MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Barbara Franchin

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Barbara Franchin. President, Fondazione ITS and Founder, ITS Contest and ITS Arcademy - Museum of Art in Fashion

Portrait Barbara Franchin ® by Guliano Koren
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MODEM:
Trieste is often described as “the least Italian city in Italy and the most Italian city among all non-Italian cities.” Does this unique combination make the place the ideal location for ITS beyond traditional fashion centres, and to what extent can its local environment offer opportunities unavailable elsewhere?

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
That contradiction is precisely why ITS Contest belongs here - and why we were able to establish Italy’s first contemporary fashion museum in this city. We were invited many times to move ITS Contest to a fashion capital. We chose not to. Not only out of love for our hometown - although that matters - but because distance, in the end, is power. **Being outside the traditional fashion system protects us from its noise, its speed, its politics.**

Trieste is a borderland: historically open, layered with cultures, facing the sea yet rooted in Central Europe. A place of exchange, internationally oriented but not driven by the competitive pressures that define Milan, Paris, New York or London. When jurors and members of the press arrive here, they slow down. And that shift changes the way they look, the way they listen, the way they evaluate creativity. ITS Contest requires that distance: a space where emerging designers are not overshadowed by the immediate demands of the industry, where attention is

concentrated on their work, and where everyone is fully present, focused and engaged.

Trieste is not a compromise. It is a strategic choice. It gives us perspective - and perspective is what allows us to recognise new talent often before the rest of the system does, and to give it the attention, care and recognition it truly deserves.

MODEM:
ITS has developed from a competition into a cultural institution with an archive, a museum, and an educational mission. Describe the ways this transformation has shaped the approach to nurturing creative talent, along with its anticipated long-term outcomes for this form of cultural infrastructure

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
In 2022 we became Fondazione ITS, formalising a commitment we had already been living for years: to preserve and protect creativity. In 2023 we opened ITS Arcademy, Museum of Art in Fashion, the first - and still the only - contemporary fashion museum in Italy.

We continue to search globally through our open call and long-standing relationships with schools, but what has changed is the continuity we can now offer. Designers no longer experience ITS as a single moment. They become part of a living ecosystem. First, they entrust us with their work, often one look, but sometimes entire collections and those pieces enter the ITS Arcademy Collection, where they are cared for and activated so that they inspire other designers, schoolchildren, students and visitors.

Former contestants return to Trieste as mentors and teachers. I have seen Demna address young finalists not as a distant icon, but as someone who once stood precisely where they stand. That circular exchange is fundamental. **Talent nurtures talent and the museum provides the structure that allows that continuity to exist.**

In the long term, this is what matters most: continuity. By preserving early works and sustaining relationships through what we call the “ITS Family,” we are building cultural infrastructure in an industry too often governed by short cycles and immediate results. **Creativity is not a prize or a moment of visibility. It is a long practice - and it deserves a place where it can develop, be respected and endure.**

MODEM:
After more than twenty years of observing young talent, any design trends or ways of thinking from the new generation appear particularly surprising or fascinating while standing out from the rest?

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
Since 2002, through our “The Seismographer” report, we have documented the seismic shifts in emerging talent and how designers mirror and question, the world they inhabit. What strikes me today is not a “trend” in the conventional sense, but the deep transformation taking place.

Young designers are not entering fashion naïvely; they are entering it with full awareness of its contradictions. They are less interested in spectacle and more interested in accountability. **When heritage, autobiography and politics appear in their work, they are not aesthetic gestures**. They are returning to craft, to personal and collective histories, not to romanticise them, but to question and transform systems of production, of authorship, of power. Categories are breaking down because the world around them has already broken its boundaries. Gender, geography and discipline are fluid. Craft and technology coexist because

they must. What might look chaotic is often a refusal to conform to outdated frameworks.

Instability has not made them fragile; it has made them more alert, more conscious. And that awareness is reshaping fashion from within. It is not by chance that the current edition of ITS Contest is titled **“Rise and Shine.”** That is precisely what this generation is doing.

MODEM:
Creativity is often regarded as needing to remain non-hierarchical and non-elitist. How could a truly inclusive global design system be structured to ensure that talent is visible regardless of background, resources, or connection to traditional fashion capitals?

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
Talent is everywhere, opportunity is not. If we want a truly inclusive global design system, we must begin from that imbalance. The design system has been built around a few capitals, a few schools and a few networks. If you are not already close to those centres, geographically, financially or socially, the barriers multiply. Tuition fees are getting higher. Internships are underpaid. Access to supply chains focuses on big budgets. If the system remains extractive, pulling talent into capitals without reinvesting in local ecosystems, inclusion is hard to achieve.

An inclusive system would make quality education more affordable and better distributed, insist on fair pay from an early career stage, reconnect young talents with traditional crafts and favour collective creative models over the mythology of the individual genius. **The role of governments** (at every level, from European to local) **and leading companies is key**. We could not do what we do without the belief and support of the Regione Friuli Venezia Giulia and the Italian Ministry of Culture. Their recognition that creativity strengthens and future-proofs communities makes it possible to build infrastructure even in a city as unique as Trieste, decentralised with respect to Italy, but with a European outlook.

MODEM:
Thousands of portfolios have been collected to form a unique archive of artistic expression. Preserving these ideas for the future of fashion proves important, as future generations may gain insights not yet apparent today?

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
Ours is one of the largest and most diverse collections of early works by fashion designers in the world: 15,643 portfolios from 80 countries, alongside 1,318 fashion items, 189 accessories, 120 jewellery pieces and more than 700 digital photography projects. It represents a unique record of creative beginnings.

Preserving these ideas matters not only for the future, but for the present. The works already **inspire designers, students, visitors and researchers**, who often discover connections not visible when they were first created.

The collection began simply, a few boxes stored in the attic of what was then the first ITS office, where I still live. I kept the portfolios out of respect for the designers who entrusted us with their work, and because they felt like small works of art. **What began as a labour of love is now a museum,** and that comes with added responsibility. Contemporary fashion presents complex conservation challenges: silhouettes that require custom support and garments made of paper, gelatin or experimental resins, materials whose ageing processes remain uncertain. There is no established manual for preserving contemporary fashion. Safeguarding this archive requires specialised expertise, museum-grade storage and ongoing passion and research.

MODEM:
Your innovation platform is housed in a former bank building that symbolizes capital and you collaborate closely with an insurance company. What determines in general for you the value of fashion, and where do the greatest risks lie?

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
I find that symbolism interesting rather than contradictory. Fashion, like art, has always operated at the intersection of culture and capital. The masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance remind us that patronage has long been essential to artistic innovation.

We are grateful to our partners: Fondazione CRTrieste supports our educational programmes, and Generali is invaluable in helping us preserve and expand the Collection. They too recognise that the value of fashion is not primarily financial. Its true value lies in its ability to translate ideas into material form, to reflect social change, to challenge norms, to record the spirit of a time. Fashion is the only art form we carry on our bodies every day. It shapes how we see ourselves and how we are seen by others. That cultural and emotional dimension cannot be reduced to market price.

At the same time, fashion is an industry. It generates employment, craftsmanship, technical innovation and regional economies. **The greatest risk, in my view, lies in reducing fashion to pure commodity. Another big risk is exclusion: when access to education, production or visibility becomes restricted to those with privilege, stifling creativity**.

MODEM:
Fondazione ITS aims to protect, maintain, and foster creativity. In a time of rapid technological change, when AI and digitalization create both opportunities and uncertainty, is the mission becoming more urgent or presenting new ways to pursue it effectively?

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
Technology continuously reshapes the way we live and create. At Fondazione ITS, we champion human creativity and fashion as an artistic form, we value what is raw, material and tangible. That does not mean rejecting technology. Creativity can and will continue to be enhanced by it.

Of course we are concerned, as many in the creative industries are, but we need to look at both the good and the bad. AI is a tool. It can mimic creative processes - sometimes superficially, sometimes with human-like precision - but it can also support and extend them. **What we observe among young designers is nuanced and still evolving. Interestingly, many are not using AI to generate fashion concepts directly, but to power research, refine communication, or even take care of administration**. In that sense, AI can free time for thinking and therefore increase the quality of the creative output.

In the end, we are not in the business of teaching designers how to use AI; we are however extremely interested in how they choose to engage with it, and in the evolving ethics that will shape its use

MODEM:
You frequently encounter young talents at sensitive stages of development. Are there common mental or emotional challenges that emerging designers face during this time,

and in what ways can your institution provide support in a sustainable and authentic path?

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
Creativity itself is an act of exposure. To create is to open oneself to the unknown and that can be unsettling. Many young designers struggle with self-doubt, comparison and the pressure of speed. The digital environment amplifies these tensions, adding a particular fragility to this generation.

We cannot remove these pressures, but we can create conditions that make them less isolating. Through ITS Contest, our Residency and the broader network we call the “ITS Family,” designers build lasting bonds. They remain connected beyond the competition. They gain peers, mentors and a sense of continuity.

Creativity is not a race; it is a long practice and no one should navigate it alone. This is why we evolved ITS Contest from the search for “the best” to a collective recognition of talent. We have also seen how important it is for designers to encounter their work in a museum context after the Contest. Seeing their pieces preserved and respected helps them understand that their talent has value beyond immediate industry validation. That recognition can be stabilising at a sensitive stage of development

MODEM:
The fashion industry operates under enormous pressure, with constant speed, evaluation and exposure. Share your perspective on structural changes that strengthen creative energy without exhausting it. Are you aware of any initiatives that support such improvements across the sector?

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
The pressure comes from a system designed for constant output: more seasons, more content, more judgement, more visibility with very little protection around the creative process. Burnout is not an individual weakness; it is often a structural design flaw. It is telling that many of the designers we welcome no longer seek a traditional industry career.

If we want creative energy without burnout, the change has to be structural. The common denominator is clear: **reduce unnecessary speed, and replace exposure with sustained support** - time, money, mentoring - **so creative risk remains possible without becoming destructive**. It also demands transparent labour conditions and collaborative support models instead of perpetuating the myth of the isolated genius.

We are doing our part, as are others: I am thinking of the BFC initiatives, the CNMI Fashion Trust, and the work of Pitti Immagine Tutoring & Consulting. But initiatives are not enough. For real change, the industry itself must finally slow down - not as a gesture, but as a new operating model.

MODEM:
If the fashion world were asked to focus on a single guiding question for the coming years, suggest one and outline its importance.

BARBARA FRANCHIN:
If the fashion world were to focus on a single guiding question in the coming years, I would choose a very simple one: “Why are we really doing this?” Because the moment we lose purpose, we stop creating and start just producing. We fill space. We add noise. We accelerate,

and we mistake speed for value. Fashion today is, in many ways, a sick system. Brands are pressured, creatives are exhausted, consumers are overwhelmed and the planet carries the cost.

Asking forces designers, institutions and companies to confront intention. **Are we solving real problems? Are we generating beauty? Are we contributing something necessary or simply sustaining a cycle that weakens us all?**

Fashion is an industry, yes - but it is also a language. And the coming years will belong to those who use that language with clarity: **saying less,** perhaps, **but with purpose.**