



BLESS

Conversation with
BENJAMIN BARRON

Photography by
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For BLESS, nothing is planned. Since creating their first edition, BLESS N°00 Furwigs, Desiree Heiss and language between themselves and those who choose to learn it. series of editions, consisting of products ranging from exercise machines, and clothing, among other media. Their products challenge the your life as a long-term companion. In a world that's concerned with the new BLESS make products that stick around and continue to evolve with you.

BENJAMIN BARRON

Where do you guys teach?

INES KAAG

We teach in the South of Germany – not today, but I'm just coming back from giving a little lecture about our work at one of the schools here in Berlin.

BB What do you teach in the South of Germany?

IK Product design. We do fifty percent professorship for product design, and this is what we did for the last eleven or twelve years. That's going to end soon, so we will have more time to teach. That's what we hope. We don't know yet, but it feels good.

BB You collaborate with others often. How does this work differ from your work together alone?

IK I think it's hard to generalize because all of these collaborations are based on time: a collaboration with Adidas that is now about twenty years ago is probably totally different from a collaboration now. For example, the collection that we presented last autumn, BLESS N°57, was collaboration with an artist, Marc Brandenburg, who is a very close friend of ours. He made beautiful pencil drawings that we used as prints for our textile patterns. At the same time, there was a collaboration with [the New York-based design studio] Print All Over Me, who asked us to develop prints and offer some styles for their collection. That was totally different from the collaboration with Adidas nearly two decades ago. We also collaborate with our own clients. For example, there was BLESS N°46, where clients, friends, or any consumers could send or communicate to us a wish. A shop from Portland – Stand Up Comedy – wished that we would develop a bag for them, and the shape of the bag referred to a film with Demi Moore where she was wearing, in a very special short scene, a specific type of bag. We had to see screenshots of the movie and then we constructed the bag. That's also a form of collaboration. In the end, our work is just one big collaboration with the outside world.

BB Your editions are made based on what you personally would like to wear...

DESIREE HEISS

It's often the personal need or the need of somebody else that triggers the entire design process. It makes us start wanting to create when there's a need for something.

BB How much do you feel chance plays into your work?

IK When BLESS first started, in 1996, it was about the very first ideas and products, and the possibility of bringing to the outside what we were thinking inside. We came up with the idea of creating and advertising the products that we had designed. We were always curious to present our ideas to the public and get reactions to them – to get feedback from them. And the feedback – it was all very different; it was not only that Colette wanted

Ines Kaag have developed a This language has translated into a furniture, cellphone cases, everyday routine, the disposable – they enter and disposable,

to buy it for their concept store in Paris, but that people saw the advertising and what they thought our label would be about. We were always curious about what people from the outside would make out of it. Of course, when we did two, three, four, or five BLESS editions, we received totally different sorts of feedback. Sometimes, it was buyers asking when we would do the next showroom. That was the very direct way – we are designers, so we make products, and we do a showroom – to sell.

We also got totally different feedback. Agencies from London were calling us, offering us their new models or trendy photographers for our next campaign. What also happened was, a few years later, people contacted us because they wanted us to do their advertising campaigns for their fashion labels. They saw some strengths or some interesting approaches in the way we created advertising. We teamed up with a label that designed totally different clothes, style-wise, and we became photographers because we shot the campaign ourselves. We thought this was the way we could profit maximally from this other job.

And then, of course, we continued developing products, clothes, and furniture pieces.

From the very beginning, we got involved in art exhibitions. Sometimes, we got a request to present our products in an art context. Since we didn't want to behave or act as artists, we tried to profit from the situation by doing our fashion presentation at the art show. It's always a combination: we try to send things outside, but then we get feedback and try to make something out of it.

DH In general, all of our work is always connected to our actual state in life. In that sense, we are extremely open and like to be influenced by whatever comes along. We don't have a rigid master plan where we say, "Okay, next season, we do this and that." It's basically open until the very end – whatever comes along in the moment, we pick it up and add to it. It's quite fresh the moment it comes out. If there's a new collection, it was not conceived half a year before. It was really conceived in the last month, maybe. It's quite a spontaneous affair and it's always an interaction with everything else around us.

BB How do you position your work in terms of fashion and art? Is there a distinction for you?

IK No. I think the special thing about BLESS is maybe that there is no specific master plan. One example is a product from our last series, BLESS N°56 *Workers*

Delight. In the course of the exhibition, we got a *carte blanche* to fill an exhibition space with whatever would be interesting for us at the moment. It was a request from the Vitra Design Museum in Germany. We started to develop objects that we thought were an important statement. We presented fitness tools in a more contemporary style to point out for an audience what we find relevant at the moment – to comment on the context of how an office is furnished now, and the importance of thinking about and changing your everyday work position. This is something that is very relevant for us. For this exhibition, we developed one object or a collection of objects that we would later include in our collections – it became a BLESS N° in itself. We presented the summer collection with these workout machines – it became a statement. There are budgets to come up with an exhibition for an art space and, at the same time, we use it for our ongoing projects and to present our fashion collection. For us, there is actually no need to make a division between art and design or art and applied arts. We just try to make ours more structured – to distribute our objects, our products, and our clothing line – and at the same time, to create the freedom that we can somehow do whatever we want. We could jump to another crazy idea because we have the freedom to do that – or we hope we'll always find the audience for it. We might develop things for an art context, but it's very important for us that, in the end, it becomes a product.

BB How important is it for you that everything you create is functional?

DH The products are always functional, in a way, because they always have a function or a reason to be, even if the function is not readable immediately. Like, for example, the Hairbrush – you think it's just a brush, and it has no use, but originally it was conceived for a project that was called the Haircut of the Month, where we were asked to go to a hair salon. The concept was that someone could go into the salon and say, "I would like the Haircut of the Month." Our proposition was that people could cut their hair, and we would manufacture this hairbrush. It was a little container, like a decorated container, to store hair. In that sense, the product has a function – originally it had a function.

IK And even in a larger sense, sometimes the functionality of a product or an edition is more relevant in a social context – it does something within the society that would trigger questions. There's also functionality in things that you see that you might not even wear yourself, but by seeing it or finding it in a shop, it becomes functional in a sense that it changes your life or changes your thoughts.

DH In a way, the product raises questions or should trigger some sort of break with routine.



You could say that every product has a function in that sense, of course, but I think your question was partially if we produce things that are purely decorative? And there, we can say, not really.

BB Do you see your work as something that's made for everyone?

DH Potentially. We have no target group – not even a specific client. It's quite vast.

IK Since we are such a small company, I think there is somehow an automatism in the restriction. We don't do mass production for our products. In general, the body of our work is such a niche product that it does not lead to huge quantities for production. Therefore, the costs and prices for the products that we offer are quite high. We would not call ourselves a luxury brand, seeing the big gap in the possibilities. Especially if younger people are viewing them, some of our products are very expensive. Therefore, it is also a bit out of proportion when we say our products are for everyone because it's not that everyone can afford this sort of product, even though they might like it. That is a bit of a problem, but in general our aim is that there is no specific trend or target group that we have in mind when we design. It is more that we are very selfish, very egoistic, and we design for ourselves.

DH I also want to point out that it's a luxury product in the sense that we take the luxury to only do small-scale production, even though a larger production might be more efficient or economic for the company. The real luxury is that we request and produce only a small quantity. There's a luxury in having the freedom to do what we want, and there's also a luxury in leading the type of lifestyle that we think is right within our economic system. In an ideal world, it would be more or less the standard – not in terms of using very precious products or materials, but more in a way that we would question if we really need a lot of items. Buying less, but being really specific in what you want and what you really need.

BB You've mentioned using the products in a way that is sustainable, because of their value – buying one and using it everyday until it falls apart. That seems to define luxury in terms of value; they're everyday objects.

DH At the end of the day, it's a long-term relationship we are looking for with the products we create, not really the first excitement when you purchase something and it's new and unknown. To really live with the product is a different stage of a relationship. For example, the frustration when it breaks. At one point, it starts to take shape – it's more like a long-term companion.

BB What's most valuable for you?

DH The classics, I would say: health, friendship, good food, good air. All of the boring things.

BB What initially drew you to presenting your work in publications?

DH Fashion labels publish their lookbook once the collection is finished. We did that for a while, too, but our collections aren't only clothing; they often contain products or projects – it's more like the status quo of the actual situation we're in. We thought that it would be richer for the people who are interested in BLESS to get in connection with other fields – not necessarily fashion, design, or typical lifestyle magazines. That's why we thought it's quite nice to discover – for us and for them – magazines that point in different directions. One magazine was about food; another was a local Istanbul-based Turkish magazine about their specific cultural scene; another was a Korean music magazine. It's interesting to see and work in these different contexts – to spread the word and to bring their fans and ours together. They're all magazines that we can relate to in terms of their base of values.

BB Are you still interested in this context for your work?

IK Definitely. In general, it depends on the concept of the publication, but we come from an analog era. It's still nice for us if there's a great photo shoot and we receive the magazine and can open it to feel the texture of the pages. That's still very effective for us. On the other hand, the whole landscape of magazines and publications has changed so much – you cannot keep every single publication of our work in all the various magazines. It's impossible. But still, if there is a certain value that people would be able to project in the actual object, it is beautiful – especially because our life and world is so digital, it makes it even more precious if the magazine is printed with good quality.

BB Do you have advice for the next generation of designers?

DH One should just follow what they need to say and what they need to add to what already exists. At the end of the day, it's about what you see, what you need, and what you can find. If it is there already or if somebody else is doing it, there's no need to create it. But if you feel like, "Hey, something is really missing," then you just do it. It's a bit like you and your magazine. There are a million magazines, but there must have been a reason or an urge to do still another magazine.

BB Everything is more or less a reaction to what's already out there. The main thing is just adding to the conversation.

DH In our case, we did not intend this originally. Over the years with BLESS, we managed to create our own profession. And that is, at the end of the day, the most precious thing we created because it's like some sort of made-to-measure structure. We are able, through the whole process of working and evolving, to adapt that structure, question it, and try to make it work with our lives that are constantly changing. That's something very valuable that we, especially growing older and aging, can absolutely relate to and are a part of.

BB How has your work changed since you first started?

IK I don't know that it has changed much, because we naturally grew bigger, but not in an extreme way. We are still a small structure, and we do the work. We do what needs to get done in order to be able to produce new things. The dimension maybe changed a little bit, but it never felt like a big gap or change from how we started to where we are now. It was a natural process – a development. It will go on. We never made a business plan for the next five to ten years. We did not need that, because we were always independent, which makes us quite flexible. As we pointed out in the beginning, we are happy to face whatever situation comes up and therefore it's important that we stay flexible. If there's a big job or if we have to produce a lot of things, then we work a lot with freelancers who help us with production. If it's a quiet moment, then we just do our everyday work. We do whatever is needed.

BB How do you stay curious?

IK I don't know – I think either you are curious or you are not. There is neither a recipe nor a specific way in how we motivate ourselves. It's that we are in the flow and the flow is with us. I don't know what to say actually – I'm not even sure if I am curious. Somehow, I can say that we don't feel as creative as people would assume from looking at our products. We are managers, we are mothers, we are – yeah, we tried to profit from the situation that we created to the maximum. That's maybe the more illustrative way to talk about it.

DH I would also say it's somehow a language. We reflect our thoughts and translate them into products. We developed that language between us and we use that language to talk.

It's often a dialogue, but of course we include people from the outside. At the end of the day, it's nice if the word spreads, and we can influence the life we live in or the times we live in. Since we developed that language, we want to talk it; we want to apply it.

BB What are you working on now?

IK We are working on the summer collection for BLESS N°58 that we'll present in Paris in three weeks, so that's our main focus – but as I said in the beginning, at the same time we're teaching, cleaning up the cellar, and whatever else. We do a million things in one day – there's never one thing.

BB Are you happy with what you've created now?

DH "Satisfied" is always relative. It never comes to the point where we say, "That's fantastic!" But that's also a motive to continue – to find another good pair of trousers, the better bag that finally works on the bicycle. Of course we are proud of what we created and we are also damn proud to still be friends after twenty years. In general, we are satisfied with, so far, what life brought us. We know that if we don't do a show, our clients won't run away. And if we do a show, there will be a reason why we feel excited to do one. There will be good reason to show something.







