

# ARLIS/UK & Ireland Research Award

## Report: International Library of Fashion Research, Oslo, Norway, March 2024

The idea of a 'fashion library' is one that resists definition. To some it is a term that may conjure the image of racks of clothes that can be borrowed like books, while others may imagine stacks of magazines from famous publications like *Vogue*. In truth, fashion libraries can be both of these things, and more. As a Subject Librarian for fashion subjects, and a fashion historian and curator, it is a term I wrestle with when introducing students to the highly varied physical and digital collections I manage in my role. I was therefore intrigued when the International Library of Fashion Research (ILFR) opened to the public in 2022 with these words printed on their doors.

Asked to name some of the most fashionable cities in the world, most people would list Paris, London, New York or Milan. Historically, dominant discourses of fashion knowledge are located in these cities, which are also home to internationally-recognised design schools and global fashion houses. However, the ILFR is based in Oslo city centre, in the grounds of the National Museum of Norway. The staff there are proud of how Oslo as a location disrupts expectations. Situated outside of global fashion centres, the setting thereby refuses to privilege Italian fashion over French, or American over British.

On my arrival, I was met by Elise By Olsen, the director and co-founder, as well as Ilaria Trame, head librarian, and Else Thorenfeldt, head of communications, who all generously agreed to be interviewed as I sought to learn more about their space and collections. Although fashion media includes books, magazines, journals and other material commonly found on library shelves, the industry also produces a wide range of more disobedient objects (artworks, lookbooks, show invitations, press releases, illustrations, zines, etc.) that, through the many physical permutations of print, challenge expectations about the traditional role of the library. I am therefore particularly interested in how these multitudinous fashion publications are managed and mediated within a library space.

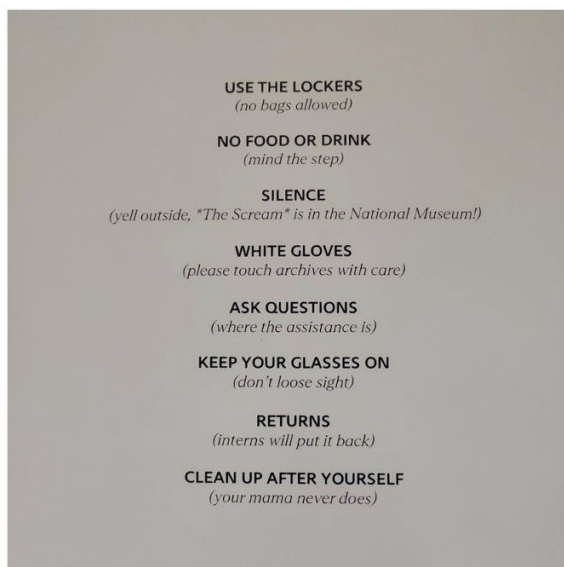


Approach to the Station Master's House,  
home of the ILFR.



Interior of the ILFR

And the space is an impressive one, comprising the upper two floors of the historic Stasjonsmesterboligen (Station Master's House), situated next to the harbour and straight across from the National Museum's main entrance. The first floor is given over entirely to a revolving exhibition programme and guest salons, while the second floor is the Library itself. In contrast to the historic building, the interior is modern and minimalist, predominately white and silver, with reflective surfaces and aluminium shelves. Pops of colour appear from the shelves where books and magazines are stored, but the majority of the collection is held in dove grey archive boxes. However, the space is not austere; displayed at the top of the stairs are the Library's rules – usual library by-laws accompanied by tongue-in-cheek instructions – and more wry humour is on display on the book trollies, each labelled 'The Lousy Librarian'. This comes from a soubriquet Elise By Olsen applied to herself in the early days of the Library, after she left a visitor with a box of rare material and suddenly had to intercede when they attempted to unwrap a precious show invitation that resembled a chocolate bar. She hired a librarian to manage the collection soon after.



Library 'rules'

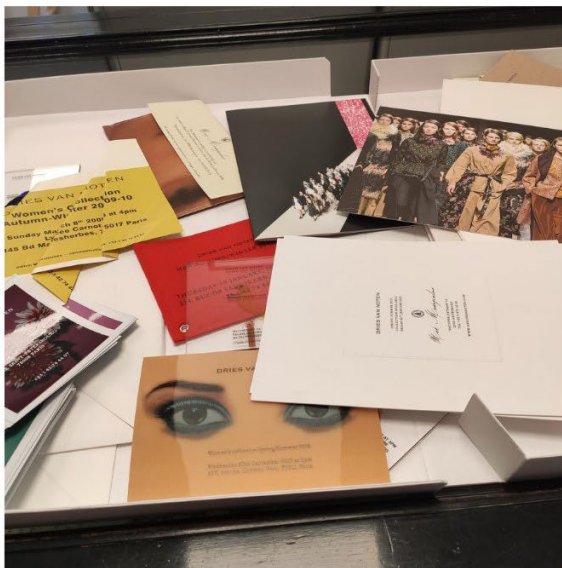


Returns trolley

This humour is necessary to understanding the collections. The ILFR was conceived of in 2020, from an initial donation of ephemera from Steven Mark Klein, dating from 1975-present, and subsequently built upon with additional donations from major global fashion houses (Balenciaga, Hermes, Schiaparelli, Comme des Garcons, to name but a few). With such illustrious associations, there is a temptation to take these items too seriously, but that is not the ILFR's aim. One of Elise's goals when founding the Library was to create something that she would have appreciating having access to growing up as a young person with an interest in fashion. She comments that, distinct from "contemporary or historical art, fields that may be more, without using the word, elitist or alienating for young people, that's where fashion has benefits." Fashion is not a rarefied thing solely experienced in a museum; it is worn on the body and seen on the street – and so it is important that a fashion library can be experienced in the same way. And certainly many objects in the collection exhibit this playfulness and skeuomorphic delight – the collection includes pop-up books, show invitations in the forms of VHS tapes, receipts, jigsaw puzzles, photographic film slides or cases of moss, lookbooks presented as exquisite corpse flipbooks and lenticular printed press releases. These are objects that beg to be handled, experienced and played with. This is why it is essential for Elise that the ILFR was a library – "not an archive, not a storage



space, not a mausoleum.” She points out that while these collections are not unique – many archives hold fashion show invitations and press releases – most institutions place a high burden on the researcher before they will grant admission to their materials. Ilaria expands on the distinction between fashion library and fashion archive, noting that “materials are nothing without the people that touch them, because it's that that makes them active and unique. Otherwise, they're just lying there in an archive, and that's not what we want.” Therefore, all of the collection is publicly and freely accessible, barring two shelves of rare material which can only be handled on request. Generally white gloves are not required to touch even the rarest press releases, and there is no barrier to entry. Whilst sitting and discussing this point, a member of the public walks up the stairs, and Ilaria jumps up to greet him.



Box of Dries Van Noten ephemera



Gucci 'Exquisite Corpse' flipbook



Balenciaga show invitation in the shape of a VHS tape



Hermes pop-up book

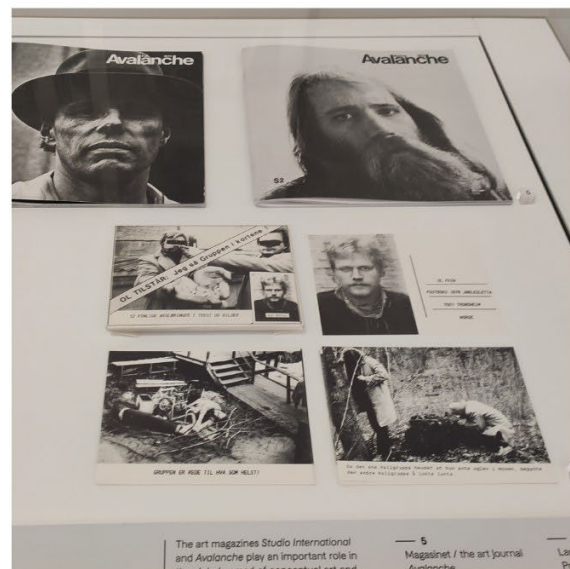
The rest of my time in Oslo was devoted to exploring these collections in detail. As these collections have grown, they have taken on further significance to the fashion industry. Many large brands did not think to save their ephemera, and so the ILFR has become a repository,

where representatives from global fashion houses can come to study their own history. The Library also houses a near-complete collection of *Visionaire*, often regarded as the most expensive fashion magazine in the world due to its multimodal and evolving publishing format. Unlike a conventional library, the books were a later addition, offered as a donation. Elise, noting that the high cost of many fashion books, which are often produced in a coffee table format, put them out of reach of many students, decided to expand the collection. And of course there are also fashion magazines, although these are far from typical, encompassing some of the more avant-garde and sought-after titles (e.g. *A Magazine Curated By*, *Marfa Journal*, *Bloom*, *Fantastic Man*) in incomplete runs that reflect their status as ephemeral publications, alongside more mainstream titles, such as *Vanity Fair* and multiple international editions of *Vogue*. The rarity of the collections combined with the more typical, approachable fashion material, and the accessible nature of access of its public library setting, is the key to how the ILFR preset fashion's printed matter.

I concluded my trip with a visit to the National Museum, which opened in Oslo in 2022 and consists of the collections of the former National Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design. As the parent organisation of the ILFR, I was interested to see how the contents of the museum aligned with the mission of the Library. Although the museum has its own library, distinct from the ILFR, it is easy to see how having a separate fashion research library on site complements the ongoing work of its parent institution. The museum's dedicated fashion gallery contains clothing produced by Norwegian designers from 1970 on, which co-indices with the scope of the collection of the ILFR. There are other works on display in the museum that are also supported by the Library's focus on rare printed matter, such as *Avalanche*, the 1960s conceptual art journal sometimes described as a gallery-in-print, a term that has also been applied to *Visionaire*. The way these spaces complement each other reminds me of the continued importance of printed matter to artistic practice and of the importance of print as an object.



Work from contemporary Norwegian fashion designer, Edda Gimnes, in the National Museum



*Avalanche* magazine on display in the National Museum

As Ilaria tells me, libraries are all about context; “how do you define a book? Because for me, if it's put on that shelf, that VHS cassette is a book because you can actually read it as an object.” And this is perhaps the defining attribute of fashion libraries – recontextualising fashionable material, making it an object of study. This is something I will take forward into my own work, and into my further research in the role and function of fashion libraries, and

the purpose of rare fashion publication in academic library settings. I am grateful to ARLIS UK for the award that enabled me to travel to the ILFR to experience their approach firsthand, and to the team at the ILFR for their help and support in this project.

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