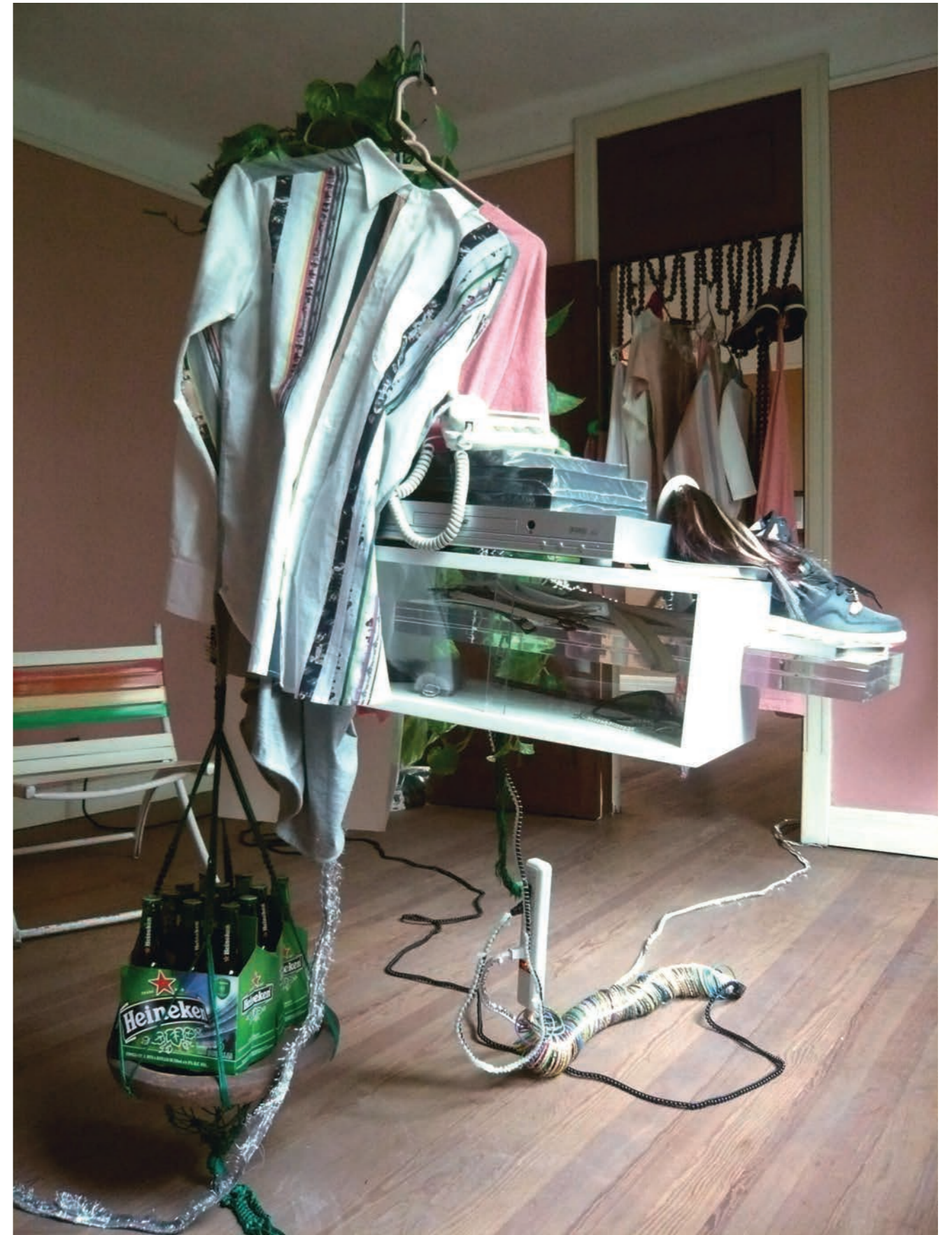


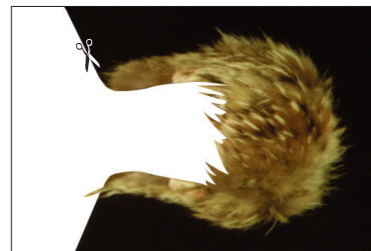
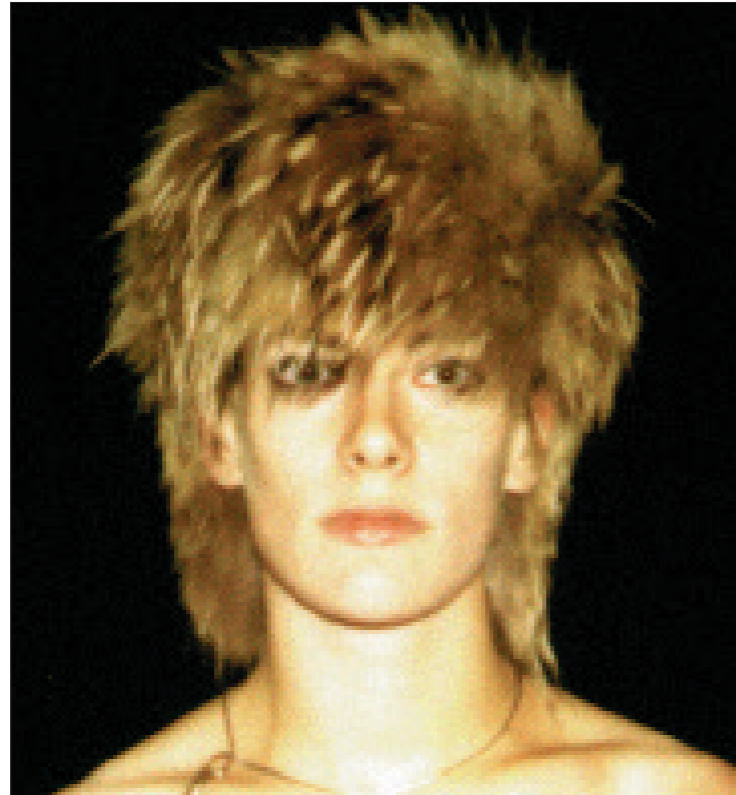
# PORTRAIT BLESS Merchandise: BUY, BUY!

The origins of the fashion industry's most provocative and innovative strategies had a forerunner in BLESS, the enigmatic fashion studio founded between Paris and Berlin in the late 1990s. With luck and hard work BLESS anticipated the rise of the stylist, customisation, collaborations, and pop-up stores. Their story can be read as a parable about the union of lifestyle and brand.

*By David Lieske*



*BLESS N°11 BLESS Shop. Travelling Selling exhibition, 2000–2011  
BLESS SHOP 19, Mexico, 2008*



**BLESS**  
(Limited Edition) N°.00  
 Fits Every Style! Cut & Try.

*BLESS N°00 Furwigs*  
 Advertisement, 1996

From the mid-1990s onwards, the international fashion system went through several drastic changes that created possibilities for unusual approaches to the industry's procedures. Brands such as BLESS came into being the moment in which a new model of curated network consumption met a new generation of luxury clients.

Conceived as an interdisciplinary design umbrella, BLESS was founded by Desirée Heiss and Ines Kaag in Paris and Berlin in 1996. Throughout the first years of their collaboration, the two designers explored, in often experimental and self-organised settings, a variety of strategies that are formative aspects of the modus operandi of today's high-profit-margin fashion conglomerates. From the pop-up shop to brand collaborations, BLESS invented several essential marketing and distribution strategies that helped to reignite the luxury industry in the social-media age.

A NEW RETAIL MODEL FOR A NEW CUSTOMER CLASS: THE CURATED (NETWORK) SPACE

The traditional hegemony of single-brand flagship stores designed to serve a couturier-devoted total-look customer – mostly recruited from ageing female members of the *haute bourgeoisie* – did not present many opportunities for a new generation of emerging designers. These conditions changed towards the end of the millennium with the arrival of a younger clientele that came from vastly more diverse socio-economic backgrounds. A newly emerging class of young creatives showed interest in fashion after reaching significant spending power through new high-paying job opportunities in the fast growing new economy and the advertising and music business of the time. These industries were built around a fresh approach to marketing and visual communication and were thus highly aware, if not dependent on, constant up-to-date visual cues and general taste-making insights that could be obtained from the radically reinventing and culturally expanding fashion sphere.

The so-called “sneaker-bourgeoisie”, was not primarily interested in the traditional value promises of the preceding luxury system or its heritage craftsmanship (it probably even had a certain threshold anxiety when it came to conventional luxury environments). Instead, these creative decision-makers were looking for an idea-driven multitude that could provide cross-cultural coolness and a framework for global connectivity. They quickly

became the perfect audience and customer base for a new, seemingly more *dégage*, highly-curated, multi-brand and multi-product boutique experience, most notably invented by Colette Roussaux, whose avant-la-lettre concept store “Colette” opened in Paris in 1997.

Colette introduced a lifestyle know-how service that surpassed and modernised the – in hindsight – modest propositions of the fragmented brand-flagship-store era. Each season, Colette offered a curated selection of various collections with matching accessories, featuring a broad network of fashion practitioners – from different generations, cultural segments, and price points – under one roof. The boutique suggested a complete contemporary wardrobe but also items of daily consumption and entertainment such as books, magazines, movies, music, electronic gadgets, and furniture. Colette's legendary basement Water Bar provided several hydration options and a networking platform that served to socially link it to the industries it recruited its potent shoppers from.

NEW MEDIA – NEW LOOK

Magazines like *Self Service*, founded by Ezra Petronio and Suzanne Koller in 1995 in Paris, were perfectly positioned at the intersection of experimental graphic design, advertising, taste-making authorities, and the new, curated mix-and-match retail approach. Besides being an important testing ground for new photographers, stylists, and models, *Self Service* delivered a low-threshold entry point for emerging designer products with 100 THINGS, a visual list of must-have items in every issue. The magazine also served as a stepping stone for Petronio Associates (cofounded by Petronio and Koller) a high-profile advertising agency that started consulting for heavyweight industry clients like Chloe, Prada, Jil Sander and Miu Miu among others.

*Self Service* and countless other magazines such as *Purple*, *Dutch*, *i-D*, *The Face*, and *The Fashion* facilitated the rise of the Stylist, a fashion profession that previously had operated mostly behind the scenes (or in its less glamorous iteration as the fashion editor) that became a leading industry player and an influencer-type figure for the decade to come.

The Paris-based half of BLESS, Desirée Heiss, worked as a stylist for *Self Service* since its early days and created several editorials for the magazine. She made her first appearance in this role in *Self Service*,



*BLESS N°62 Overmorrow, 2018*



*BLESS N°60 Lobby Conquerors, 2017*



*BLESS N°65 Not That I Can't Wait for It, 2019*



*BLESS N°56 Worker's Delight, 2016*



*BLESS N°65 Not That I Can't Wait for It, 2019*



*BLESS N°63 Neutra Design, 2018*



*BLESS N°61 Swimmingtogether, 2017*

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BLESS N°11 BLESS Shop. Travelling Selling exhibition, 2000–11  
BLESS SHOP 15, Melbourne, 2005

BLESS invented, probably out of sheer necessity, a strategy that became defining for the networked brand-reality of today's social media fame-stacking technique: the collaboration

No. 3, 1996. By issue No. 5 she started collaborating with Anders Edström, a Swedish photographer who pioneered and popularised a style of gritty documentary-like fashion photography that perfectly matched Heiss's mundane and anti-luxurious styling approach. A look that admittedly already existed atmospherically in fashion before, through the revolutionary visual vocabulary of Martin Margiela (often reproduced through the lens of Austrian artist Marina Faust or the American photographer Mark Borthwick).

Edström's harsh daylight and un-retouched photography seemed to closely communicate with the aesthetic propositions of the Scandinavian filmmaking movement Dogme 95 that was introduced by Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995. Dogme 95 created a new approach to filmmaking with a set of rigid rules based on traditional principles of storytelling, acting, and theme, which excluded the use of elaborate lighting, technology, special effects, and make-up.

The American filmmaker Harmony Korine, who was strongly influenced by Dogme 95 and later made movies such as *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999) following their rule set, gained global popularity with his film *Gummo* (1997). His overnight success was in large part due to the participation of his girlfriend, lead actress and it-girl of the moment, Chloë Sevigny, who was a constant presence in fashion magazines such as *Self Service*, *Purple*, *i-D*, and *The Face*. Sevigny embodied an edgier beauty ideal that perfectly fitted the zeitgeist and had nothing to do with the old upper-class idea of traditional glamour. She could make the leap from dollar-bin second-hand clothing to couture as effortless as no one before, and became a bridge for these previously opposed visual cultures. Chloë seemed to transcend class and status while at the same time being a high-paid agent for the one industry built on cementing these exact distinctions.

A deceptive new global culture established itself that superficially pushed the luxury aspect of fashion into the background by replacing it with an adventurous lifestyle narrative that seemed to effortlessly and in an entirely harmless way link it to the fringes of society (in a highly stylised way of course). Photography books like Corinne Day's *Diary* (2000), which documented the daily hardships of her opiate addicted peers, and Astrid Proll's *Hans und Grete: Bilder der RAF 1967–1977* (1998) – an assembly of archival photographs featuring the short lives (and horrific deaths in German prisons)

of Proll's ex-comrades in the militant anti-capitalist Red Army Faction – were easily displayed next to Prada tool sets at boutiques such as Colette and others that followed its example.

#### THE AGE OF CUSTOMISING (THE STYLIST AS DESIGNER – THE DESIGNER AS STYLIST)

This cultural atmosphere and the *démodé* of traditional luxury and heritage craftsmanship paved the way for and re-popularised anti-establishment approaches to design, like punk-era DIY fashion, in the form of a fashion practice that was then generally labelled “customising”. A practice that was able to combine the role of the stylist and the designer into a new category of fashion products and brands such as BLESS.

An important pioneer of this genre was Susan Cianciolo who founded Run Collection in 1995 in New York. Run became an influential genre-defining fashion line of often one-off handcrafted pieces of clothing made from found or recycled garments and textiles. Similarly, Ann-Sofie Back in Stockholm actively blurred the lines between styling and designing collections in her own right. Back would frequently appear in the editorial credits of *Self Service*, *Purple*, or *Dazed & Confused* as a stylist, staging her up-cycled creations alongside found garments.

However, customising designers had it particularly hard in fashion's retail system because most of their pieces were one-offs and couldn't be industrially produced or scaled into different sizes. The only commercial distribution system that could potentially tolerate an approach like that would be the art market and its workforce (as customers), which both Cianciolo and Back gravitated towards.

#### THE FOUNDING OF BLESS

Interestingly enough, BLESS was “accidentally” launched as a brand through experimental advertising and a customising project in 1996. After their initial meeting in Paris at the Concours International des Jeunes Créateurs de la Mode and an extended pen-pal friendship throughout their student years Heiss and Kaag launched an ad for their first collective product, *BLESS N°00 Furwigs* (1996), which they crafted entirely from leftover fur pieces from Kaag's parents furrier business. Partly as a coded job application and to fill in the post-graduation void, they spontaneously decided to combine funds and run a one-page ad in *i-D*, their favourite fashion magazine



BLESS SHOP 16, Brussels, 2005



Sunshield, *BLESS N°20 O.kayers*, 2003



BLESS SHOP 2, Hyères, 2005

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All images: *BLESS N°11 BLESS Shop. Travelling Selling exhibition, 2000-11*



BLESS SHOP 21, Beijing, 2008-09



BLESS SHOP 11, Basel, 2001



*BLESS N°12 Jewellery*, 2000

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*BLESS N°11 BLESS Shop. Travelling Selling exhibition, 2000–11*  
BLESS SHOP 19, Mexico, 2008

at the time. The ad featured a simple product shot of BLESS N°00, the name BLESS, and an anonymous telephone contact to Kaag. It inspired only two responses. One from Colette Roussaux, who wanted to stock the wigs at Colette, and one from Martin Margiela's Patrick Scallon, the house's communications director from 1993 to 2008, who blessed Kaag and Heiss with a prestigious work opportunity by asking them to develop BLESS N°00 into an accessory for Margiela's autumn/winter 97–98 collection. These two entry points to fashion's overhauled elite network couldn't have summed up its new status and distribution chain more elegantly.

MERCHANDISE: BUY, BUY!

Heiss and Kaag continued their collaboration by officially founding BLESS. They experimented with projects that challenged the universal and pressing questions (especially for young designers) of production, consumption, distribution, and self-sustenance. *BLESS N°02 Disposable T-Shirts* (1997), *BLESS N°05 Subscribe*, *BLESS N°06 Customizable Footwear* (both 1998) or *BLESS N°08 Found Objects* (1998) were once again accompanied by strategically-placed advertising; but BLESS struggled with

retail opportunities given their refusal to offer traditional collections or to launch in coordination with the seasonal runway schedule.

Colette remained a loyal outlet. Meanwhile, BLESS was backed in Hamburg by Raw Fitting – a stylist's archive and showroom – established by Yasmine Gauster, who set out to support BLESS as a close friend and consultant from there on out. Gauster opened with BLESS SHOP BERLIN the first permanent retail outlet of the brand in 2003.

Even though at this point most people only knew of BLESS from their advertising, sparse appearances in editorials or hearsay after the Margiela collaboration, the brand had built a mysterious reputation and a solid fanbase. Their notoriety was fuelled further by their decision to stay anonymous, and subsequent refusal to be photographed (again, in the tradition of Margiela, who rigidly follows this directive until today).

The year 1999 saw the first “real” collection of BLESS clothing with the project *BLESS N°09 Merchandising*. A highly complex play with expectations, demands, and perceptions of a fashion brand's practice had, through its inadequate representation in retail, reached an almost immaterial form of hard-to-get-ness.

BLESS declared the collection of hand-embroidered Levi's 501 jeans and oversized printed sweaters and T-shirts a quasi means to an end by insinuating the garments referred back to an almost fictional entity or character of that one could declare oneself a fan and patron via purchase and wearing of the pieces. Topped off by the fact that the highly stylised portraits printed on sweaters and T-shirts ostensibly revealed Heiss and Kaag's physical identity, they now had a highly auratic product on their hands that could circulate in the retail system a bit more broadly, which sparked a widespread desire in fashion enthusiasts across the globe.

After this success, *BLESS N°10 Scarves Sponsored by* and *BLESS N°12 Team-ups* (both 2000) addressed the more pressing issue of follow-up production. At this point BLESS invented, probably out of sheer necessity, a strategy that became defining for the networked brand-reality of today's social-media fame-stacking technique: the collaboration.

Companies from high-street-fashion to young designers sponsored BLESS's production with random garment donations for BLESS N°10. Heiss and Kaag collaged selected pieces together to create scarves that could, worn hanging down the neck, resemble entire outfits on the wearer's body. The project elegantly incorporated aspects of customising, recycling, and styling into a single one-off garment. A smart form of labelling was attached to the inside of the scarves that credited all participating companies with boxes in front of their names that were hand checked if a particular brand had been used in the specific piece.

In response to the ensuing interest from galleries, off-spaces, and museums in their work, BLESS created *BLESS N°11 BLESS Shop Travelling Selling exhibition*. Reflexive of the practically opposed systems of value inflation and decline present in fashion and art economies, Heiss and Kaag insisted that BLESS products were never to be exhibited only, but obligatorily to be offered for sale, even in spaces that weren't previously commercial. Through this sharp distinction BLESS introduced another format of contemporary omnipresence: The pop-up shop. As *BLESS N°11 BLESS Shop* was installed in a variety of institutions, an audience was now invited to experience the entire vision and product range of BLESS at a single physical location for the first time.

*BLESS N°12 Team-ups*, and its legendary collaboration with Adidas, resulted in a number of customised sneakers that should be of the highest fashion-historical value today. It anticipated the designer sneaker – the speculative fashion item par excellence of today's fashion reseller and social media reality. It is exactly that virtual online-reality and its aggressive claims on aspects of our most private life that BLESS challenges with their current retail iteration, the BLESShome: an actual private living space equipped with the entire range of everyday life design solutions by BLESS, situated in a Berlin apartment (on Oderbergerstrasse 60), that is inhabited by changing residents and can be invaded IRL by appointment.

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BLESS is a transdisciplinary studio founded in 1997 by Desirée Heiss and Ines Kaag. Heiss was born in Freiburg, Germany, in 1971. She is based in Paris. Kaag was born in 1970 in Fürth, Germany, and now lives in Berlin. They both got degrees in fashion, Heiss at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and Kaag at the University of Arts and Design in Hannover.

BLESS has been part of several solo and group art exhibitions, including: *BLESS N°65, “Not That I Can't Wait for It”* at Freedman Fitzpatrick, Paris, 2019; *BLESS N°60 Lobby Conquerors* (with Artek furniture classics) at Mathew, New York, 2018; “Passageways: On Fashion's Runway”, Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, 2018; “Fashion: Objects, Concepts and Visions”, at the Me Collectors Room, Berlin, 2017; the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial; and in 2016, “Costumes & Wishes for the 21st Century: BLESS, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster & Manuel Raeder” at the Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin; the 10th Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Etienne, France: “Sports/no sports” at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg; and “Re-Fashioning Austria” at the Liu Haisu Art Museum, Shanghai