

EDITION — CONVERSATIONS ON BEAUTY

BEAUTY

Volume I

Christian Brey

TEN CONVERSATIONS / INTERVIEWS BY INGEBORG HARMS

VOLUME I

ON BEAUTY

Beauty As A Way Of Seeing

Christian Brey

INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY INGEBORG HARMS

CONTENTS

01 Wolfgang Joop	04
Unvarnished views on the cult of beauty	
02 Ricardo Bofill	08
Beauty as emotional intelligence in architecture	
03 Huda Kattan	12
Beauty in the age of self-optimisation	
04 Catherine Deneuve	17
On image, curiosity and the values behind an icon	
05 Ingo Wilts	21
Beauty as quality, precision and a promise kept	
06 Wolfgang Joop II	25
On fragile balance, restraint and the soul of beauty	
07 Jil Sander	30
Beauty as a by-product of designing the future	
08 Eva Longoria	33
Beauty as work from within	
09 Ingo Maurer	36
Beauty begins where freedom begins	
10 Anselm Grün	39
Beauty as a spiritual place	

BEAUTY AS A WAY OF SEEING

My understanding of beauty began long before it became part of my professional language. I grew up as the son of a tailor, surrounded by cloth, proportion, craftsmanship and the knowledge that quality is created through attention. Later, the radical openness of post-Wall Berlin taught me that culture is not inherited passively; it is built through courage, experiment and the willingness to imagine another reality.

Private experiences of rupture and loss deepened this conviction. They taught me that beauty is not the opposite of tragedy and not an escape from life. Beauty is one way of meeting fragility without surrendering to it—a form of dignity, orientation and hope.

At Breuninger, this became an opportunity: to move beauty from the surface to the centre of the brand and to ask how a commercial institution could become a cultural space. The conversations in this first volume mark the beginning of that enquiry.

Wolfgang Joop

Fashion designer, artist and iconoclast

As a jury member on Germany's Next Topmodel, can you discover what beauty is?

No. A model is not beautiful in the conventional sense. Beauty is merely an agreement with the bourgeoisie, while fashion is not bourgeois: it is unreliable, radical and unfair. Fashion is about the personality of a face—extremely pale or extremely dark. That is how fashion signals that it is ahead.

So is beauty mainly about the face?

No. Beauty is a successful date between your genes, your culture and the taste of the time. Some cultures regard a plate lip or a shaped skull as beautiful. In times of hunger, abundant bodies are preferred; in times of plenty, an eating disorder can be treated as an achievement. Beauty is built on renunciation, discipline and resistance to pain—the Little Mermaid already knew that.

Wolfgang Joop

Was even Audrey Hepburn first perceived as an affront to taste?

Yes. When Erin O'Connor and Karen Elson appeared in the early nineties, no one spoke of beauty. The question was "ugly or unique?" Yet fashion naturally demands new faces. The first supermodels had tremendous vitality; they seemed to free us from the ailing seventies and from a youth culture darkened by Vietnam and the loss of faith in lasting peace.

The supermodels had extraordinary energy and presence.

They did, but they were an expression of their time. Today they are simply beautiful ladies. Back then, they were an antidote to the fear of AIDS, an unknown virus that attacked hedonism. Health, beauty, muscles and broad shoulders became armour against an invisible enemy. Fashion has always used disguise: polished medieval armour dazzled the opponent, and the inflated portraits of Elizabeth I proclaimed that she was unconquerable.

What followed the supermodels?

Kristen McMenamy, photographers such as Jürgen Teller, Wolfgang Tillmans and Nan Goldin, and heroin chic. I helped formulate that look in a 1993 New York show, inspired by the dishevelled women of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. After the pomp of the eighties it felt cool. Fashion is always about cool; it is never about pretty.

Wolfgang Joop

What, then, is “cool”?

For a while, designers and stylists asked: can you also do ugly? The art was no longer to make something beautiful, but to create excitement through what lay outside accepted taste.

Did beauty matter more in the past?

Beauty was once the only route to social advancement. The beautiful peasant girl could become a princess—or at least a mistress. Youth culture later moved from the sympathetic Audrey Hepburn child to Brigitte Bardot and Jane Birkin: the spoiled, bored child-women of late-sixties French cinema.

Is today’s embrace of diversity a way of generating unused faces?

It began much earlier, with figures such as Angela Davis and Malcolm X. Fashion now often quotes a quotation. What frightens me is the willingness to correct the self completely. Women in my gym train obsessively for Kim Kardashian’s body. That desire is easy to exploit: there is always someone who believes one more expensive injection will help. Once inflation begins, the only options are cutting away or making it larger still.

Wolfgang Joop

It began with Jennifer Lopez ...

But it first had to assume pornographic proportions. Ask any cosmetic surgeon: pornography has become a visual benchmark. It no longer reaches us primarily as sexual stimulation, but as aesthetics. Isn't that absurd?

What lies behind the present ideal of androgyny?

Androgyny is youth. Think of Botticelli, Lucas Cranach the Elder and the ethereal Virgin. As an ideal for women, she was fatal. Why must she be a virgin? With Mary Magdalene, the sinner, our images truly begin.

Does fashion draw on the Virgin or on Magdalene?

On Magdalene. It is still the transgressive woman we find compelling. But we should never forget that beauty is bound to pain. The pyramids were not created without pain. The fear of failing to meet an ideal is pain as well.

Is our interest in non-Western beauty an expression of colonial guilt?

The West is largely immune to criticism. I think we search for archetypes because we need orientation.

“Beauty is a successful date between your genes, your culture and the taste of the time.”

Ricardo Bofill

Architect and urban visionary

Why do you like building in the desert?

Because it is free from architecture. One can observe granite, dunes, wind and the way light plays with things. The desert is silent, pure and peaceful; I learn from its geological formations.

Ricardo Bofill

Why do you call your buildings fragments of an impossible city?

Life itself is the most complex subject, yet architecture rarely confronts quality of life, ways of inhabiting or our future existence. Large global firms have reduced the space for individual intelligence, and cities increasingly look alike.

What is architecture for you?

The art of shaping space—the void. Like wind moving through the desert, each project reconstructs space in response to a particular place.

Ricardo Bofill

What should the city of the future become?

A connected city without carbon or cars, with clean energy and controlled water. But it must also possess sensual character and emotional intelligence.

Ricardo Bofill

Why return to columns, arches and classical proportion?

The vocabulary must be renewed for each project and culture, while keeping proportion and harmony alive. Digital life has reunited functions once separated by modernism; streets, squares and continuity matter again.

What did regional and Mediterranean architecture teach you?

Architecture grows from landscape, climate and human needs. A small opening in a hot climate frames the landscape like a painting; in the north, larger windows answer the need for light. Form must belong to life.

“Every successful architectural space possesses a profound sensuality.”

Huda Kattan

Entrepreneur and founder of Huda Beauty

You have devoted your life to beauty. Is beauty really so important?

Beauty has great power, and I have always valued that. I believe it can transform us inwardly and give us confidence. The right make-up allows anyone to become who they want to be. That is absolutely liberating. For women, make-up can be what power is for men.

In the Middle East, women often approach beauty with professional seriousness. Is beauty work?

It is a matter of attitude. If you sell something to yourself as work, it becomes work. I love doing my make-up; applying it is therapeutic for me.

Huda Kattan

In an age of diversity, is the distinction between beautiful and ugly still relevant?

Today no one needs to fear not being beautiful. We have opened ourselves to difference in an unprecedented way. Some cultures remain more conservative, but social media can be liberating; this new openness reaches places that were highly dogmatic only recently. Diversity is not a passing trend. It will remain relevant.

You run the brand from Dubai. How do its beauty standards differ from those in the United States?

The Middle East is very glamorous. Women indulge themselves without apology and may visit a salon twice a week for nails, eyebrows or hair. Elaborate make-up is an everyday matter. America currently favours make-up that appears natural. That has made little impression in Dubai. Here, a glamorous face is simply part of the culture.

Huda Kattan

In videos you test other brands and sometimes play the clown. Does humour belong to beauty?

I love making people laugh. It feels good not to have to hide that side of myself, especially the silliness. The clowning is actually one of the best parts of my work.

A strong interest in one's own appearance is quickly labelled narcissistic. Can it also serve others?

Indirectly, yes. First you have to become confident yourself; then you can inspire other people.

You have spoken openly about cosmetic procedures. Can public discussion be helpful?

I have never hidden my procedures. I am not ashamed, and I have always wanted to share every beauty experiment, whether it went well or badly. More serious interventions especially should be discussed because other people urgently need that experience.

Huda Kattan

Why were false eyelashes such a success for you?

They direct attention to the eyes and create a seductive, highly communicative look. Without them I feel incomplete; I have been obsessed with them since I was a teenager.

Are you an advocate of the smile—or does it ruin the look?

Nothing is more seductive than a smile. An uninhibited, heartfelt smile transforms an appearance and makes someone approachable at once. It is the best calling card in the world. I especially like a smile that does not hide a gap or braces.

Whose beauty do you admire?

My younger sister Mona's. As a child she entered beauty pageants, which were a huge affair in the American South, and she took me along as her make-up specialist. She was like a little doll to me. She remains my muse, my icon and, sometimes, my test subject.

*“The right make-up allows anyone to become who they want to be.
That is absolutely liberating.”*

APPEARANCE

Catherine Deneuve

Actor and enduring cultural icon

The media constantly call you a “grande dame.”

“Grande dame?” Good heavens.

You do not care for the label?

I cannot take that sort of thing seriously.

But you have had the reputation of a beauty icon for decades.

That is true, but these are expectations brought to me from outside. At times that can be complicated.

In what way?

I do not feel like an icon. I become aware of the image only when someone asks about it. I do not live that way. Of course I dress elegantly for festivals or premieres, but everyday life is different. Even wearing costumes in a film can feel demanding.

You were once Yves Saint Laurent’s muse.

Yes. He undoubtedly shaped my sense of style. But wearing his clothes for decades does not mean they defined my entire existence. Like anyone else, I lived in casual, comfortable clothes.

Catherine Deneuve

Still in Yves Saint Laurent?

Perhaps an occasional tracksuit, but certainly other designers too. Some people are surprised to see me in jeans. I am pragmatic. When I moved house, there was no room for everything, so I auctioned 280 Saint Laurent pieces. I still feel wistful about it, but it was necessary.

Was it difficult to live up to the image of a beauty icon?

Beautiful gifts are pleasant, of course, and the image introduced me to many interesting people. At the beginning of my career I did not think about it. Around thirty, I began to feel the pressure and the expectations. But if you need a label for me, I would say that my defining quality is curiosity.

Today everyone has a camera. How do you deal with that?

What can I do? We live in a world of images. That was already true, but the internet and phones intensified it. People photograph you and immediately put it online. It worries me, yet it cannot be avoided. I mostly find the constant photographing boring.

Catherine Deneuve

So selfies are unlikely?

Indeed. It is silly. People no longer perceive the world properly. At a dinner by the sea there was an extraordinary firework display, yet no one truly watched it; everyone stared into a camera. We used to tease Japanese tourists for photographing continuously. Now we are all like that.

Were you ever tired of being the famous Catherine Deneuve?

There was a period when I was tired of my profession. The roles were no longer interesting, and I wondered whether acting still had a place for me. That was in the late seventies. Then Truffaut offered me *The Last Metro*, and everything changed for the better. I have had no doubts since.

What satisfaction does acting give you?

First, you work with a small group of trusted, talented people. I love that shared experience because an actor can also be very alone. Second, the work satisfies my creative curiosity.

Catherine Deneuve

How do you explain the aura people associate with you?

I value harmony, I am reserved, and I do not want to hurt anyone. I usually ask what I can do for others, not what they should do for me. I asserted my rights professionally, but I was never a feminist on the barricades. I had a healthy confidence and created a life of freedom without having to wage war for it. I left home at sixteen to act; fortunately my parents accepted that.

Do you strengthen that harmony physically?

I do Pilates and like being in water, although I am not a great swimmer. Gardening matters greatly to me too, though harmony is not always the point.

What is the point, then?

Nature is much stronger than we are. It cannot truly be controlled; it teaches humility. That is good for the mind and the soul.

“If you need a label for me, I would say that my defining quality is curiosity.”

Ingo Wilts

Fashion executive and creative leader

Is it strange to give an interview about beauty?

No, because beauty matters. Everyone wants to be beautiful and to look younger, and fashion can contribute. You might not recognise a runway model on the street. Put that same young man in a suit, comb back his hair, and suddenly you say: what a handsome man.

Why is a man in a well-cut suit attractive?

Does it truly make him more attractive, or does it give him a different feeling? I wear suits a great deal, and in one you stand differently. You also look more confident. People respond differently when you board a plane in a suit. It is presence—an aura. Today there are many ways to make a suit comfortable too.

Does comfort remove the construction that gives the wearer an ideal form?

Our pattern makers test garments to the millimetre, even a light stretch suit without shoulder pads. Everything must still sit perfectly. I always look at the shoulder and lapel. They need a recognisable language. It is about consistency. Compare a 1978 Porsche 911 with today's model: it remains unmistakably a Porsche. A suit must retain that same identity.

Ingo Wilts

Is beauty as relevant to men as it is to women?

Yes. It also has to do with a new freedom. Today there are far more ways to see how someone in New York, for example, chooses to dress.

You worked in New York. Did you encounter other forms of beauty?

New York teaches faster thinking and faster decisions. If something fails, you simply take another route. For New Yorkers, whatever is new is beautiful. That is why the city moves so quickly.

Did your East Frisian childhood shape your aesthetic?

Not directly, but I grew up on a horse farm. We were taught to groom the horses; at weekends we braided their manes for competitions. Perfectionism becomes beauty. What shaped me more was a German disposition. In America people always remarked on my punctuality. Precision is simply part of my nature.

Can you put the aesthetic into words beyond the lapel?

It is about the person: masculine for men and feminine for women, even when a woman wears a double-breasted jacket. Above all, it must be modern.

Ingo Wilts

Is modernity a German speciality?

For me modernity reflects how we are: direct and straightforward. We cannot escape objectivity—and we can be enormously proud of it.

You speak of heritage, although the founder is less central than at many brands.

I do not primarily see a person; I see a product. One American company stands for the wrap dress, an English one for the trench coat. Here, heritage is the suit. Every design begins with the jacket, suit or coat, including womenswear. In many countries, we are a first address for professional clothing. That field is the epicentre.

How do you decide on the look of a new season?

It is a feeling. You must want to wear it yourself. A brand can set trends too: perhaps drawstring trousers with a double-breasted jacket. That possibility is the beauty of it.

Ingo Wilts

How do you create desire when the brand stands for reliability and the classic?

Desire is essential. It is created through shows, products and the talents featured in campaigns. But quality matters equally, as does value for money. Those are elemental questions considered every day.

Why did Pierre Cardin's lapel-less, side-zipped suit not prevail? Do we ultimately seek classic parameters and symmetry?

I find asymmetry difficult. If something in my home is not straight or centred, it drives me mad. I even straighten products in a supermarket.

Symmetry signals peace and balance.

Exactly. It returns us to security and equilibrium, and to the German tradition of the Bauhaus.

Beauty is often communicated only through media. Does the real product still matter?

Of course, especially because of fit. Many German brands make a promise—and the promise is kept.

“Perfection becomes beauty. Quality is the promise—and the promise must be kept.”

Wolfgang Joop II

Fashion designer, artist and iconoclast

You often mock the excesses of the beauty industry. What is the alternative?

Individuality—and respect for nature's diversity. Fashion may distort beauty precisely to emphasise its fragility, like a repaired Meissen plate: the moment in which beauty begins to pass. Even sunsets make me sad. Beauty implies an awareness of loss.

Does fashion pursue that moment?

A model is not beautiful in the conventional sense. Beauty is an agreement with bourgeois taste; fashion is unreliable, radical and unfair. It is concerned with personality. Beauty is a successful date between genes and the taste of the time.

Wolfgang Joop II

You have explored your Prussian origins as a designer.

The ideal was noble simplicity and quiet grandeur. In Prussia, ostentation was rejected. Anything inflated can be punctured by someone else; when you remain modest, no one can take away your dignity.

Your Wunderkind collections combined distressed surfaces with exceptional materials.

First everything had to be perfect; only then could I deconstruct it. When I painted in the technique of the old masters, I worked meticulously. Without that foundation, scratches would not be destruction—they would merely be chaos.

Wolfgang Joop II

Did being beautiful help you?

My genes gave me certain proportions, but being discovered as a model irritated me. It was difficult because people did not want to see that I was capable of something beyond appearance.

Does beauty have to do with bearing?

In my family the rule was: it is nobody else's business—keep smiling. That helped me through a seductive life. Cleanliness, freshness and naturalness are part of my aesthetic repertoire too.

Wolfgang Joop II

What separates beauty from kitsch?

Kitsch is soulless: ornament for its own sake, false Baroque, pretence. Beauty has soul—the animated presence of a diva. The old formula remains harmony and balance. I always know where destruction needs to be caught and held.

When fashion opposes one extreme with another, does it restore balance?

Exactly. But fashion operates not only in time; space and context matter as well. The same collection shown in Berlin rather than Paris can mean something entirely different.

“Beauty implies an awareness of loss.”

IDENTITY

Jil Sander

Designer and modernist

Does fashion today still concern itself with beauty?

Beauty has always been a matter of taste. Fashion is about far more: substance, innovative fabrics, three-dimensional form, cut and quality. It is not merely beautiful; it has class and participates in a changing culture.

Does what many people find beautiful depend on proportion?

Certainly, but there is also the will to change. A customer invests in pieces whose cut is coherent enough to last, while still taking pleasure in new things and combinations. Fashion is a continuing development: it is what I feel now.

Jil Sander

Do you garden according to the same principles as you design?

Yes. I think visually and spatially. Even colour is three-dimensional: it can be closed or floating. A garden's light changes constantly and reveals new perspectives. A collection should do the same. One has a handwriting, subtle visions and a clear sense of direction.

Can the new be a new view of the past?

Others may orient themselves toward earlier periods; I would never repeat the past. I would search for a new solution—an oversize form, for example, in which the figure still matters. The ambition is to invent something that moves the idea one step further.

You often speak of energy.

Energy is intoxicating. When gardeners say the garden is humming, energy is present. It also existed in the company: enthusiasm, intense exchange, openness and purpose. The spiral of energy extended from the showroom into the hotel.

Jil Sander

How does a material begin a collection?

My fingertips were sore from handling millions of fabric samples. A colour in the wrong material can be vulgar. The challenge is to make every element coherent, like a piece of music or a rose garden—including individual models, their hair and skin.

Can youth and beauty be empty?

You can be young and beautiful and still have nothing happen. Something must come from within. A person can be extreme and still be beautiful. In the end, beauty in people is presence.

Is beauty overrated?

How do we escape the banality of “how pretty”? Optics, aesthetics, quality and content converge. Beauty can be terribly conventional. The work is to break it open. Beauty, for me, is only what is not yet called beauty.

“Beauty, for me, is only what is not yet called beauty.”

Eva Longoria

Actor, producer, director and advocate

Can beauty be worked for—or is it simply a gift?

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, but it is not only external. Beauty is work, much of it from within. When life, love and work are fulfilling, that fulfilment becomes visible.

Do women become more beautiful with age?

I hope so. Many women grow more beautiful as their relationships deepen or they experience motherhood. Age does not simply mean wrinkles; it offers the possibility of becoming wise.

Is perfection important to you?

Honestly, perfection matters very little to me. Remaining true to myself is much more important.

Eva Longoria

What did directing teach you?

At first I was afraid I would not be good enough. Many women wait for still more experience, but eventually one must jump into cold water. Directing also lets me support talent across cultures and backgrounds and put women into positions where they remain underrepresented.

What changed through #MeToo and Time's Up?

Women speak more openly and build stronger networks. We can call one another directly, share knowledge and become more independent. Mutual support changes the balance of power.

How do you make decisions and ensure you are taken seriously?

I am persistent, and I work twice as hard. Fame should never be the goal; it should be a by-product of doing something exceptionally well.

Eva Longoria

How did motherhood alter your relationship with your body?

After giving birth, you feel capable of anything. The body creates life, endures change and pain, and continues despite little sleep. I became grateful for it and gave it time to recover.

What matters most in physical transformation?

Training and nutrition take real effort, but the essential thing is to feel at home in your body. That matters to the mind as well: value yourself, accept imperfections and develop a positive relationship with who you are.

“Perfection matters far less to me than remaining true to myself.”

Ingo Maurer

Designer and poet of light

Why did you call for the ugly to be reassessed?

I like to provoke perception. A screw or hammer can be as beautiful as a painting. I want to transform ugliness so that we see it differently. My first LED lamp looked like a bouquet; I called it Bellissima Brutta—the beautiful ugly one.

You do not conceal technology.

That is a matter of honesty. I dislike pretence—things that merely act as though they are something else.

Does illusion belong to beauty?

Yes. One enjoys an illusion while knowing it is artificial. That interval interests me. As children we called a small stream the Amazon and created an entire world with spiders, salamanders and stones.

Ingo Maurer

Your Porca Miseria! freezes a catastrophe in porcelain.

Inspiration is a moment of illumination. An idea may gestate for twenty or thirty years. The moment is intense because you do not know whether it is something or nothing—or whether you dare to realise it.

What did America represent to you?

Freedom, a new aesthetic and different people. I was overwhelmed by what I saw in California. My heroes were never pretentious; they convinced from within. Their beauty arose from attitude, soul and a vital naivety.

Ingo Maurer

Can ugliness become beautiful?

At Fondation Cartier I threw scrap into a pool of water and mirrors. A frog disturbed the surface; the mirrors made a dream from refuse. The translation from ugly to beautiful is central to my work.

Does creative freedom require becoming “nobody”?

It is tremendously liberating. External expectations are enormous. I simply want to risk, create and provoke through the beauty of ugliness—while accepting responsibility for the team that makes ideas real.

Is light connected to your childhood on an island?

Very much. Crossing Lake Constance with my fisherman father, I watched lights dance on water and wind move through trees. That was the connection. Much of my work began there.

“The beauty of my heroes comes from their attitude. The soul plays the decisive part.”

Anselm Grün

Benedictine monk, theologian and author

You have called beauty a spiritual place. What does that mean?

For Plato, everything that is participates in truth, goodness and beauty. Plotinus calls God original beauty, reflected in everything we call beautiful. Kant relocates beauty into subjective judgement—the difference between “this is beautiful” and “I experience this as beautiful.”

Is beauty in the eye of the beholder?

The beautiful puts me in contact with the beautiful soul—the image of God that I am. In Plato, beauty and love belong together. Love is also the condition for recognising beauty. I experience my own beauty only when I regard myself lovingly.

Anselm Grün

What can hatred tell us?

Negative feelings have meaning. Hatred may say: I too have a right to live; I will not be ruled by others. We are not responsible for feelings that arise, only for how we handle them. Neither acting them out nor suppressing them is healthy.

Is beauty material as well as spiritual?

Nature is trees and landscapes; a person has a face and flesh. Simone Weil called beauty the tender smile of Christ through matter. The soul expresses itself through the body, and beautiful rooms allow us to work differently.

Is adorning oneself legitimate?

It can honour one's dignity and express gratitude for life. There is a difference between supporting beauty through clear, simple clothing and using clothes for display. Splendour has value when it points beyond the individual.

Anselm Grün

What connects fashion and hope?

Ernst Bloch wrote that only what is permeated by hope and conveys hope has value. Dance is embodied hope for freedom and beauty; clothing can be hope for beauty as well.

Can beauty survive age and suffering?

Beauty is vitality, laughter and joy. Even an old face can be profoundly beautiful when its beauty has changed and become transparent to something greater.

Does consumption satisfy the longing for beauty?

No garment can preserve beauty forever. Addiction is displaced longing, while longing itself belongs to beauty and reaches beyond the concrete toward absolute beauty. Beauty brings what exists into radiance; vanity compensates outwardly for an inner lack.

“Love is the condition for recognising beauty.”

CULTURE

CONTEXT & PURPOSE

Christian Brey is a chief brand officer and cultural entrepreneur whose work connects commerce, culture and beauty. As Executive Director Marketing, Brand & Creative at Breuninger from 2016 to 2023, he held responsibility for the Group's brand, marketing and creative direction.

He transformed beauty from an aesthetic attribute into the organising principle of a cultural space—connecting fashion, architecture, art, food, communication, service and human encounter with emotional relevance and economic value.

The interviews collected in this edition were conducted by the writer and critic Ingeborg Harms from 2018 to 2022. Brey initiated the series to examine beauty as a universal perspective on life and to give this idea an intellectual foundation through voices from fashion, art, film, architecture, science, spirituality and entrepreneurship.

WITH GRATITUDE

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Their intellectual openness and commitment gave me the freedom to pursue the idea of placing beauty at the centre of Breuninger's cultural life throughout my tenure as the executive responsible for the brand.

ALL INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY INGEBORG HARMS

COLOPHON

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Beauty begins as attention.