



RETHINKING THE MODULAR





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8 Whatever product we create, be it a pair of trousers or a chair, we love the idea that it ages with us. After fifteen years of designing, instead of doing something totally new we tend to pick aspects of our old collections and redo them according to our current tastes. That means we modify certain details, but the design itself remains the same. Somebody told us that his most beloved product, a cashmere sweater, had holes. So we applied pearls to the elbows. This season, we remade that pullover but we applied different pearls, and the texture was completely different. We often look back, reviewing and refining what made sense at the time, and seeing what we still like, establishing some classics by and for ourselves. Following this approach, each collection is composed of familiar as well as entirely new modules.

Looking at Bless N°51, how do the different pieces in the collection relate to each other? Are you interested in some kind of cultural system, which you create through your work?

8 Design in general has the potential to modify cultural behaviour and ways of thinking, and can exert a kind of social influence. It can solve problems where the political system acts too slowly or is too much driven by the economy. From our perspective, we don't aim to create a cultural system but try to establish a very personal microcosmos. To build a made-to-measure profession seems to be the healthiest option for us, and we would like to encourage others to do the same.

In each of our collections you will find clothing pieces as well as design pieces. Together they define our current worldview, like a screenshot. The N°51 collection contains new design pieces called 'Silent Servants'—a title that would serve equally to describe how we see ourselves and our profession. The 'Silent Servants' are composed of different round brass profiles that together form a modular system. They feature different mechanisms to hold soft or hard materials. They work like a kind of extended valet stand, which you can use as a wardrobe or as a display. These elements are useful for presenting a collection quite naturally.



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How would you describe your relationship with your customers and your audience? How do you establish a connection with your clients?

■ We discovered that we do presentations mainly for our clients. It's not our strongest point, being social, but it's good to do it twice a year at least. That's when we do our presentations and shows. A certain number of people follow our idea of repeating what we've already done ten years ago, because they like the fact that they don't have to try on a pair of trousers—they can just buy them blind, knowing it's their size, their style and they like the fabric. The clothing line mainly consists of pieces we developed a long time ago. It's interesting because we found a group of people who feel the same as us. We can't say we don't care about our clothes. On the other hand, we hate the whole process of shopping, trying on, etc. Instead we like to establish the kind of wardrobe you don't have to think about but can rely on in terms of style and quality. It has the same trousers that you already know will fit you. It's more like a service. That makes it easy for a lot of people who are interested in clothing and who like this reliable, repetitive element but are not necessarily into fashion to say: 'Please do this pullover again.' Actually, that's how we started. We teamed up, defined a common thread and offered the results to a certain kind of audience. That's what got the ball rolling. It is our way of communicating: the products we make, the service.

As far as your clothes are concerned, do you stick to certain patterns that you like, or are they a long-term exploration of form?

■ There's not so much thought behind it. It's simple: you have a pattern. When the next season arrives, you don't have to do something new because the pattern is still valid. Sometimes we modify the patterns and fine-tune them endlessly over the years. You really would not notice that some pieces have changed, but they do change every season. It's very hard to point to exactly what is important for our design or our work, because everything feels totally bound up with our lives. You could say that our overall aim is to become more efficient and more



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Presentation by the Bless masterclass at the Domaine de Boisbuchet, France, 2014

→→ Bless, 'N° 40: Workout Computer', 2010-15, punchbag keyboard, exhibition view, Milan, 2015

→→→ Bless masterclass, 'Exoteric Souvenirs', 2015



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precise in defining our thoughts, statements and tools, and in the meantime the results take the form of lifestyle products.

You place great store by your collections as small, self-contained systems that are not isolated products so much as holistic snapshots of your design philosophy. In what way do your Bless Homes in Berlin and Paris—your down-to-earth showrooms where Bless products are mixed with other everyday items—represent your position?

■ There is always a strange gap between the way you perceive products when you first encounter them displayed in an artificial shop setting and the context those products will live in later on once purchased. The Bless Homes function as archive and storage rooms—spaces to display typical interior products, kitchens where you can cook things we like to taste and share with others—but at the same time they're meeting rooms for people who want to see objects in real life or talk to us about their ideas and visions. Sometimes we use the Bless Home as an addition to our studios and private homes, offering it as a guest room or apartment for friends and clients. They can then take their time to try on things or spend one night in our N°33 'workbed' wrapped in Bless sheets. The Bless Homes should ideally facilitate encounters between people and products.

Over time we've learned that everything is connected and equally relevant: the comfortable atmosphere, true privacy shared between those involved, good food and drinks. It's not about clothes and design: it's more about sharing a moment in the here and now, and offering what we consider the most precious experiences when we travel: being invited into people's homes.

■ *... The designers at Bless don't like to be in front of the cameras too much, but when you visit the exhibition they are everywhere. There's one group doing performances, and there's the Bless workout computer. The group is very present ... so Bless did it again!*

MARLENE OEKEN Well, invisibility doesn't mean that what we do doesn't have an effect. It's just not



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about putting something straight on a pedestal. What we produced with the USM masterclass at the Domaine de Boisbuchet were actually instruments or wearable musical accessories that would naturally generate sound and rhythm. For example, I wore bracelets on both arms and little pieces of plastic sewn onto the seams of my trousers. Whenever I walked with my arms relaxed, they made a noise when they touched my legs. This automatically drew attention to my body, to the rhythm of my movements. Other instruments included a necklace that bounced on a stiffened t-shirt front when the wearer moved her torso back and forth; a mobile phone app encouraging the user to flip the device over; and a pair of gloves containing heavy metal balls and bracelets that generated sounds when you moved your wrist.

It seems that the project your group showed at the exhibition in Milan has undergone quite significant changes compared to its approach at the masterclass at the Domaine de Boisbuchet.

MO We decided that what worked extremely well in Boisbuchet, an isolated place in the countryside, needed to be adapted for a new, more urban environment such as the Milan Furniture Fair. We therefore developed new tools for exhibition visitors, enabling them to share in our experience instead of us being the only performers. It turned out that 'rethink the modular' was just the starting point for us, and in Milan we have noticed a strong group dynamic encouraging this process of collaborative working. Bless no longer feel like teachers, but have become collaborators alongside the other participants. We have decided to work together as a group named 'Exoterika' beyond this project.

The group decided to focus on drinking glasses as appropriate, simple tools that every visitor could use at the various events that took place during the 'rethink the modular' exhibition in Milan. Five different glasses were created. First of all there was the 'Stoner', which incorporated a piece of rock as its foot. The second, 'You Can Say it Again', included a microphone that recorded snippets of conversation and sometimes broadcast them publicly into the courtyard of the exhibition space. 'Chaincheers'



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was a glass whose stem was replaced by a chain. The fourth, named 'The Opening Hiker', was a long wooden stick supporting a glass at its tip, which allowed the drinker to wander around. Lastly, the 'Boirebuchet' was a glass sunk into a huge piece of heavy wood that amplified the gesture of drinking, making it necessary to use both hands.

Are these pieces about obstruction?

MO No, the opposite: they help you to communicate with other people. If you want to have a drink using 'The Opening Hiker', the glass with the long stem, you really have to ask for space if you're in a crowded area. Likewise, when you're drinking with both hands and you want to smoke a cigarette or eat something, you have to ask somebody else to hold the glass for a second. In the end the glasses forced their users to modify pre-learned and automatic patterns of behaviour, and that's what we're interested in.

The design duo Bless were interviewed as tutors of one of the seven USM masterclasses held during the 'rethink the modular' workshop at the Domaine de Boisbuchet, France, in 2014 (I). Marlene Oeken, was a participant in the masterclass and was interviewed as a spokesperson for the team on the occasion of the 'rethink the modular' exhibition in Milan, 2015 (II).