

EDITION — CONVERSATIONS ON BEAUTY

BEAUTY

Volume III

Christian Brey

TEN CONVERSATIONS / INTERVIEWS BY INGEBORG HARMS

VOLUME III

ON BEAUTY

Beauty At The Centre Of Life

Christian Brey

INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY INGEBORG HARMS

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BEAUTY AT THE CENTRE OF LIFE

The work at Breuninger demonstrated a principle that has guided everything I have built since: beauty and meaning are not soft additions to economic life. They create relevance, loyalty, cultural resonance and lasting material as well as immaterial value.

But the purpose extends beyond brands. In a world shaped by ecological pressure, social fragmentation and technological acceleration, beauty can restore attention to what deserves to endure. It can align human aspiration with responsibility and transform growth from accumulation into contribution.

My concern today is therefore larger and more personal: to place beauty at the centre of life—as a strategic principle for organisations, a cultural right for people and a path toward a fulfilled life. The final volume moves from architecture and art to the planet itself, asking what we choose to value, protect and leave behind.

Gilbert & George

Artists

How do you define beauty?

Beauty matters only when it transports a message. It is the servant of meaning. We also believe beauty is close to morality: if the world is a complex flower, one behaves accordingly and respects one's neighbour.

Gilbert & George

Why is culture so powerful?

We are made from the books our families did or did not read, the music they heard and the streets they inhabited. Culture forms behaviour before it becomes an argument.

Gilbert & George

Why organise images through a grid?

A house cannot be made from one brick. The grid allows many fragments to become one image, just as life is divided into weeks, months and minutes.

Why are your suits essential?

They are part of our living sculpture. Discipline gives freedom and makes the artists and the work inseparable.

Gilbert & George

Does size create beauty?

Scale creates a physical relation with the viewer. We want images large enough to speak directly, not to retreat into preciousness.

What does your own museum mean?

It gives our work a permanent home and the public a place to encounter it. In that sense it lets the work continue living beyond us.

“Beauty has meaning only when it carries a message to the viewer.”

Brunello Cucinelli

Entrepreneur and humanistic capitalist

Do we lack spirituality today?

Life has accelerated and filled with routines. I return home, exercise, eat and spend two hours before the fire. I look into it, read and speak with myself and creation. Afterwards I am intoxicated by beautiful thoughts.

Brunello Cucinelli

How do you nourish the soul?

Through reading, silence, music, landscape and conversation. Knowledge should deepen the person, not merely increase information.

Brunello Cucinelli

Why restore Solomeo?

A company should contribute to the place that sustains it. Architecture, work, theatre, gardens and public life can regenerate a community rather than extract from it.

What principles guide your enterprise?

Human dignity, fair work, measured profit and responsibility to future generations. Economic life can be conducted without humiliating the human being.

Brunello Cucinelli

What constitutes the good life?

A balance among work, affection, contemplation and beauty. Wealth becomes meaningful when it leaves the world more gracious.

What is the essence of beauty?

Beauty elevates without shouting. It connects the material world with the soul and reminds us that our time should be used with care.

“Before the fire, a beautiful sentence by Kant can bring you into conversation with your soul.”

Werner Sobek

Architect and engineer

When did your search for beauty begin?

As a small child. It became a fascination I pursue carefully in both engineering and architecture: the desire to reconcile imagination with exact knowledge.

Werner Sobek

Is strict engineering opposed to beauty?

No. Constraint can create freedom. A structure becomes beautiful when forces, materials and form are resolved without deception.

Werner Sobek

Why does emptiness feel luxurious?

Patagonia contains an incredible abundance within apparent emptiness. Everything feels clear, clean and ordered. Beauty can lie not in variety but in almost nothing.

What role does contemplation play?

Reduction gives the mind space. When objects and noise recede, relationships become perceptible.

Werner Sobek

Can sustainability be beautiful?

It must be. Zero waste, zero emissions and renewable energy should not be technical additions; they should determine how a building is conceived.

What is the right relation between humanity and nature?

We must stop treating resources as limitless. Buildings should be light, separable, reusable and capable of returning their materials to a cycle.

“In Patagonia there is an incredible abundance within emptiness.”

MATERIAL

Wim Wenders

Film director and photographer

Why are museums essential?

Without museums we would have to invent them immediately. As a child they opened new worlds and possible lives. They remain as vital to society as concert halls, theatres, galleries and cinemas.

Wim Wenders

What is the beauty of cinema?

Cinema joins place, time, movement, faces, sound and memory. Its beauty lies in allowing us to see the world anew and to share another person's gaze.

Wim Wenders

How does emotional beauty arise in a film?

It cannot be manufactured by technique alone. The filmmaker must have seen and desired the beauty that the camera is asked to reveal.

How did Harry Dean Stanton acquire the aura of Travis in Paris, Texas?

He knew it was the role of his life. The camera recognised a truth he was ready to give. Aura appears when actor, role and gaze meet without protection.

Wim Wenders

What makes a person beautiful?

Presence, vulnerability and the capacity to look at the world. A face becomes beautiful through what it has lived and what it is willing to reveal.

Are you a perfectionist?

Perfection is less important than truth. One works rigorously so that the image can finally feel inevitable and free.

“To participate in beauty is a human right.”

Alexandra Cousteau

Ocean advocate

Did your family awaken the world to underwater beauty?

My grandfather Jacques Cousteau revealed how much life and beauty existed below the surface. In the early fifties the oceans were still close to untouched; that pristine world no longer exists.

Alexandra Cousteau

Why did he turn to film?

He wanted to bring the underwater world to people and explain it. Technology, storytelling and wonder became tools of public understanding.

Alexandra Cousteau

How much has already been destroyed?

A great deal, but recovery is possible. Marine ecosystems can regenerate when pressure is removed and habitats are protected.

Alexandra Cousteau

What can individuals contribute?

Reduce plastic, choose food carefully, support protection and demand political action. Personal choices matter most when they become collective expectations.

How do you define beauty?

The sea's beauty is multisensory: light, movement, sound, colour and memory. It reconnects us with people we love and with a living system larger than ourselves.

“The beauty of the sea touches every sense and heals many souls.”

Charlie Siem

Violinist

Are order, calm and balance a formula for beauty?

It depends on what a moment requires. Sometimes beauty is flamboyant and exciting. It enriches us by giving what is absent from our immediate environment.

Charlie Siem

Does beauty require discipline?

In music, freedom rests on rigorous preparation. Organisation, repetition and precision create the conditions in which something spontaneous can happen.

Charlie Siem

Can difficulty be beautiful?

The greater challenge is often to make lightness and joy convincing. Darkness can command attention easily; serenity demands control without heaviness.

Charlie Siem

What does an old violin contribute?

An instrument carries material history and the traces of other players. Its voice is both physical and inherited.

Do concerts have a spiritual dimension?

Yes. For a short time, musicians and audience share attention, silence and vibration. That concentration can feel larger than the individual.

“Beauty may result from rigorous organisation, yet it can also appear spontaneously like a miracle.”

RESPONSIBILITY

Jonathan Adler

Designer and potter

Does beauty still matter in your heterogeneous interiors?

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. We should not be dogmatic; it can be found everywhere. Harmony can emerge from elements that should not logically belong together.

Jonathan Adler

What makes a vase beautiful?

Made objects possess life. They carry the inexplicable impulse of human creativity and the evidence of a hand making choices.

Does beauty have a formula?

No. I prefer swagger: individuality, confidence and the art of remaining in someone's memory.

Jonathan Adler

What should decoration do for residents and guests?

A room should amplify life—make its inhabitants feel more themselves and give visitors something to discover.

Is the childlike important to creativity?

Yes. Play protects curiosity from correctness. The goal is not to become juvenile, but to remain capable of surprise.

“Beauty has nothing to do with rules. It simply exists.”

Tom Wong

Architect

What shaped the Shanghai Astronomy Museum?

We wanted its purpose to be legible and its relationship with the city to be clear. Simple primordial forms create a distinctive building without straight lines or right angles.

Why does it remain close to the ground?

Earth is the point of departure for all of us. The building looks toward the universe while reminding us of the rare conditions that make life on this planet possible.

Tom Wong

Why use the spiral?

It moves through all three dimensions and appears throughout nature. It carries visitors dynamically between the oculus, the planetary sphere and the inverted dome.

Can architecture create a spiritual experience without religion?

Yes. A planetarium can function like a cathedral: it takes your breath away and makes you sense that earthly life is a tiny part of something much larger.

Tom Wong

Did nature give humanity its first idea of beauty?

I believe so. Nature contains order and reason as well as emotion. Beauty speaks to the heart and occupies the intellect; one does not grow tired of it because it touches us in many ways.

Why should the museum produce humility?

The building is spectacular, but the subject is our vulnerable planet. Seen from space, our divisions disappear. Beauty should enlarge perspective and change how we live with nature.

“Beauty addresses the heart, but it must also engage the intellect.”

Heinz Mack

Artist and co-founder of ZERO

What does light mean to you?

Light is colour because it becomes visible through what it illuminates. It models sculpture, gives colour intensity and carries both physical and intellectual energy.

Why did the Mediterranean and the Orient matter to your work?

They opened a culture of brightness, wakefulness and spiritual illumination. In many traditions the sun becomes the source and centre of both material and inner energy.

Heinz Mack

What is the meaning of the upright stele?

Its verticality is a profoundly human act. Humanity stands upright; the first monoliths gave orientation to limitless space and mediated between earth and sky.

What happened when you placed light steles in the desert?

Under the force of the sun, matter disappeared into an apparition of light. Dematerialisation is central to my work: I want to see fields of colour and energy rather than canvas or object.

Heinz Mack

Why did ZERO replace composition with structure?

Traditional composition sets forms in dramatic conflict. Structure repeats an element so that each part carries the whole. It connects art with the arabesque, natural science and the logic of Bach.

Why insist on beauty in contemporary art?

The word has been corrupted, yet nature and human beings remain extraordinarily beautiful. Beauty matters through harmony and rhythm—the deep grounds of human existence. Ugliness, much of it made by people, can cause physical pain.

“Beauty still has a chance. Its deepest grounds are harmony and rhythm.”

Piet Oudolf

Garden designer

Are your gardens metaphors for nature?

We create the feeling of nature at its most meaningful, but we do not imitate it. A garden is bounded and designed, even when it appears wild.

Why has your language become simpler?

After forty years of studying plants, I can achieve more with fewer species. Simplicity comes from knowledge, not from reducing attention.

Piet Oudolf

How did your naturalistic approach begin?

Existing gardens felt too decorative and governed by rules. We sought spontaneity and later found that this language also answered ecological thinking.

Why do you value the winter garden?

Beauty changes rather than disappears. Seed heads, dry stems, birds, insects, low light and decay can be as dramatic as flowering if one learns to see them.

Piet Oudolf

Do your gardens require less control?

The better one understands a garden, the less one needs to intervene. The work becomes observation: seeing whether one plant overwhelms another and understanding ecological behaviour.

Do you intend to seduce?

Yes. I want to reveal the best side of plants so people wish to integrate them into their lives. Beauty reaches them emotionally and brings them closer to origins, value and the meaning of life.

“Beauty is emotion—and decay can be as beautiful as flowering.”

LEGACY

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 becomes a way of life.