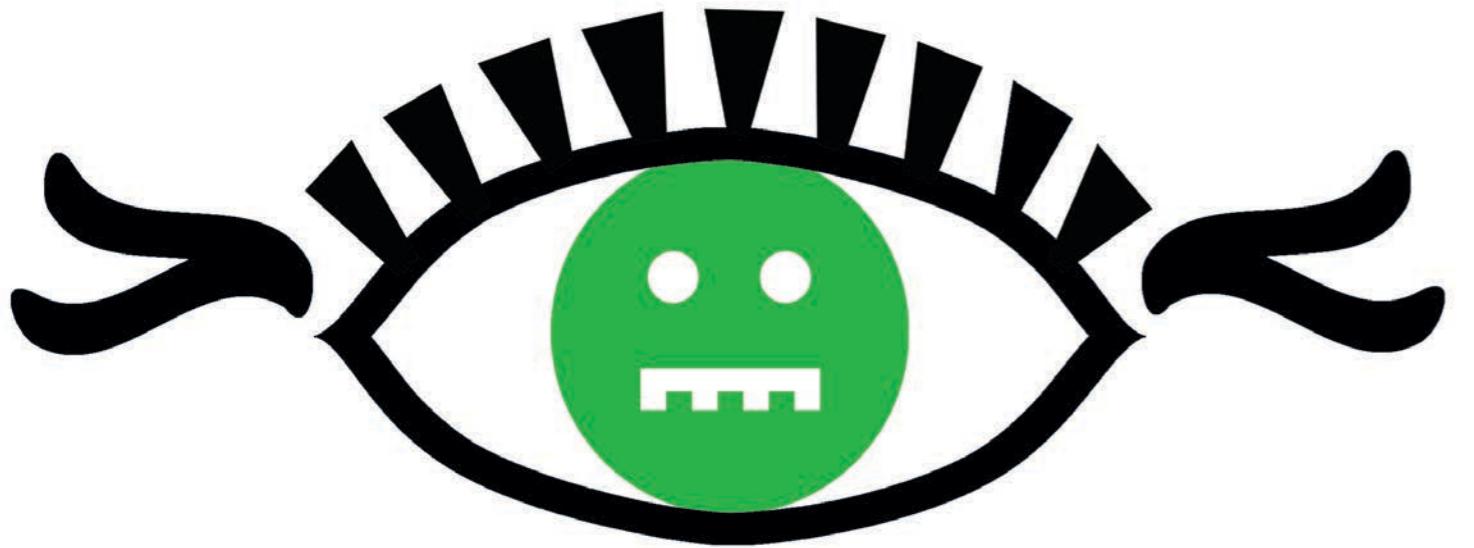


Walter Van Beirendonck



Prophet Margin

Fashion's political visionary explores shaping young minds and seeing the future.

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Think radical and fashion and the first designer to come to mind is Walter Van Beirendonck - or it should be. Unwaveringly dedicated to exploring socio-political issues such as safe sex, racism, terrorism and gender fluidity, Van Beirendonck is the first and last word in menswear's ability to provoke and express the rapidly changing landscape of an essentially fucked up world.

Most memorable in his three decade long career, are the statements explored in his Spring Summer 1996 collection: 'Killer/Astral Travel/4D-Hi-D' which featured a whoopee cushion shaped mask with slogans such as 'Get Off My Dick', 'Synthetic Hell' and 'Blow Job'. Ever the renegade, the collection was a fundamentally hopeful exploration of safe sex in the wake of the AIDS crisis, a crisis that took the life of many of his contemporaries, and a territory that few were willing to visit.

Van Beirendonck set up his label in 1983. By 1987 he was touted as one of the Antwerp Six, and went on to work under the moniker W< (Wild and Lethal Trash) and Aestheticterrorists: the politically-charged nature of his collections meant he avoided using his own name. With W<, in collaboration with Mustang Jeans, Van Beirendonck focussed his experimentation on designing with latex and fetishwear, using his platform to discuss the AIDS crisis, and how it had affected his community.

He has maintained his stature as one of the greats, all while resisting succumbing to buzzwords and trends that even major fashion houses

have relied upon to sell clothes and turn a profit. Van Beirendonck has sold clothes, though, staying relevant and commercial throughout his career despite - and perhaps as a result of - his dedication to using fashion as a force for change.

Regardless of the name he worked under, or the political message his collections were exploring, Van Beirendonck has consistently displayed expert craftsmanship in his work: perhaps the key to his long term relevance. Unafraid of bold colour combinations, with a challenging use of textiles, innovative cuts and strong graphics, the designer is celebrated in equal parts for his dissidence and his design. The fashion industry still looks to Van Bierendonck for his irreverence and subversive nature, use of pop culture and social consciousness. His work follows the Antwerp tradition of expression as a must, of art as a means of expressing, and of fashion as a vehicle for positive change. His collections have striking and powerful names, such as STOP TERRORISING OUR WORLD, eXplicit, Take the W-ride and READ MY SKIN.

It will come as no surprise then to discover he is the force behind training some of the most influential and important modern designers: Raf Simons, Kris Van Assche and Demna Gvasalia are all alumni of the Fashion Program at the Antwerp Academy, of which Van Beirendonck is the head. With this in mind you might expect the activist-designer to be nerve-inducing in person, but the opposite was the case when I meet with him in his office at the Academy.



**What ignited your need to express through clothes?
Were you angry about something? What did you feel
like you had to say?**

Originally I decided to do fashion because I loved the glam rock of it: I loved David Bowie. I also realised that through clothes and makeup you could express a lot. The way that David Bowie was working with his looks, it added to the music. I found it really fantastic, and I realised that you could communicate through fashion. That I found the most interesting: that when you put something on you communicated something, and that was one of the main reasons I went to fashion.

To express.

To express. Always the same word.

But it's true.

I think it's a totally different reason to why some go to study fashion: because they like to work for elegant women, they want to design dresses which are chic, but it's a very different story for me. It's about that communication. From the beginning, from the first collections, I always use very decided names for every collection: it was always about a message from the start of the process. Sometimes it became political, I really wanted to express what I felt very strongly in certain collections, and sometimes it was not even written on the collection, but it became a way of talking with press and with people that showed interest. And for me, it was more interesting to talk about those kind of topics.

But you don't have to talk about it? To see it, if you don't want to?

Even when I did the most heavy topics—I think now back to the collection where I did the AIDS T-shirts which was very tough, the whole thing was about my friends dying, about people I knew who were having major problems at that time. People were buying T-Shirts which had very strong messages for me, but for them it was just some funny T-shirts. I don't want to impose that feeling on the shoulders of the wearer, it's more that if they want to see it it's okay for me, but if they just want to buy a colorful t-shirt... that's also okay.

**Using that platform to say things you want but not
making people own that statement, I see. What do you
feel is the most radical collection that you've done?**

I think the SEXCLOWN collection was the most radical that I've done, and it was really on purpose because it was after we started the shop with the Walter Van Beirendonck label. Before that point I'd stopped working under my own name and I worked under 'Aestheticterrorists'. Then I went back to Paris and I just didn't get the attention I wanted. I was trying very hard to sell, but it really didn't work how I thought it would. So, I decided I'd just do something that would blow them away and that will be a new start. That's when I did SEXCLOWN collection. I remember all the heads with the penises – I really made a strong look and a very strong impression. I did it on purpose but I really wasn't expecting that kind of reaction, because suddenly it was like "yes, he did it again" and there were the followers which was nice.

**Coming out of an academy like Antwerp, where
designers use all kinds of different art forms to develop
and have a strong cultural vision, how do you feel about
fashion houses who take on trends as a buzz?**

I don't think they're real designers. I think they're more like marketing machines. They take the easy way and they follow waves which are going through fashion. It makes perfect sense in that context; because at the end if you see the policy of the big houses they need so much money to spend on the most stupid things that they have to work in a certain way, a way which almost guarantees success to a certain audience.





Which of your graduates really excite you?

All the graduates really. Somebody who had a kind of incredible soul was Demna [Gvasalia]. He graduated and I took him immediately to the commercial job that I was doing. I was close with him, and sometimes I give my students chances, or I introduce them somewhere, or sometimes I keep in contact with them. But I mean there are so many, so many that have graduated and I teach them all, one way or another: they all came through my hands and that's really nice to see them afterwards, to blossom and see that they are a success.

Let's focus on your role at the academy now; what do you look for in the students that you admit into the fashion program?

We have approximately 400 people every year who want to get onto the course, and we have 60 places. We have a strong selection process, which is mainly based on drawing. Drawing for us is very, very important: we want students to be able to express themselves on the page. We want to know that they are interested in culture, that they're seeing exhibitions, reading books, seeing movies – anything which can broaden their vision. What we are looking for is people with a very open mind.

So you're saying you can learn fashion design, but it's the strong opinions and cultural engagement you need first?

For us fashion is something which is there, but the way that we are approaching it is via many different angles. After this I'm going to show you the class that I am working with: this week, for example, we made sculptures to express what we want in our final collections. We try to use all these different steps to develop a creative voice. There are so many steps, all of which are in preparation for their collection, and then the collection just comes automatically. The fashion is born through these different experiments. It's not like we are here saying: "Oh today we are going to make fashion", it's different.

Do you try to invest your students with a sense of political responsibility in what they're creating?

I don't think that is something that we can demand. We try to work with every student in a very personal way. When we see that a person is interested in a particular topic we try to push them in that direction, and make them more aware of it. But if we see that they become more interested in something totally different, we will push them forward in that too. It's not that we want to make them all aware of sustainability, or of political questions, it's more something which should grow naturally, which should happen spontaneously. And, most of all, we try to create a person with a strong individual vision: that for us is the most important thing.

We always hope that the students really are working out of their hearts, and out of a certain vision which is ethically correct – that's the key. Then, of course, you're not going to misuse animals, of course you're not going to use this or that because you're a good person: you have an ethically correct vision. Of course, afterwards, when they arrive in the real world there are wolves: but still I feel that after years and years when I meet people, they often have that original vision that was born in Antwerp.

Antwerp, and you, are known for radicalism and politic in design. Do you think it's possible to be radical, subversive in a collection whilst being commercial? Or is that not the point here?

It's not the point, but you can. I mean I don't think that I'm the best example of that, because I'm not desperately commercial. But I do sell, and I do sell rather well in certain shops. Of course it depends on what you call commercial. Our students are taught in a way so that they leave on a very high level, and they can easily be an assistant on a team like Balenciaga, or they can even be an assistant to a designer.

So this is what makes 'good fashion', or is there not such a term?

I think 'good expression'.

It feels, going back to the Antwerp Six in the 80s, that it was all about good expression. How did it feel back then when all this buzz started surrounding you all?

Well the way that we're working now it's almost the same. It's the same way we were studying back in the 70s and 80s – which is rather exceptional because the school did evolve a lot, mostly the quality, and definitely the direction the students are coming from has changed a lot. There was an enormous synergy between all of us, between the Six, but also the other students too. We really had a relationship where we were doing things together, and we were triggering each other to discover something more. We had a real want to know more and do things better. And nothing was happening in Belgium at that time, so we were totally isolated where we were studying.

Even when we graduated, we were desperate – and it took us more than 5 years – to get out of Belgium. So we started doing a lot of projects in Belgium, we did projects together, we were working together for magazines, we did styling together, we were traveling together and we also felt that Belgium was too small for us. It's still like that, because there's no press coming out of the country, because of the language: no magazines have made it in Belgian, even in Belgium.

Do you think it's more important to reject the mainstream and have this true creative, radical expression?

This is a very difficult question because I don't reject the mainstream. I do a lot of work in the mainstream, I did a commercial children's collection: very commercial, like comparable with Topshop level. I always do commercial jobs next to my other work. I did IKEA, which is extremely mainstream, so I don't reject it at all. But I must always keep that spirit of expression as well. We come again, in fact, to what I said in the beginning: we expect our students to have that kind of soul. Once you have that soul for expression, everything will go in the right direction.

