

EDITION — CONVERSATIONS ON BEAUTY

BEAUTY

Volume II

Christian Brey

TEN CONVERSATIONS / INTERVIEWS BY INGEBORG HARMS

VOLUME II

ON BEAUTY

Beauty As Cultural Infrastructure

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INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY INGEBOG HARMIS

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BEAUTY AS CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

At Breuninger, I built beauty into the core of the cultural space—not as decoration or taste, but as a universal perspective on life. It became the organising principle through which brand, fashion, architecture, art, food, communication, service and human encounter could be experienced as one coherent world.

This changed the role of marketing. It was no longer only the communication of products, but the creation of emotional relevance, aesthetic intelligence and economic value. Beauty connected commerce with culture and transformation with meaning. It turned the department store into a place of inspiration, belonging and possibility.

Throughout my tenure as the executive responsible for the brand, the interviews conducted by Ingeborg Harms opened this idea to radically different voices. Volume II asks what beauty can do inside institutions—and what companies risk losing when relevance, dignity and imagination disappear.

Camila Morrone

Actor

How do you remain grounded in Hollywood?

I am still a normal person thrown into that world. My mother watches carefully that I keep my feet on the ground. I left a successful modelling career to try acting, and the speed of what followed still feels surreal.

Is it important to show beauty across a wide range?

Yes. I value both sides: looking completely ordinary at home and enjoying the glamour of an evening dress and jewellery. Neither one cancels the other.

Camila Morrone

Why is surface perfection valued above inner beauty?

Many people do not look deeply into themselves and therefore fail to see beneath the surface of others. Glitter and glamour distract them. It is unfortunate that we struggle to see people as they are.

What is beauty to you?

What we call beautiful is subjective. Modelling introduced me to outwardly beautiful people I had no wish to speak with, and to people whose energy and spirit made them beautiful beyond conventional features.

Camila Morrone

Has your idea of beauty changed?

Completely. I resist beauty dictates and the pressure to think about how bodies are supposed to look. I am growing beyond the standards and supposed ideals of my youth. We should accept our bodies and stand by them.

How would you define beauty now?

You can find beauty in everything if you change your perspective. I have often complained about something and then discovered that another way of looking revealed its beauty. I practise that every day.

Camila Morrone

Can fashion complete beauty?

Fashion shapes part of the image we form of a person and can make us feel good. Clothes allow transformation. Modelling taught me how costume reveals character, which now helps me develop roles as an actor.

What makes you happy?

The people I love: friends and family. My parents are my foundation. Warmth, an open door and people arriving for dinner matter more than glamour.

“You can find beauty in everything if you change your perspective.”

Gerard Butler

Actor and humanitarian

What is beautiful about giving?

It feels wrong to calculate the advantages of generosity. Not giving is simply not an alternative. Give when an inner need moves you; then giving is always right.

Does an actor's work also require giving?

Hundreds of people work hard to make a project succeed, and I feel an obligation to give my best. Public visibility also brings responsibility and possibilities—not only financial ones—to return something to society.

Gerard Butler

How do you preserve authenticity in a world of appearances?

I entered Hollywood relatively late and retained a sense of gratitude. Its glitter may be superficial, but it enabled me to do what I was meant to do. I do not need to twist myself into another shape.

Can physical attractiveness seduce?

Everyone responds to outward beauty, but there is a deeper level: beauty reflecting the inner person. It can appear in a glance, the way someone walks or speaks.

Gerard Butler

How do you define beauty in a person?

Appearance is only one part. What matters is whether it corresponds to the person's nature or has merely been applied—whether one encounters a beautiful human being or only an attractive surface.

Is humour a path to beauty?

It is a prerequisite. Not constant jokes, but sensitivity to absurdity, fractures and unexpected turns—and especially to one's own faults. Nothing is duller than someone who considers himself the centre of the world.

Gerard Butler

Does fashion support a person's beauty?

It can emphasise attractiveness when it corresponds to personality. You immediately sense whether someone feels at home in clothes or is disguised by them. Authenticity includes how a company behaves as well as how a garment looks.

Does beauty have to do with mindfulness?

Absolutely. Increasingly, I see that the point is to be at peace—with yourself, with the people around you and with the things you choose. One can see that alignment, even without knowing exactly what it is.

“What matters is whether appearance corresponds to the nature of the person.”

Penélope Cruz

Actor, designer and environmental advocate

Who shaped your idea of femininity and beauty?

My mother and grandmothers. My mother owned a hair salon, where I spent hours listening to clients discuss their lives. It was not only a salon but a place of therapy.

What did the salon teach you?

The women wanted more than a hairstyle. They shared secrets and longed for change that went deeper than hair. They always left a little happier. The hairstyle was a metaphor for inner transformation.

Penélope Cruz

Do conventional beauty ideals frustrate you?

Very much. There is no single measure of beauty. Criticism intended to diminish women or make them feel inferior deserves no attention.

Does being sexy depend on age or body measurements?

Not at all. Jacqueline Bisset and Lauren Hutton were over sixty when I photographed them—beautiful, open and alive. It is absurd to reduce the world's diversity to colours, forms, sizes and categories.

Penélope Cruz

How do you define beauty?

A young woman barefoot in torn jeans can be as beautiful as one in an extraordinary designer dress. When designing with my sister, we tried to serve different styles and bodies rather than only idealised twenty-year-olds. I seek beauty in diversity.

Is there a contradiction between luxury and ethics?

The world cannot function when costs are imposed on the environment, other people, regions or resources. Luxury brands have a particular duty to act responsibly, open discussion and create products with a positive effect.

Penélope Cruz

What did your parents teach you about value?

They worked hard and taught me to treat money responsibly, to appreciate things and never assume they were simply owed to me. That feeling has remained.

How did motherhood change you?

Life no longer revolves around oneself. The ego becomes smaller, which is healthy. Children are extraordinary teachers; I am grateful for every lesson they give me.

“It is absurd to reduce the world’s diversity to categories. I seek beauty in diversity.”

VOICE

Renzo Rosso

Entrepreneur and founder of Diesel

Why did you remove plastic containers from the company?

It was a simple, visible measure, but our sustainability work goes much further. I grew up on a farm, where recycling and respect for nature were natural. Positive thinking matters too: problems can be solved, and we have a responsibility to help others.

Renzo Rosso

What principle shaped the landscape around the Diesel headquarters?

I wanted nature to be present in everyday work. The vertical garden brings thousands of plants into the building; red flowers are always in bloom. A company should not separate productivity from life.

Renzo Rosso

What first attracted you to denim?

A pair of jeans carries freedom, blue sky and authenticity. Denim ages, fades and decomposes visually like nature. Its imperfection makes it human.

Can one speak of a beauty of ugliness?

Yes. Diesel has always challenged polished convention. What appears worn, raw or rebellious can possess greater truth than a perfect surface.

Renzo Rosso

How can production become less harmful?

The task includes chemicals, water, materials and the life of a product. Progress requires measurable changes throughout the chain, not merely a campaign.

What makes life beautiful for you?

Family, friendship, nature and the ability to create opportunities for others. Success becomes meaningful when it improves the lives around it.

“Denim is as beautiful as autumn leaves. It gives us good feelings and brings us closer to nature.”

Johann König

Gallerist

Did the exhibition *What Beauty Is, I Know Not begin with the question of beauty?*

The exhibition was our idea; my father contributed the Dürer quotation. For him it was a form of reflection on a life in art. The title admits that beauty cannot be secured by a final definition.

Johann König

Do you ask yourself what art is?

Yes, because a gallery helps shape discourse. My father is comfortable admitting uncertainty; my work often requires a position. The tension between knowledge and not-knowing creates energy.

Johann König

What attracts you to a work?

It must create resistance as well as desire. Materials, surfaces and ideas can disturb or hurt and still draw us in. Beauty need not be harmonious.

What did the ruined church bring to the gallery?

Its walls carry history. Brick, marble, bronze, neon, paint and stone coexist. Their differences are not corrected; they make the space alive.

Johann König

Is aesthetic education still possible?

It begins through exposure and attention. One learns by looking, comparing and allowing a work to change one's judgement.

Are Jeff Koons's works beautiful?

They are beautiful in the sense of desirability. They intensify the mechanisms of attraction and consumption, while forcing us to examine why an object becomes wanted.

“Beauty and desirability are closely connected.”

Karim Rashid

Product and interior designer

Should every company concentrate on beauty?

Human history suggests that beauty is a fundamental need. Ancient cultures invented cosmetics, perfume, grooming and designed environments in its name. We belong to nature, and nature is seductive and beautiful.

Karim Rashid

Why, then, is the built environment so monotonous?

Industry repeatedly chooses safe neutrals. Yet my colours come from flowers, iridescent animals and sunsets. Colour is not artificial excess; it is part of the natural world.

What is beauty for you?

Beauty is an elevated experience of the present. It should make daily life more humane, pleasurable and emotionally generous.

Karim Rashid

Why call your work sensual minimalism?

Minimalism should not mean deprivation. It should remove what is unnecessary while preserving touch, colour, comfort and desire.

Karim Rashid

Can technology create beauty?

Technology is valuable when it becomes intuitive and liberating. Progress should reduce friction and allow objects and spaces to respond more naturally to human life.

How did the pandemic change your work?

It exposed how much the quality of our immediate environment matters. Homes and objects must support physical needs, emotional resilience and connection—not merely display style.

“We need beauty because we belong to nature—and nature is irresistibly seductive.”

TRANSFORMATION

Christoph Felger

Architect and design director

As a design director, do you mainly discuss aesthetics?

We rarely begin with beauty. We begin with use, context, material, history and social relations. Aesthetic questions emerge through the design process, especially when a form creates strange or unsettling associations.

Christoph Felger

What makes a public space successful?

Architecture can reinterpret the ancient agora: a central, open place that enables encounter. Beauty is inseparable from the possibility of people sharing a space with dignity.

Can beauty be taught?

Education gives precision to perception, but beauty remains a gift. One must create the inner state in which it can be noticed.

Christoph Felger

Has craftsmanship shaped your architecture?

Training as a cabinetmaker taught me that decisions are registered by the hand and body. Details such as a handle's height make architecture tangible and humane.

Does beauty also protect?

Yes. A room can offer orientation, proportion and calm. Protection does not require withdrawal; it can arise from clarity and a carefully formed threshold.

“Beauty is a gift, not something to which I am entitled.”

Alexander Schwarz

Architect and design director

How can a room sound unlike what it is?

Large spaces are often acoustically suppressed until they feel falsely intimate. I prefer rooms whose sound corresponds to their volume. A church asks people to behave differently because its physical truth remains audible.

Alexander Schwarz

Did violin making influence your architecture?

It taught me the unity of appearance, material and performance. An instrument cannot pretend; its form must produce its sound.

What did the James-Simon-Galerie require?

The task was to create a new entrance within an overwhelming historical context. Monumentality had to be considered without imitation, and continuity without nostalgia.

Alexander Schwarz

What education is needed to discuss beauty?

Historical, artistic and sensory education. Without comparison and vocabulary, judgement collapses into preference.

Can beauty be defined?

Not as a fixed formula. It appears when proportion, material, context and meaning achieve a convincing necessity.

“It takes an enormous degree of education to discuss beauty today.”

Jane Goodall

Primatologist and environmental activist

Do chimpanzees possess a sense of beauty?

We cannot know. In the wild they concentrate on social relations and food, yet sometimes they sit absorbed in a sunset. Perhaps they see its beauty.

What does mutual grooming signify?

It is practical, but also social and emotional. Touch creates trust, resolves tension and maintains relationships.

Jane Goodall

Do chimpanzees have artistic abilities?

They can make marks and show curiosity, but we should be careful not to impose human categories. Their intelligence appears in forms appropriate to their lives.

How can young people preserve idealism?

They need real participation. When people understand a problem and are empowered to act, hope becomes practical rather than sentimental.

Jane Goodall

Why have humans lost contact with nature?

Our clever brain has become detached from the heart. We imagine ourselves outside the natural world, although every breath and meal proves our dependence on it.

What is beauty to you?

Beauty is the living world in its diversity—the snow, animals, plants and human kindness. Climate change may force us to invent new beauties, but it should also force us to protect those that cannot be replaced.

“Because of climate change, we may have to imagine new forms of beauty.”

Sergei Tchoban

Architect and architectural draughtsman

What inspired the façade of your drawing museum?

It carries motifs from historical stage designs. Their lines were transferred into concrete so that the closed façade tells of the building's purpose and allows dirt and patina to enrich it over time.

Sergei Tchoban

Can tension produce beauty?

Yes. Architecture becomes compelling through relationships: smooth and rough, heavy and light, old and new, repetition and interruption.

What is the attraction of architectural drawings?

A drawing preserves thought before construction fixes it. It reveals imagination, doubt and the personal hand of the architect.

Sergei Tchoban

How is beauty recognised in architecture?

Through rhythm, proportion and detail. A long colonnade gives the eye continuity and variation at once.

Does sustainability alter beauty?

It must. Durability, adaptability and graceful ageing are aesthetic as well as ecological qualities.

“A long rhythm of colonnades is among the most beautiful experiences the eye can have.”

RELEVANCE

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

I thank Breuninger and Ingeborg Harms for making this series of conversations possible. My particular thanks go to Holger Blecker, Willem van Achtmael, the Meilicke family, Willy Oergel, Nadine Hippler and Jens Remes for their trust, continuing inspiration and support throughout these years.

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

Conversations on Beauty. English editorial edition. Interviews conducted by Ingeborg Harms. Concept and series: Christian Brey. The interviews were originally published in the Breuninger magazines. A5 format. 44 interior pages plus four cover pages.

Beauty becomes cultural space.