



Walker Art Centre, «UNLICENSED: BLESS» - interview, December 2020



WALKER



## the Gradient

### UNLICENSED: BLESS



BLESS N°67 Situation Designer, Multicollection t-shirt, 2019 (photographs: Stand Up Comedy)

“Over time, the term “bootlegging” has evolved beyond illegal copyright infringement and moonshine to describe, in essence, a creative act. In the ongoing UNLICENSED series, we turn to designers and artists who exploit this phenomenon to provide some insight

BY  
Ben Schwartz

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into contemporary culture's obsession with bootlegging.

In this edition, we focus on the creative polymath *BLESS*, lead by partners Desiree Heiss and Ines Kaag. Since 1995 BLESS has succeeded in consistently being inconsistent, seamlessly moving between areas of fashion, home goods, product design, performance, installation, and contemporary art... often thriving in the blurry boundaries of each. The resulting objects are otherworldly, completely familiar yet totally alien, best understood as fully "BLESS". What is surprising is the motives that shape this utterly unique practice remain quite practical. As Heiss and Kaag detail below their work is strongly tied to ideas of structure, sustainability, reuse, and recontextualization. The Multicollection T-Shirt is a paradigm of this thinking: an official bootleg of an unofficial bootleg, which begins to answer (or ask) what does it mean to bootleg yourself? In the interview below I speak with the partners about their practice as "situation designers", wooden Coca-Cola bottles, and the politics of uniforms as leisurewear.

PART OF SERIES



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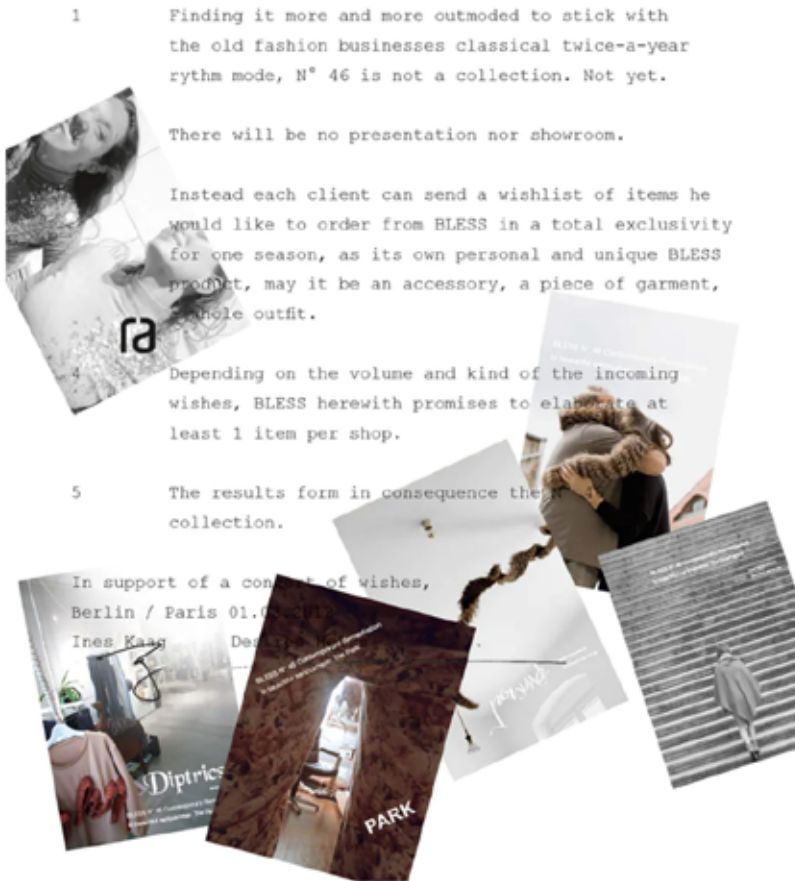


**BLESS N° 46 Contemporary Remediation**  
In beautiful seriousness:

As announced earlier BLESS is tempting to touch new grounds in its way of procedure to act and interact with the present time.

# W

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BLESS N°46 The Contemporary Remediation postcard, 2012

## BEN SCHWARTZ (BS)

How do you understand bootlegging today—on a broad level as well as how it's related to your practice?

## BLESS (B)

Over the past year, our understanding of the word “bootlegging” has changed a lot. Instead of seeing it as a lesser version or reproduction of an object or concept (a copy to be sold at a cheaper price), we have come to view it as a method of research and a means of getting to



know an original.

In terms of the reproduction of our own design and ideas, we feel quite inviolable. As a small brand, we consider it an honor if the products we create trigger the desire in others to possess, copy, or reproduce them as you wouldn't do this with something meaningless. On the contrary, it hurts much more when people who were part of our structure apply laboriously researched contacts and longterm relationships to their own or other brands. In such an event we try to be as easy and Buddhistic as possible. We call our profession "situation design", a sportive and spiritual import/export business.

If bootlegging also means the elegant infiltration of existing systems (consumerism and our society in general) then we would like to reserve a seat in the front row of underground activists. We are constantly working on the sustainability of our structure.







BLESS N°46 Contemporary Remediation, The Bjarne Melgaard  
Sleevliner, 2012

BS

Could you elaborate on ways in which you consider sustainability in your practice?

B

Since 2012, with the creation of BLESS N°46 Contemporary Remediation, we stopped purchasing fabrics at a large scale and began to rely on the leftovers of big fashion houses, such as Hermes and Fendi. This strategy allows us to work with amazing quality, but considerably reduces the number of pieces we can create. Production-wise it's absolutely inefficient, but it allows us to work with materials we otherwise could not afford.



Further, we constantly use and re-use our own design leftovers which is our way to clean our path up and take responsibility for all items that didn't find a satisfied owner. We re-transform them and propose them as unique pieces every season. Examples of such products are:



BLESS N°49 Alternarrative, Insert Edition, 2013

BLESS N°49 Insert Editions: We cut existing BLESS tops and jackets at the shoulder line and insert a piece of fabric from the current collection to link the pieces. It can then be worn with the additional part around the neck which looks like the piece has an incorporated



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scarf, or you can let it fall down and it gives a more extended and dramatic silhouette.



BLESS N°67 Situation Designer, Overstockjeans, 2019

BLESS N°67 Overstockjeans: A full pair of BLESS trousers is cut at the back and inserted as a front piece, attached to a jeans backside.



The way we work design-wise applies all the same on a structural level. Often people think that designers should always be thinking about the next color of the season, or what crazy shape a product could develop. In reality, we need 98% of our creativity for developing alternative business models, interim solutions to survive with our little structure, and paying our team and rents punctually at the end of the month. Over the years we have developed a stable mix of collaborations, teaching and learning, barter deals, and crossed uses of budgets—the mix of strategies has become a growing experience. Our path allows us to discover how to use and combine interests and inspires us to sometimes interlink different projects: from those that are commercially necessary to those that are more of a hobby.

