

## A Big Friendly Giant

Contrasts and Extremes in

Walter Van Beirendonck's Clothing



Walter Van Beirendonck,  
1996 © Jean-Baptiste  
Mondino.

*King Kong Kooks*, *SexClown*, *Cosmic Culture Clash* and *Weird*: these are all collections by fashion designer Walter Van Beirendonck. With his sensational clothing full of radical statements he pushes the boundaries of conventional values. His idiosyncratic fashion touches on sensitive themes leaving a trail of bewilderment behind it. Is it provocative work by an artistic genius or the creative chaos of a rebel? Who is this designer, and why is he so famous?

Walter Van Beirendonck (Brecht, 1957) grew up in Flanders, the son of a garage proprietor. That he was bursting with creativity was obvious at an early age. Whereas the fashion at his boarding school was short trousers, Van Beirendonck went around in platform soles. It was the era of glam rock and he was beginning to associate himself with the extravagant pop star, David Bowie, who was forever reinventing himself. After doing a preparatory year at the Royal Academy for Fine Arts in Antwerp, he began a four year intensive course in Fashion and Stage Costume. The end of the seventies was an inspirational period for a fashion student: Gianni Versace, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Comme des Garçons and Thierry Mugler were beginning to make their mark and their approach to fashion must have worked like an aphrodisiac on the young Van Beirendonck. In 1980 he graduated with distinction, alongside Martin Margiela,

and two years later was responsible for causing ructions in Belgium. The controversy surrounding his first show, *Sado*, in which he displayed women with whips and muzzles, seems to have set the tone for the rest of his career.

Van Beirendonck designs mainly men's clothing, but introduces a female silhouette from time to time. He sees the tenuous boundaries within which fashion designers manoeuvre as a challenge. By questioning these conventions he has regularly succeeded in stretching the boundaries. The characteristics that would distinguish Walter Van Beirendonck were evident already after his first couple of seasons: the combination of contrasting materials and colours, unusual proportions, the naïve alongside the aggressive, fantasy and frequent allusions to sex. His work demonstrates his social engagement and shows him to be an innovative storyteller. In *Bad Baby's Boys* and *Let's Tell a Fairy Tale*, his two fairy-tale collections, he combines teddy-bear sweaters and pompoms with the harsh reality of the gay scene halfway through the eighties. With the slogan *Safe Sex* he is referring to the disease of AIDS – one of his models had died from it.

As a result of the success of their first shows in Antwerp in the mid-eighties, Van Beirendonck formed the much acclaimed group, *The Antwerp Six*, with fellow-students Marina Yee, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs, Dries Van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester. They made an overwhelming impression on the international press during a London fashion fair and put Belgium on the fashion map for all time. Once Van Beirendonck's talent had gained international recognition, his business acumen ensured him financial independence, a great bonus for a novice fashion designer. Following his appointment as a lecturer at the Antwerp Academy in 1985, Van Beirendonck was assured a regular income that he could combine with commercial commissions. He invested the money he earned straight into his own business.

This meant he could experiment freely with materials, proportions, symbols, bright colours,



Walter Van Beirendonck's Wild Knights at the exhibition Dream The World Awake © Ronald Stoops.

cyber pop and internet – continually improving himself. Because of the way he brought innovation to fashion design he became an extremely influential fashion designer. In the booming nineties, in addition to his main *Walter Van Beirendonck* line he had the label *W&L.T. (Wild & Lethal Trash)*, a huge commercial success that catapulted Van Beirendonck to stardom in the world of fashion. His spectacular Parisian shows were the *must see* of fashion week and had an international following. The German jeans manufacturer Mustang was also partly responsible for the worldwide spread of Van Beirendonck's label and gave the Belgian *carte blanche* for years. He caught the eye of the rock band U2 and designed the costumes for their *Popmart* tour (1997-1998).

When Mustang suddenly started to interfere in the design process, and because of the changing spirit of the times at the end of the nineties, which suited Van Beirendonck less well from the aesthetic point of view, his artistry began to suffer. In 1999 he opted for artistic independence and continued only with his top line, which he sold in his shop-cum-gallery, *Walter*, in Antwerp, a joint venture with his partner Dirk Van Saene. To give vent to his feelings about the disagreement with Mustang, and to be able to follow his own passion for design, he started the *aestheticterrorists* line. But this was granted only a short life following the events of 9/11 and the changes in the world of fashion that came with them. In 2011 he was appointed as artistic leader of four exhibitions under the name of *Mode 2001 Landed/Geland*, which were meant to draw attention to Antwerp as a city of fashion.

After that all was quiet around the Belgian designer for a while until about the middle of the last decade when, thanks to commercial commissions, he had acquired sufficient financial re-

sources to put on a show again, the first for years. His fans relived the old days. Van Beirendonck gloried once more in his extreme statements with his collection *SexClown* (Summer 2008). Taking a fetishist approach, he designed shocking pieces of clothing with an almost militant theatricality. He showed his mastery of his trade by communicating things that fascinated him personally in his fashions. Couturier Azzedine Alaïa: "A Walter-shirt expresses more than what others are expressing in a whole collection."

His interest in architecture, ethnic rituals, decoration, sex and innovation works as a source of inspiration. Concealed within the good-natured Flemish giant is an unfettered hunger for knowledge. This hunger, together with inspirational artists such as Roy Liechtenstein, Marc Newson and Leigh Bowery, feeds the design machine that is Van Beirendonck. He has a multidisciplinary vision of fashion, and a general exhibition, *Dream the World Awake*, with an accompanying catalogue, has been organized to demonstrate this.

At the moment he has his own ladies' and gents' collections, he is the artistic director of Scapa Sports, he designs the children's collection *Zulupapuwa* for the Belgian fashion chain JBC and he is head of the Fashion department at the Royal Academy for Fine Arts in Antwerp. Here Walter Van Beirendonck teaches his students, who come from all over the world, to communicate by means of their work and he introduces them to his own marvellous world of fantasy.

MARTINO BIDOTTI

*Translated by Sheila M. Dale*

[www.waltervanbeirendonck.com](http://www.waltervanbeirendonck.com)

Walter Van Beirendonck, *Dream the World Awake*, Lannoo, Tielt, 2011, 240 p.