mix and exchange the terminology that usually refers to one or the other institution without particular attention due.

The centre of documentation, for example, can overlap with the library since it represents a research centre usually placed inside a bigger institution, for example the one of a museum. As the term suggests, this type of collection is usually dealing with printed and flimsy documents that are supporting the objects that belong to the 'main collection' of the museum. The centre also acts to map the activities of the institution (exhibitions reviews and documentation, etc...). This definition, I argue, already implies a hierarchical differentiation of certain objects that should be identified as more important than others. If we take the example of the fashion museum in fact, the 'main collection' would be the one of clothes and garments preserved in the archive, while the printed matter created around the same fashion is deemed as being identified as 'supporting materials', thus not as worthy of the attention of the public. If, however, these collections are taken and translated to the digital realm, this difference seems to be less evident, as these flimsier, secluded and non-public materials, meaning fashion ephemera, seem to gather the attention and interest of many devoted followers. This is because usually only professionals in the related field can reserve an appointment to consult the documentation. In this sense, the centre of documentation seems to be less democratic than the institution of a library in terms of the possibility to access its materials.

However, to consider the documentation centre as an elongation of the institution of the library, means to include ephemera in the collection of 'books' stored in the shelves. By ephemera we identify all those objects, documents, invitations, press releases, catalogues, lookbooks and materials

that survive their original function, thus to inform an event happening in the fashion industry, and that are preserved as gatekeepers of that part of fashion history (Pecorari, 2021). By considering the overlapping of identity between library and documentation centre, these types of objects also force us to manifest the multiplicity of the fashion library in terms of both its practices and its definition. These documents are in fact oftentimes responsible for bringing to the shelves of the library the concept of 'unofficial knowledge' introduced by Raphael Samuels, in order to speak for an alternative type of history distant from the one that is written by those institutions that act as temples of authorisation of history and knowledge

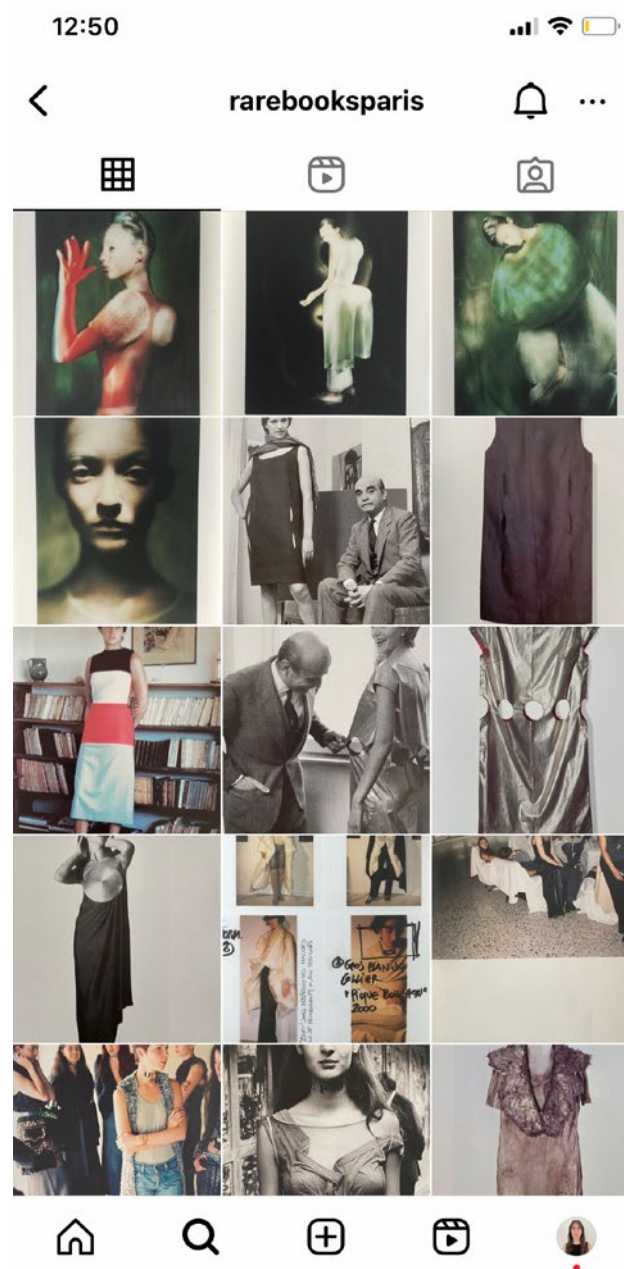


Fig. 02

— such as museums, but even ‘canonical’ libraries (Samuel, 1994). This type of knowledge encompasses the voices of the everyday too, by acknowledging memory as a form of history to be preserved, and then refers also to a personal story related to the artefacts (Samuel, 1994). In relation to ephemera, as they were previously belonging to a former practitioner of the industry who then decided to donate it to the institution, they often recall signs of its past owner and life: in an invitation to a fashion show for example, it is common to find the name of the person invited, and some eventual notes that the person might have taken at the event (Pecorari, 2021). In this sense, the interest from the general public towards these more ‘hidden’ dynamics behind the fashion system and the emerging fashionability of the ‘fashion document’ in Instagram platforms and social media pages can be further understood.

In a parallel and similar way, it can be also argued that the institution of the fashion library at times flirts with the idea of the archive as it may overlap with its original mission and function of conserving printed matter and objects that are non-accessible for people outside the fashion industry. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Michel Foucault defines the archives as “systems of statements” (Foucault, 1972) as he writes:

“The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities.” (Foucault, 1972).

In this view, the archive is what legitimates a thing or an event by organising these statements in multiple groups that present similar characteristics between each other and thus institutionalise knowledge. Furthermore, these statements — the materials contained in the archive — are not just documents, but take the large definition of ‘objects’. If considering that in the fashion system a library can encompass books, documents and, because of this overlapping, even objects, the institution of the fashion library acts just as the archive in authenticating and institutionalising facts and events. In this sense, every self-defined ‘library’

in the digital realm is then responsible for a form knowledge creation and institutionalisation of its own. Not only the library opens to a wider public, but also a wider public opens up further possibilities of understanding a fashion library. Hence, if we go back to the Instagram profiles that act as ‘digital libraries’, we could say that they are symptomatic examples that bring us to the necessity of rethinking the definition of ‘fashion library’ today. I argue in fact that with the advent of the digital, we observe a blurring of control and power in the ways libraries are constructed. Digital platforms have helped opening the dialogues about who is supposed to share and who is supposed to access certain aspects of the fashion system, also allowing a personal vision to enter the discussion. The digital realm also serves as a tool to decentralize the focus and interest of fashion. In doing so, the digital seems to be expanding an idea of the library, questioning its own mechanisms of control and ways of operating.

Therefore, I argued that due to the advent of the digital turn and to a growing fashionability of the terminology of the fashion library, the definition of ‘library’ itself needs to move beyond the one of merely a repository of books, and in doing so, it will broaden its scope. In fact, the library can be seen as a device to reorient an understanding of fashion beyond the garment alone, and will act to redefine several hierarchies of materials that are currently at stake in the fashion system. These additional objects of interests are fundamental to be studied today because they can speak for another, additional and parallel history of fashion, oftentimes complementary to the one written by the study of garments, whilst at times in opposing contrast. In a fashion library in fact, we might find clothes, but the garment may not be the most eloquent source to research a certain aspect of fashion as other types of documentation may be more declarative, like a personal document, a sketch, a written description and even through forms of oral history. This permits a formation of subsequent hierarchies of knowledge.

By letting this long-lived institution open up to new possibilities that are reoriented by the digital realm, the fashion library will prove to be a fundamental institution where research can and needs happen in several ways. The digital presence of certain materials will in fact not represent a risk for the library to become ‘unfashionable’ but rather an asset that can be utilised to expand its walls beyond their own physicality. In this sense,

the institution of the library would serve as an inclusive space were fashion histories are presented are re-presented, in multiple and varied ways. To conclude, every library, digital or physical, personal or public, produces a form of knowledge that can be defined in close relation to the materials it keeps and preserves, and thus speaks for. Conversely, the documents and materials that are part of a library concur to the creation of different types of knowledge, that if 'unofficial' will become 'official', and therefore to vary a definition of the nature of the library that, with the means of its digital presence, opens to be a more accessible and inclusive form of institutionalised knowledge.

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Figure Captions

Fig. 01: International Library of Fashion Research Website. Micro-curated sections from previous projects and initiatives in which the library took part on or organized. Courtesy of International Library of Fashion Research.

Fig. 2: RareBooksParis Instagram Profile. A screenshot from the Instagram account @rarebooksparis, showcasing how social media platform can serve as research pages for many fashion insiders, but also for the general public. Courtesy of RareBooksParis.

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