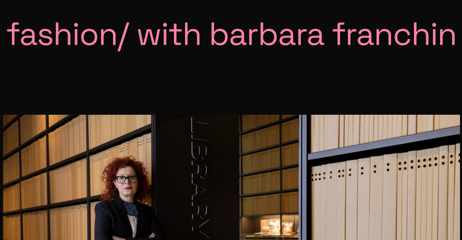
fashion/ with barbara franchin


Barbara Franchin, photo by Camilla Glorioso.

Barbara Franchin (born 1967) is the director of International Talent Support (ITS), a scouting platform that she founded in 2002 which offers support, visibility and opportunities to young designers coming from all over the world. ITS jurors have included high-profile personalities from the world of fashion, art and photography such as Raf Simons, Nick Knight, Franca Sozzani, Cathy Horyn, Valerie Steele, and Marina Abramovic. In 21 editions it has launched the careers of more than 670 finalists, who have gone on to hold positions at some of the most famous brands in the world – Balenciaga, Bottega Veneta, McQueen, Chanel, Calvin Klein, just to name a few – giving shape to the fashions of tomorrow. Since 2016 she has been included in the prestigious BoF500 list. As a talent scout for young designers, she has been featured in a number of international articles and TV reports and is a consultant for fashion design companies and universities.

Franchin is also the founder of ITS Arcademy, the first contemporary fashion museum in Italy located in Trieste.

LUCIJA ŠUTEJ: Your door into the world of fashion is unusual – you have a background in accounting and previously worked in real estate. How did you gravitate towards fashion?

BARBARA FRANCHIN: It does sound unusual, but it did help me out hugely – specifically accounting. Finding a space to set up an office that would organise an international contest, and dealing with a budget to cover costs for staff, traveling, and production…actually, I couldn't think of two better professional backgrounds to avoid silly mistakes in the making!

I initially got hooked on fashion when looking for something unique to wear for my graduation. I stumbled on this very gifted seamstress and saw her at work. Once I stepped inside her atelier, I never left. I got mesmerised by seeing someone taking pieces of fabric and shaping them into garments – something with a soul, a creative expression. The seed was planted then and there; it took a while to germinate.

LŠ: That was one of your first roles in the fashion world – opening an atelier with a friend who was a dressmaker. It would be great to hear more about why you opened an atelier together and how this specific experience helped you launch the International Talent Support (ITS).

BF: I was so fascinated that I asked that seamstress, Erica, to team up and open a place together. We wanted to work on extravagant and unconventional clothes – we knew we wanted to be creative. Working side by side with someone who already had the knowledge was fundamental for what I did later. I learned the techniques, I understood the fabrics, the treatments, and how to find solutions depending on what our clients would require. It was a wonderful time of my life! We called it the "Axis," around which the earth rotates, the imaginary line around which a body creates itself in space, that gravitational pull responsible for all creation in the universe…to create something, you need to have an axis, an idea…The place wasn't huge, and it needed not to be. We filled it with our will to make it happen.

LŠ: In 2002, you launched an international scouting platform that supports young and emerging designers worldwide. How and why did you decide to form ITS? What were some of the initial challenges to get it off the ground?

BF: Working as a seamstress myself, I understood the struggles that young designers face in an industry where nobody would help you out, explain things, or tell you the dos and don'ts, particularly at that time. I knew my passion in the long run was to work with a team on a project. With ITS I wanted to achieve 3 things - first to create and work with a dedicated team of people I could trust as a family; second to express my love for Trieste; and finally to showcase beauty – which creativity so incredibly displays in all of its possible declinations, from nature's work to that of the human mind. It all started from these points, basically.

Before 2002 I had the opportunity to sort of "test" the project by creating and organising another international contest for a local institution. But it was when I met Renzo Rosso that things really took off – he was a true gentleman, and he believed in what we were doing and gave us wings to fly.

ITS Contest, 2004 (Demna).

ITS Contest, 2006 (Matthieu Blazy).

LŠ: Are there colleagues or perhaps even mentors whose advice was vital to you in the formation of ITS? What was the advice?

BF: For a project of this scope, you can't just go on your own and listen to no one. Of course, I trusted—and still do—my gut, but there have been countless friends and collaborators who gave me good advice and made me see things from a different, useful perspective. So I can't pinpoint one single piece of advice, though I can certainly say that without the support of some of my oldest collaborators, I don't know if I would have made it to where we are today.

LŠ: Were there other platforms that you were inspired by?

BF: We were very young and reckless at the time and wanted to do things our own way, wanted to make things differently…we weren't that much interested in what others were doing.

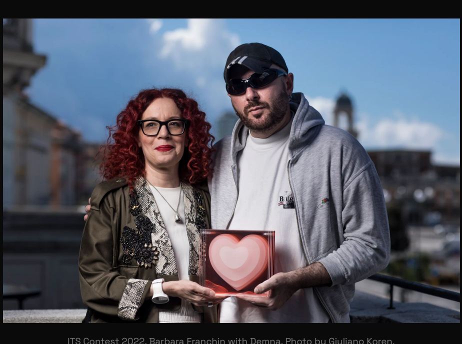
LŠ: Why did you decide to base it in Trieste? What opportunities did you see in the city?

BF: Trieste is my home. I see myself in this city, and the city reflects who I am and what I love. I have always considered it an underestimated jewel that deserved recognition and deserved to welcome people with an unconventional, creative approach arriving from all over the world. I wanted to make it a crossroad of cultures, as it used to be historically. Its beauty is unquestionable. An amphitheater facing the sea, with lush hills and countryside behind castles and imperial buildings on the water…you can see the Alps when the wind clears the air. It is magical; how can one not see the limitless potential of the city? And I am proud to have contributed, through ITS, to put Trieste back on the map, bringing international guests that used to tell me, "Trieste?? Where??" say, "Ah! Trieste!! Can't wait to be there!"

ITS Contest, 2014(Maiko Takeda).

ITS Contest, 2018 (Chopova Lowena).

ITS Contest, 2018 (Seiran Tsuno).


ITS Contest 2022, Barbara Franchin with Demna. Photo by Giuliano Koren.

LŠ: Over 20 years, how has the format expanded? What were some of your biggest challenges in the two decades of organising ITS? Which partnerships and sponsorships were vital for its expansion?

BF: As an agency funded by private companies, we faced challenges for most of our history – fighting for survival basically every single year. I remember looking at ourselves every time the contest finals were over, saying, "Ok, how are we going to raise the budget for the next one?" Much of the stress I felt at the time was due to trying to provide for my staff, to creating them a job they could rely on and a good salary. Looking back, I don't know if I would have continued without this responsibility I felt on my back. Also, my biggest struggle was explaining what I was trying to achieve in the long run. You know, it's a bit like feeling you're on a ship trying to convince everyone else there's an island out there, but nobody sees it except you.

There have been many brands and institutions we partnered with, and they were all vital for the project's expansion. But to grow and establish solid roots in your territory as we did, certainly, the support of our Region Friuli Venezia Giulia and our city hall in Trieste was key. They believe in what we do, as does Fondazione CRTrieste, which grants us our home for ITS Arcademy – Museum of Art in Fashion today, and Generali, who ensured our archive collection, ensuring our future.

LŠ: In the long history of ITS, you partnered with prominent personalities from the world of photography, fashion, and also art – from Raf Simons, Nick Knight, Franca Sozzani, Valerie Steele, Iris van Herpen, Manish Arora to Marina Abramović. How was each edition shaped through these partnerships?

BF: I wouldn't say we partnered with them. We invited them to "join the family", we asked them if they liked the idea of being part of the jury responsible for supporting the talented emerging designers we scouted. We managed to create a space where everyone would arrive and feel at home, welcomed, and relax from the hustle and bustle of traditional fashion events thanks to a professionally tailored hospitality that would leave them one single task: view, enjoy, evaluate and support the creativity we'd lay under their eyes, through exhibitions and fashion shows. Everyone has always landed at ITS understanding that this is a collective event, that they didn't need to shape anything. The limelight has always been on young creativity, that's always been, and still is, the Axis… 😊

ITS Contest 2022, Barbara Franchin with Róisín Murphy. Photo by Giuliano Koren.

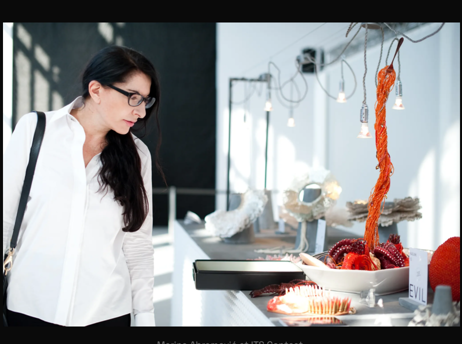
ITS Contest 2022

Valerie Steele at ITS Contest. Photo by Giuliano Koren.

LŠ: Why did you see it necessary to also involve artists in the jury positions in addition to fashion designers, curators and journalists?

BF: Because the kind of fashion creativity ITS has always searched for – is a form of art. We've always looked for those who walk the unbeaten path and shape new directions and possibilities. That's a form of art in all fields of design. We wanted to invite different perspectives on creativity because the approaches might differ, but the language is the same. It is very stimulating and culturally relevant to welcome many different views from many different art fields. But this is not the only reason. Artists constantly inspire young designers in their projects: painters, performance artists, writers, musicians…they look at their work and shape new directions through fashion. So, it felt natural to invite artists to the jury.

There is also another reason that is very dear to me. It is the reason why we decided to define ITS Arcademy as a "Museum of Art in Fashion." Fashion feeds on art, but at the same time, there are so many different arts in fashion: illustrators, artisans, pattern cutters, tailors, knitters, printmakers, milliners, glove makers…I always knew I wanted to tell their stories.


Marina Abramović at ITS Contest.

ITS Contest 2022 (backstage).

ITS Contest 2004 (Demna).

LŠ: Further, ITS works closely with more than 1000 fashion schools globally — why did you yourself never establish a fashion school?

BF: It isn't something I haven't thought of, and I have been invited more than once. But until today, ITS has been the bridge, a fundamental tool for students coming out of schools all over the world who had very few support tools to make it into the industry. Today many contests are helping young fashion designers, and perhaps the contest format is saturated and needs to evolve.

This year, we experimented with a new format, ITS Residency: a full calendar dedicated packed with workshops and seminars for the finalists, held by professionals in the field, from Demna to Orsola de Castro, Sara Sozzani Maino, past finalists from ITS…a chance for young designers to learn and talk directly with who has experience, an even more targeted and focused way to receive support that finalists have welcomed with enthusiasm. It rubs shoulders with a school, but it's a "school outside of school", if I may… We're very excited about how the format can evolve.

ITS Arcademy, by the way, has an entire area dedicated to learning, with workshops and laboratories for all ages, and all walks of life (students, professionals, or just people who are curious about challenging themselves with creating).

LŠ: Which fashion schools have in recent years, in your opinion, supported the most daring talent? And why?

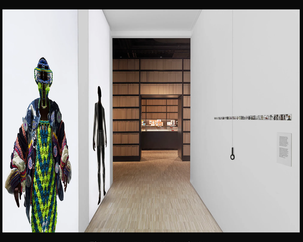
BF: Hard to answer this one, there's many schools out there doing a great job. At the same time fashion education is mostly private and it's a business, so there's also many schools out there selling the dream of fashion design, in the fees their students pay rather than in selecting the most gifted ones. Sometimes it really seems that "the more students, the more money" is the goal, instead of providing the tools to make it in an industry that, in any case, is incapable of absorbing the huge amount of students graduating every year. There simply aren't enough chairs for everyone, when the music stops.

Suppose you ask me which schools have shaped the most daring talents. In that case, those who are seriously passionate about education, with a forward-thinking department direction, have decades of experience in what the industry is and what it is looking for – with the future of their students as their fundamental mission. Teaching is what it should be for these schools: the most important profession of all. It is a huge responsibility, comparable to being a parent. Teachers shape us (if we are among the lucky ones who access education) into human beings who will, in turn, raise children, vote, lead countries, change destinies, and take crucial decisions for our planet. I really can't see how someone who creates and heads a school has the guts to treat it like a hedge fund.

LŠ: As ITS grew, so did its collection – an archive of submissions collected globally

that trace the developments of contemporary fashion production. When and how did you decide to create what is today – ITS Arcademy – Museum of Art in Fashion?

BF: ITS Arcademy has been years in the making. We began archiving portfolios from the beginning and collecting items from our finalists in 2005. A couple of years later, we opened for private viewings a space in the attic of our old office, where we set up a set-designed showroom/archive. There, we kind of saw the potential for a museum coming, but it was only in 2018 that we developed and structured the idea and found the backing and the space to make it happen, and we are still learning and understanding what we will become.



ITS Arcademy, photo by Massimo Gardone.

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LS: Were there other fashion museums whose model you found intriguing – and why?

BF: We looked around, of course, but the ITS Arcademy project was so unique that it made it hard to drive inspiration from other museums. Even the collection is so unique: first works of designers who later became heads of renowned brands, like Demna in Balenciaga or Matthieu Blazy. Apparently, we're the only ones in the world who have preserved the graduation projects of such creative talents, together with over 15,000 portfolios from our contest applicants… It's an archive unlike any other, and it demanded a tailored approach and its own model to happen.

LS: Why did you decide to focus on the dialogue between contemporary fashion and art?

BF: Fashion is a form of art. Crafting objects with your own hands is art. The dialogue has always been there – one only has to look at the countless inspirations that designers receive from works of art – and at the same time, it could be said that there's no dialogue at all: it's actually the same field: the same tree, same roots, just different directions branching out.

LS: Can we also stop at the name - Arcademy – what does it mean to you? What is your vision for the institution as it expands?

BF: We coined the word "Arcademy" to blend Ark, Archive, and Academy. Metaphorically, ITS has always been an ark, traveling the world to find and preserve the most interesting expressions of creativity. In doing so, we built an impressive Archive, the ITS Collection. The learning activities we offer represent the Academic side, the opportunity for us to close the circle and have the visitor see creativity, be inspired by it, and finally challenge themselves with creation using their own hands.

In the long run we want ITS Arcademy to establish itself as a growing cultural and social resource recounting the evolution of contemporary fashion, a place of creative discovery and learning designed for everyone, where visitors can explore fashion as a form of contemporary art.

ITS Arcademy, photo by Massimo Gardone.

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LS: Do you plan to invite more curators from the art world to contribute to the expansion?

BF: For sure! And I hope they will accept our invitation to help us grow and understand where we're headed and what we will become.

LS: What advice would you give to young designers?

BF: The most precious piece of advice I can offer is the following, and I feel it's quite obvious: be sure this is why you wake up in the morning very quickly. Because if designing isn't a vocation, a mission, something that brings a smile to your face regardless of the hardship and failures, you're on the wrong path. If this is what you desperately want to do, you need to have the willpower. And the will is everything.

LS: With the ever-changing technology, how do you see the fashion industry being affected? Will we also see changes in fashion runways and their quantity? Will AI take over the design process or assist designers?

BF: We've only barely scratched the surface of what AI can do. Some fields will experience a revolution, some jobs will disappear, who knows which ones will appear instead. Fashion will follow the same path but it's really hard for me to tell, at least for now, what the impact will be. I've already seen young designers using it to accelerate the process of envisioning possible creative declinations more quickly, so it's there. And as I've said, the tool is in its infancy, so the industry will be affected. There's a big wave coming, and not everyone will be able to surf it, but I do believe that ultimately, creativity at its core is only human. That final push, that last touch, that final glimpse of genius is still in the mind of man. At least for a while.

*all images courtesy of ITS Arcademy and ITS Contest