

# Drawing Time: Showcasing Archives Beyond the Museum. The case study of 1●Corso·Como “Yohji Yamamoto. Letter to the Future”

Irene Calvi\*

Università di Bologna (Italy)

Published: January 15, 2025

The exhibition of archival pieces has been perceived as a prerogative of museums and institutions with a historical focus, however, fashion museology has often broadened the horizon of exhibition-making, exploring new ways to present archives. In recent years, corporate museums have adopted strategies to reframe their archives, frequently aiming to reconnect the heritage with the contemporary collection on sale and to engage the public in uncovering the inspirations behind the creations they will later encounter inside shop windows. A compelling example is the *Gucci Visions* exhibition at Gucci Garden in Florence, which dedicates a room to pairing archival outfits with those of recent collections. This juxtaposition immediately highlights the resonance and endurance of archival pieces in new and inspiring creative processes. The display's effectiveness is evident, as it invites even casual visitors to discern the connections between past and present, often requiring careful observation to distinguish earlier pieces from newer ones. However, while this approach is effective in this context, it might not evoke the same resonance in another temporary exhibition, leaving the feeling of being overly didactic. Gucci is renowned for showcasing its archive in this way, explaining its importance and essence like in the previous touring exhibition, *Gucci Cosmos*<sup>1</sup> in the section which is also narrated on the Maison's website under the title “Putting the archive into orbit”.<sup>2</sup> These initiatives demonstrate Gucci's commitment to integrating its rich history with contemporary fashion, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of its heritage among a broader audience. The reasoning around the archive prompts the following critical questions: How are other spaces innovating the display of fashion archives? What narratives are they

---

\* ✉ [irene.calviz@unibo.it](mailto:irene.calviz@unibo.it)

1. Gucci Cosmos opened in Shanghai from April to June 2023 at West Bund Art Center, then in London from October to December 2023 at 180 Studios.
2. “La messa in orbita dell'archivio”, Gucci, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://www.gucci.com/ch/it/st/stories/videos/article/cosmos-shanghai-making-of>.

employing, and what lessons can visitors derive from them? Are we moving away from a linear concept of time, where archival pieces are invariably the oldest, and contemporary works are excluded from museum or archival contexts? Many exhibitions might attempt to challenge this last aspect, but the recent display titled *Yohji Yamamoto. Letter to the Future* held at 10 Corso Como in Milan offers a compelling exploration that deserves closer analysis.

## The space: 10 Corso Como

“Storefronts have become windows for creation and dream arrangements. [...] As for 10 Corso Como, the windows there are on the inside.”<sup>3</sup> This excerpt captures the long history of 10 Corso Como as a unique concept store, experimenting with exhibitions of fashion, design and photography. Here the renewed vision of the Gallery exhibition space is taken into account under the directorship of Tiziana Fausti and the curatorial expertise of Alessio de’Navasques, exemplified by the exhibition dedicated to the designer Yohji Yamamoto<sup>4</sup> that opened from May to July 2024. Besides fashion, the other main characters of the space are photography and design thanks to the “polyphonic project”<sup>5</sup> put into place by the group of curators of which Alessio de’Navasques is part. This collaborative aspect of the Gallery’s exhibition program undoubtedly contributes to its renewed success. Following a renovation project in November 2023, the aim was “creating a space akin to a secret garden where visitors can always discover something unexpected”.<sup>6</sup> The space has long been a Milanese landmark, hosting a store, café, and bookshop. Its redesign by the interdisciplinary agency 2050+ has transformed the Gallery and Project Room into two hubs for cultural programming, seamlessly connecting the commercial ground floor with the upper level in a unique “contemporary cabinet of curiosities”.<sup>7</sup> Through the exhibition *Yohji Yamamoto. Letter to the Future*, the new vision promoting cultural exchanges and conversations is clearly outlined.

## The Anti-exhibition for an Anti-fashion

When museum director Johannes Cladders defined the anti-museum in 1968, his purpose was to “criticize the museum’s power to transform an artist’s work through a kind of official process of cultural validation”.<sup>8</sup> The prefix “anti” encompasses a range of concepts and attitudes that challenge or reject traditional definitions, making the display of *Yohji Yamamoto. Letter to the Future* a fitting example of an anti-exhibition. Not merely due to its unique venue, the concept store, but more so for its effort to spark a new dialogue between clothing and language, challenging the historical and linear representation of objects on display. Furthermore, there is another terminological connection, as Yamamoto’s creations have often been celebrated as “anti-fashion” both by fashion scholars and in the several exhibitions that have been made about him and his works. The trope of ‘avant-garde’ fashion may sometimes dilute the term’s meaning, but in this case, referring to Yamamoto’s designs as anti-fashions stems from

3. Emanuele Coccia and Donatien Grau, *The Transitory Museum* (Newark: Polity Press, 2019), 31.

4. Yohji Yamamoto is a renowned Japanese fashion designer celebrated for his avant-garde and minimalist approach to fashion. Born in Tokyo in 1943, he launched his label in 1972 and soon gained international acclaim. Yamamoto is known for his innovative use of drapery, asymmetry, and oversized silhouettes, often employing a predominantly black colour palette that reflects a philosophy of understated elegance and rebellion against conventional fashion norms. Throughout his career, Yamamoto has received numerous accolades, including the prestigious *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* from the French government and the Master of Design Award from the Fashion Group International. He has also expanded his influence beyond clothing, exploring other creative outlets such as costume design for opera, theatre, and film. He is regarded as a visionary who continues to push the boundaries of design, influencing contemporary fashion on a global scale.

5. Alessio de’Navasques, interviewed by the author, 29 July 2024. The interview has been conducted in Italian and every direct quote has been translated into English by the author.

6. “Rethinking 10 Corso Como”, Press Release, 10 Corso Como, accessed December 8, 2024, [https://10corsocomo.com/it/blogs/news/10-corso-como-announces-the-beginning-of-a-new-chapter?srsltid=AfmBOoqdsIHJLonRaUgXg\\_DjqyNZA6ojoSks38DioWWA1s8wm45q194](https://10corsocomo.com/it/blogs/news/10-corso-como-announces-the-beginning-of-a-new-chapter?srsltid=AfmBOoqdsIHJLonRaUgXg_DjqyNZA6ojoSks38DioWWA1s8wm45q194).

7. Ibidem.

8. Eva Branscome, “Triptych for an Ideal Museum: Hollein, Beuys and Cladders.”, *AA Files*, no. 71, (2015), 100.

his pursuit of creating clothing that conveys “an idea of the future and beyond time”.<sup>9</sup> As he put it himself, “I want to achieve anti-fashion through fashion.”<sup>10</sup> In 2011, as recounted by Romano, he “had already been displayed in more than thirty museum-based exhibitions in Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan”.<sup>11</sup> More remarkably, his first museum exhibition took place just two years after his debut prêt-à-porter collection in Paris in 1981, a moment “which incited visceral reactions of both wonder and contempt”,<sup>12</sup> and likely led to Yamamoto’s scepticism of his clothes being understood by curators. The display of 10 Corso Como is fortunate to draw on all these examples to tackle the challenging task of retracing past steps while exploring a new approach inspired by previous experiences yet distinct from them. For example, the retrospective held in Tokyo<sup>13</sup> in 2003 included recent collections up to 2000, trying to cover thirty years of career, and in doing so many retrospectives showed hundreds of Yamamoto’s creations. Instead, the selection of 10 Corso Como has been carefully curated: the exhibition featured twenty-five looks, displayed in two rows leading to a section mounted on a circular pedestal. Conversely, the display adhered with the repeated choice of keeping the garments at ground level - apart from the modestly raised pedestal. This reinforces the idea of fashion as transient, avoiding the elevation of pieces to the “work of art” status, and instead preserving its ever-evolving nature and value. The famous triptych of exhibitions — *Correspondences* in Florence at Palazzo Pitti and *Juste des Vêtements (Just Clothes)* in Paris at Musée de la Mode et du Textile, followed in 2006 by the one in Antwerp at MoMu, *Dream Shop* — now almost twenty years old, have set a direction in Yamamoto’s approval or dismissal, and a high bar in terms of defying museum taboos, or showing as much as possible of not only the clothes in their shape, colour and materials, but also Yohji Yamamoto’s values and statements. That being the case, the idea behind *Yohji Yamamoto. Letter to the Future* explored new forms of curatorial practices, fusing the three-dimensional form of the dresses with the two-dimensional quality of the printed words.

## The Narrative: Drawing Time

Yamamoto expressed his desire to “draw time”, which is eloquently realized through the installation of the twenty-five dresses. This installation is conceived as a letter to the future, merging past and present, and showcasing archival pieces alongside future creations, broadly covering the years 1986-2025. It encapsulates the continuous challenge Yamamoto has posed to fashion throughout his career. The Gallery’s exhibition emphasizes the garments themselves, with each shape, cut, and geometry conveying an idea of timeless futurism. The exhibition delves deeply into his “poetic use of structured yet ethereal designs”<sup>14</sup> that capture the viewer, eliciting emotions and thoughts. This profound and personal engagement with his designs allows a new way of experiencing the archive on display, based on discovering the atemporal relationship between body and clothes.

A spontaneous dialogue emerges between the text and the dresses, born from a conversation between the designer and the curator. Yohji Yamamoto’s acceptance of the exhibition stemmed from its dynamic connection to the archive, embodying vitality rather than static retrospection. As a literature enthusiast, Yamamoto envisioned the dresses as drawing tools, with the gallery acting as a blank canvas. Two reflections emerged from the exhibition visit, shared here as a non-comprehensive example of what could have been understood during the visit. The first reflection is the silent dialogue of the two mannequins facing

9. “10-Corso-Como and Yohji Yamamoto announce the exhibition Yohji Yamamoto. Letter to the future”, Press Release, 10 Corso Como, accessed December 8, 2024, [https://10corsocomo.com/cdn/shop/files/Press\\_release\\_10\\_Corso\\_Como\\_Yohji\\_Yamamoto\\_exhibition.pdf?v=6680268307851676879](https://10corsocomo.com/cdn/shop/files/Press_release_10_Corso_Como_Yohji_Yamamoto_exhibition.pdf?v=6680268307851676879).

10. Yohji Yamamoto and Kiyokazu Washida, *Talking to Myself by Yohji Yamamoto* (Gottingen: Steidl Publishing, 2002).

11. Alexis Romano, “Yohji Yamamoto and the Museum: A Contemporary Fashion Narrative” in *Yohji Yamamoto*, ed Ligaya Salazar (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011), 102.

12. Ibidem, 105

13. The exhibition was titled *Yohji Yamamoto: May I help you?* and it took place at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art.

14. “10-Corso-Como and Yohji Yamamoto announce the exhibition Yohji Yamamoto. Letter to the future”, Press Release, 10 Corso Como, accessed December 8, 2024, [https://10corsocomo.com/cdn/shop/files/Press\\_release\\_10\\_Corso\\_Como\\_Yohji\\_Yamamoto\\_exhibition.pdf?v=6680268307851676879](https://10corsocomo.com/cdn/shop/files/Press_release_10_Corso_Como_Yohji_Yamamoto_exhibition.pdf?v=6680268307851676879).

each other, one with the wool coat and hat of the A/W 1986-87, renowned for the recomposition of forms here expressed by this outburst of red silk taffeta in the bustle. Opposite it stands the coat of the A/W 2024–25 presented in Paris just a few months before the exhibition opening, as the centrepiece of the catwalk finale. You can observe both mannequins, walk in between them, and around them, yet still feel like a third presence —one that can't fully understand—, but only witness their dialogue between past and future. To encapsulate this, the sentences on the wall behind them refer one to the mother (the past) and one to the young people in the world (the future) urging them to “study history not to reproduce the same mistakes”. Secondly, the colours. Among the backdrop of white walls, the dominance of black and white designs was struck by occasional red lighting, immersing the visitor in the intensity of these three colours. In particular, the spectacular red jacket coat and hat from the A/W 1995-96 collection was mesmerizing, and the rare opportunity, not always granted, to look at the back of this emblem of Yamamoto's knowledge of different sources that he then reinterprets with new structures as the visible folds on the back of the jacket.

Central to the display's effectiveness are the beautiful Bonaveri mannequins and the careful mounting, the result of a true collaboration between Yamamoto's Parisian team, 10 Corso Como and Bonaveri that accounted for a special design helping the final outcome of the display. The white base on the mannequins was made on purpose to support the visual impact of clothes floating in space,<sup>15</sup> merging with the floor and walls of the Gallery. This carefully studied work has been carried out keeping in mind how important it is to maintain the shape of Yamamoto's creations, made to challenge the relations with the wearer's body and therefore with its representation by a mannequin. In this arrangement, the mannequins encouraged viewers to rethink the relationship between clothing and the body, moving beyond conventional notions of dressing. Unlike other precedents and typical fashion museology practices, this time the white space of the Gallery was devoid of photographs and videos. Apart from the dresses and words, the only additional element accompanying the visitor's journey of discovery was music. It has been defined as “a trend of post-modern museology”,<sup>16</sup> but the reason why mixing art forms can effortlessly improve a visit to an exhibition is because all senses are involved. In this anti-exhibition, the music was produced and sometimes vocalized by Yohji Yamamoto himself, embracing the spectator and welcoming everyone into his own world even through auditory cues.

## The Viewer: an Active Agent

Taking everything into account, one aspect that stands out is the impact this display had on the public. As Alexandra Palmer reminded authors when writing “most reviews describe the exhibition contents—the fashions—yet often omit an analysis that measures the successes or shortfalls of the exhibition itself, the curatorial thesis, and the installation techniques”.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is important to highlight the profound and transformative experience that the visitor undergoes as an active agent.

First, it is important to remember that the previous exhibitions with Yamamoto's dresses already actively aimed at crossing traditional museum boundaries, with the most famous *Dream Shop* in Antwerp, where twenty outfits were displayed but also available if the visitors wanted to try them, in a space redesigned to be with white lights and changing rooms. The public began to perceive the clothes as consumable items, transforming the museum experience into a commercial one, thus their perspective shifted from that of a viewer to that of a wearer. The experiment was particularly appreciated by the designer because “by engaging the museum spectator as an interactive consumer, the exhibition symbolized a major break from traditional museological practice”.<sup>18</sup>

15. From the description given by Alessio de'Navasques, interviewed by the author, 29 July 2024. The interview has been conducted in Italian and every direct quote has been translated into English by the author.

16. Romano, 110

17. Alexandra Palmer, “Reviewing Fashion Exhibitions”, in *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 12 no.1, (2008), 123.

18. Bonnie English, *Japanese Fashion Designers: The Work and Influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2011, 62.

Then, 10 Corso Como offered a Gallery space which had on one side more freedom than a museum room, but on the other an unmissable bond with the commercial side of the venue. Some of the aspects mentioned above already presented the experience of the visitor, the most striking one being to have the clothes on display at a natural height and freedom from window cases, allowing to have a close relationship with the dresses and the rare possibility to admire the details. Rather than lengthy wall texts or external voices, the words of the designer himself accompanied the viewer, maintaining the curatorial precision conveyed through the labels and the introductory text. The short labels are poetic yet informative, supporting the reflection of how the body/dress relationship is addressed each time. Lastly, the music completed this introspective experience, where one not only left with the impression of having truly encountered the designer and received a message from him, but also to have been immersed in beauty, in a space with no time, in the busy streets of Milan. About the impact this exhibition could have had over a long span of time, it is necessary to remember that some of the dresses on display were of the most recent collection, therefore fashion students and enthusiasts would have experienced the joy of seeing up close something they recently got to see on the catwalk. The innate “shop window” effect of dressing up mannequins, considered inevitable, was in this case avoided because the coat from the A/W 2024–25 collection wasn’t even available in retail spaces. Another key aspect of situating *Yohji Yamamoto. Letter to the Future* within its momentum and its relationship with the audience, was the concurrent blockbuster exhibition of Dolce & Gabbana *Dal cuore alle mani (From the Heart to the Hands)* displayed at Palazzo Reale in Milan. While certainly a contrasting type of show, it was still highly visited, highlighting once again the potential of fashion exhibitions in Italy and the fact that there is a dedicated audience for such exhibitions. When going to Milan and visiting both, the experience was particularly striking, the D&G exhibition was a major retrospective featuring spectacular rooms designed to present a relatively recent span of time, grouping collections and pieces according to certain thematic or tropes of the fashion house. The case of Yamamoto, as described already, was different but more importantly a deep and intimate experience offered to the more and less *habituée* of fashion exhibitions. The fact that this was perceived as a positive factor of the visitor experience signifies that maybe the public was longing for a place like the current 10 Corso Como, hopeful to rediscover fashion according to a well-structured narrative and eager to retrieve an emotional reaction to a moment of personal discovery. Even the curator said he was particularly pleased with the emotional reaction some of the viewers expressed to him, a sign that even if minimalist in many aspects, the power of the selected pieces and the work done to build the display was perceived.

In conclusion, the hope is that the anti-museum stance has been resolved through this unique display space, offering redemption almost twenty years later the Palazzo Pitti retrospective that left Yamamoto dissatisfied. This has been possible through the dialogue between curator and designer, the chosen anti-linear narrative, and the hybrid space that hosted the experience. The archive has been redrawn as a letter composed of words, fabrics and shapes, with the designer a time-traveller that reshapes volumes to interact with the body. Often, discussions centred on the suitability of fashion in museum settings and the hierarchy of such places for displaying fashion, rather than on the exhibition’s success and merits. The hope that this exhibition has left is that more exhibition/anti-exhibition like this one will be fostered in the Italian landscape in the future, enriching the interpretation of the fashion archives and further intertwining the corporate and museum mindsets.

## Bibliography

- Bonnet, Federico. *Yohji Yamamoto: An Exhibition Triptych*. Antwerp: ModeMuseum, 2006.
- Bonnie, English. *Japanese Fashion Designers: The Work and Influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2011.
- Branscome, Eva. "Triptych for an Ideal Museum: Hollein, Beuys and Cladders." *AA Files*, no. 71 (2015): 92–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43687073>.
- Coccia, Emanuele and Donatien Grau. *The Transitory Museum*. Newark: Polity Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175693814X14035303880678>
- Palmer, Alexandra. "Reviewing Fashion Exhibitions," *Fashion Theory*, 12:1 (2008): 121-126, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174108X269595>.
- Pecorari, Marco. "Fashion archives, museums and collections in the age of the digital". *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, 10 (2019): 3–29. [https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.10.1.3\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.10.1.3_7)
- Romano, Alexis. "Yohji Yamamoto and the Museum: A Contemporary Fashion Narrative" in *Yohji Yamamoto*, edited by Ligaya Salazar (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011), pp. 102-127.
- Yamamoto, Yohji and Kiyokazu Washida. *Talking to Myself by Yohji Yamamoto*. Gottingen: Steidl Publishing, 2002

**Irene Calvi** – Università di Bologna (Italy)

✉ [irene.calvi2@unibo.it](mailto:irene.calvi2@unibo.it)

She is a PhD student within the fields of visual and fashion studies at the University of Bologna and is passionate about fashion interpretations in museums, especially when emerging technologies are involved. She supports the creation of international networks and for this reason she is a member of the executive committee of The Association of Dress Historians, and participates in the activities of the CFC - Culture Fashion and Communication International Research Centre, among others. She previously worked at Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art in Turin, Italy, as the Director's Office.