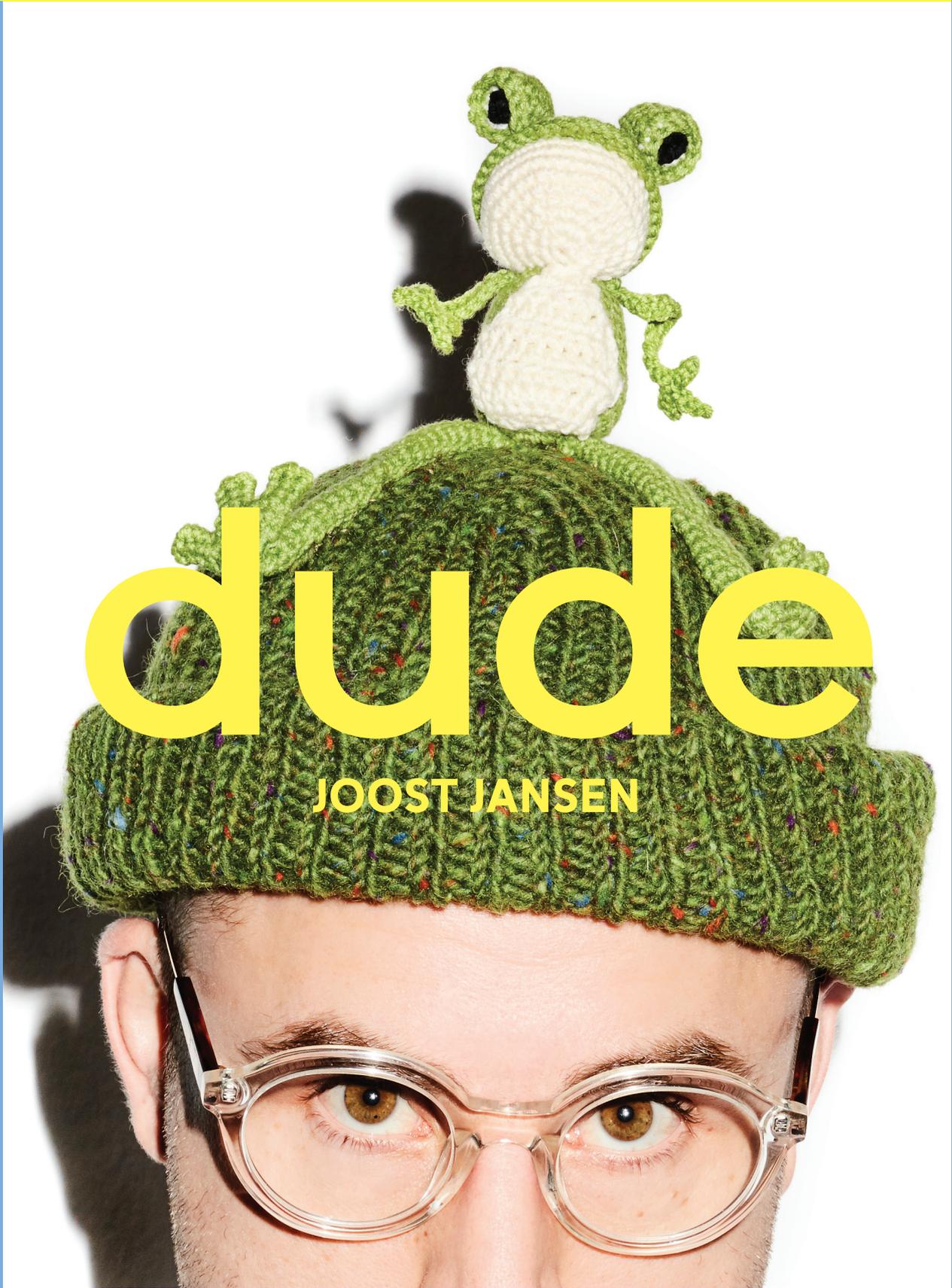


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JOOST JANSEN

‘in fashion there is often a fake face’

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He is not a fashion designer, but Joost Jansen works for more than ten years in the fashion industry, an expression he actually dislikes. For a long time he assisted Walter Van Beirendonck, he moved to Henrik Vibskov where he gained more creative freedom and presented his own collection of sweaters in Paris last fashion week. Fame and money are no motives for him. Qualitatively high and honestly made products however are.

INTERVIEW FLOOR VAN ESSEN, MARSHA SIMON * TEXT FLOOR VAN ESSEN
PORTRAIT VALENTINA VOS * TRANSLATION ARYANA

Survival of the Fashionest is what Joost called his label with hand-knitted sweaters and accessories made in Europe. The choice of name is significant. Where many others do, Joost chooses deliberately not to use his own name for his label. Survival of the Fashionest is a wordplay on survival of the fittest and expresses the urge that according to Joost is needed in fashion to change things. He himself does that by making honest products, of a high quality, where craftsmanship and human scale stand central. Critical but positive. That he doesn't give importance to having his own name on his work, is one of the reasons why he could work for eight years for Walter Van Beirendonck. Joost Jansen ended up at the eccentric Belgian designer while still studying at the famous Design

JOOST JANSEN

— SINCE 1985 —

After a short 'carrier' at the Technical University of Eindhoven at the study industrial design Joost switched to the Design Academy Eindhoven. He graduated in 2010 from the department Man and Identity. He did his internship at the Belgian designer Walter Van Beirendonck and could after his graduation immediately start working for him. During the years at Van Beirendonck Joost also had his own practice, worked at the silkscreen workshop of the Design Academy and became creative director of EE Exclusives. In 2016 he decided to stop at Walter Van Beirendonck and started working for Henrik Vibskov. Since half a year Joost has his own label: Survival of the Fashionest.

Walter's I always asked myself what could be next. The speed in fashion attracts me. I have a need of new things rather quickly and also results. And with Walter I had a

very good click, until I announced my farewell.'

The choice to go and work for Van Beirendonck has been crucial for Joost Jansen. 'My real education I got while working with him. At school you look more if the field of work is something for you and if it's something you would like to continue with and devote your life to. But the years at Walter have really shaped me. Back and forth we have invested a lot into each other. During the first talk that I had with him, as sort of an internship application, he immediately pointed out what he liked and what he liked less and therefore would work on together; he is a born teacher. That I really liked. At Walter's you work in a small team of maximum five. This means you are involved in everything and less a small chain in a bigger system.

There is always a lot to do, especially on organization and production. With friends that start their own label or company right after graduation I see how they struggle with combining the creative part and the organizational side of their practice. The last comes as an extra and costs a lot of energy, mostly negative withal, because they would prefer to concentrate on thinking about new, fresh things. I have a pretty big organizational ability and, as friends say a big head in which I can store a lot of information. I am good at shifting and keep an overview. I don't know how to make a garment myself, but I can very well explain what I want. This ability I have used at Walter's to take over the production of his collections. This created a lot of space for him to work creatively on building up the new collection. My job was to take the designs off the paper and turn them into actual products. Furthermore I kept all contacts with the producers, did all buying and selling, ran the studio and selected the interns for eight years, that's why I know how much interest there is and the luck I have had to be selected myself. There was little room for my own creative input however, especially in the beginning. Once I left Walter I realized that I had missed that.' Also for EE Label, Joost offered his organizational talent and

During his studies he focused mainly on interior design, but wanted a change for his internship. A teacher introduced him to the work of Van Beirendonck. 'I didn't know Walter yet; it was a revelation to me', explains Joost. 'His work fitted very well to the things I was working on myself at that time, although it wasn't really fashion. I always tried to do things a little different by using unusual materials, communicate with humor and use distinct colours.' The, as turned out later, coveted internship he got. And even before graduating Walter asked Joost to work for him. 'That I did for eight years as his assistant. I thereby started on top of the ladder; I didn't know a place I wanted to work rather than there... and still I don't. That is fantastic, but at the same time difficult. During my years at



COLLABORATING

Joost believes in the power of collaboration. Ever since his studies he is regularly working together with friends on both self initiated and commercial assignments.

Next to the two hundred and fifty knitting Bulgarian 'grandmothers' he is for Survival of the Fashionest closely working together with specialists Loret Karman and Ruth Marshall. Scheltens&Abbenes photographed his collection and Halfdan Trolle developed together with Joost beautiful boxes to wrap the sweaters in and the family portrait on which the whole collection is presented.

‘I LEARNED A LOT THERE, BUT ESPECIALLY SAW HOW I DIDN’T WANT TO DO IT’

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ability to act as a link between different craftsmen. This family-ran company, established in 1900 in the small village of Heeze just underneath Eindhoven, is specialized in weaving brand labels, for example used in our clothes. ‘When I worked at Walter’s for four years, I proposed to work together with EE Labels and make fabrics there. Such a label is a very precise, small piece of woven textile. If you can keep this specific definition on a larger scale you could do very special things with it. The collaboration was such a success that the mill decided to develop new machines and broaden it’s activities towards other partners. I applied as a candidate to set this up and since 2013 I am therefor the creative director of EE Exclusives. Just alike my work for Walter I do this part time. I didn’t know a lot about weaving, but I did know how to organize and realize things and also had an idea of what I thought was a demand for – small specialized productions with a lot of personal attention. I don’t think it’s necessary to know the technique through and through, I think it would even obstruct my work. I am standing in between the client, designer and factory and act as sort of a translator because the three don’t speak each other’s language.’

Just like at Walter’s, the atmosphere at EE Exclusives is very personal and it’s exactly this that Joost feels attracted by. Contact is direct and informal, also with clients. Because they are mainly smaller firms with high standards that he works with, there is therewith a lot of sense for detail. At Van Beirendonck for example there was a folding technique developed for every piece of clothing before it was shipped out. ‘That aspect of attention, that I like very much and I would also like in my own business’, says Joost. ‘There is an overkill of “fashion”, but you differentiate yourself mainly by these maybe a little forgotten “details”.’ Half a year ago he made the step towards independence, something he had in mind for a longer period of time already and he

could afford himself thanks to a buffer he had build up with the goal to be able to once make this step. He worked meanwhile for a year and a half for Danish designer and musician Henrik Vibskov. ‘I knew Henrik already for a few years because I also sold Walter’s collection in the Paris showroom. He is very talented and has next to his own label two shops, one in Copenhagen and one in New York. Here he sells amongst others Walter’s clothes. When after a long while at Walter’s I started to learn less and everything started to feel a little repetitive, I send an email to Henrik. One day he told me someone was leaving and he asked me to come and work for him. His company is a step bigger then Walter’s and works more commercial. I turned everything upside down, left everything behind and started working for him. Very soon I started to realize that in those eight years with Walter I had missed to be more creative myself. At Henrik’s I got at that point more freedom and also took it. I did a lot there on textile design and -development, searched for new factories and techniques and brought most of the production back to Europe wherever possible and helped building up shows. That they are still building further on this I see as a big compliment. I learned a lot there, but especially saw how I didn’t want to do it.’ With the knowledge that he had to put his own creativity again in a central roll, the idea to start up himself started to be more and more attractive. Moreover, he had an idea already for it for three years. When his contract with Henrik Vibskov ended because the person whom he replaced decided to come back and Joost decided not to fight for his place because of too much animosity, everything fell in it’s place. ‘With Walter I talked sometimes about bad knitwear. He himself started mainly with sweaters and knows a lot about it. We agreed that there aren’t that much nice and qualitative special knits around. I thought that was a shame, especially because there is so much

Walter Van Beirendonck SS16 collection Home Sweet Home, fabrics by EE Exclusives. Backstage photo: Ronald Stoops



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heritage and knowledge in Europe. I wanted to do something with that. I am not a fashion designer but a sweater is manageable as a shape and has an outside to work with graphically. When I met a Bulgarian woman at Hendrik's that made hand-knitted sweaters and I thought she could make what I had in mind, it came at exactly the right moment. I decided to take a full season, so half a year, to set up my idea, Survival of the Fashionest, and have all the time and attention to do it exactly as I wanted.'

In that half a year a lot happened. Joost made the designs for his sweaters and went to Bulgaria to meet the group of women that would knit for him. The idea that they could immediately start and make samples for him he soon had to let go when he concluded that they didn't really realize their own abilities. 'That was on one hand a deception, but on the other also a gift. I was so used to work with the best people around and not needing to explain much and doors opening by itself. Without actually knowing it themselves, they had a treasure of knowledge, knowledge that has disappeared or been forgotten here in the West. I turned everything upside down again and concentrated on how we could exploit, show and benefit the most from these hand techniques. I remade all the design with this in mind and pushed to reach the level that I wanted. Sometimes I thought I went too far, but it really worked out well and the makers are proud of themselves.' What Joost by definition doesn't want is that his collection gets the ethos of a social workplace. Of course he thinks it's important that part of the profit flows back to the makers and he will invest in educating the new generation. But this he sees as an obvious matter and doesn't want to exploit it as a marketing tool. What is important for the outside world, is the message that on the matter of sustainability and transparency something has to happen in the fashion world. Preferably he would like to see more unique pieces being produced within the higher segment with more focus on quality and crafts. 'Especially there is room for it, with the prices being asked. I have for example myself looked at all aspects of my product and questioned myself how I could improve

them. That's why my sweaters have knitted labels in stead of woven ones that don't stretch with the knit and I use Donegal Tweed merino wool, the best quality yarn, from a traditional familyspinnery in Ireland. I want every step to be honest.' Regarding the fashion-industry itself he has mixed feelings. 'I can hardly say I dislike the industry. But I don't like the word itself. Companies like H&M and alike I indeed see as an industry, but the higher segment is something else. I can't change a lot and let's be honest, just because it's there the other gets more attention', explains Joost. But he is furious about copying pieces from smaller designers. 'That really has to stop. I have seen how items from small independent studio's were almost identically copied and exploited by the big giants like H&M. Somebody like Dries Van Noten is doing something against this, but he also has the financial possibilities for it. I think it's a very beautiful gesture that he donates the compensation fees he gets from it to fashion schools. 'I am not that typical fashion-person; in fashion there is often a fake face. I don't like that. For example if you look at a hot issue like sustainability; many companies do something with it, but not sincerely. They want to join the craze. At the same time a lot has also been improved since a few years ago. Many big fashion houses like Chanel buy small ateliers that would otherwise disappear and that is very good. But the big group underneath is only in it for the money. That doesn't suit me; it's the side of fashion that I dislike most. I am a big fan of the initiative of Bruno Pieters: Honest by. It's the first company in fashion that works a hundred percent transparent. On the labels in the clothing you can find exactly where it's made, what every part costs and what their margin is. I walked once into Primark to see the phenomena with my own eyes. There are things hanging there for five euro that I just know of that it's impossible in terms of making costs and margin. It would be good if labels from these companies were as transparent as those of Bruno Pieters. I think not many people would buy there any longer. Very effective is the comparison that Li Edelkoort made between the price of a garment, that has been through a full production cycle,



'ON THE MATTER OF SUSTAINABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY SOMETHING HAS TO HAPPEN IN THE FASHION WORLD'



Castle in the Sky, 2012. Installation at the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, in cooperation with Marleen Hartjes

'I AM NOT A FASHION DESIGNER BUT A SWEATER IS MANAGEABLE AS A SHAPE'



joost jansen

and a sandwich. The last costs more in the shop. People need these kind of comparisons to really see the problem.' Joost points out that he is definitely not driven by frustration or anger. He tries to offer criticism and change in a positive way, although he is a very small player. One of the most beautiful things about his own label is that he works with a maximum instead of a minimum, as is common in fashion. 'At EE Exclusives we have a motto "Get better, not bigger". I think that is a beautiful starting point. We communicate a maximum, not that we really have one, but it's mainly a different way of thinking that immediately hits the people and makes them change their way of thinking. The same principal I use for my sweaters. When I tell that it takes a week and a half to produce one sweater, buyers are in shock. Only then you realize awareness. The advantage of

handmade items is that you can work with small quantities. At Walter's we also did, namely thirty to thirty five pieces per item. It was a real struggle to produce everything, but at the same time very satisfying to realize. At Henrik's the amounts were much higher, but also here they were never high enough. If you work with bigger amounts you also give away a lot of creativity. From the five designs you make, you sample three and eventually two are produced because you have to reach your quantities. Now in terms of creativity I can try everything, I have twenty design and it's not a problem if I for example have to produce only one of them.'

We speak with Joost on the eve of the launch of his label in Paris. He doesn't know exactly what to expect and worries if buyer will be coming to his expensive showroom in the



crowded fashion week. But the stress and maybe insecurity proved wrong, as it turns out after Paris Fashion Week: 'Paris really turned out better than expected', explains Joost enthusiastically. 'Thanks to the contacts I build up through the years with the best buyers and press they actually came, which is very special. My choice to present in a personal "designer showroom", so without collections of others around, was a good one. I was able to explain my story very well and that was important.' Joost tells he already opened a bottle of bubbles when he received an e-mail from Adrian Joffe, partner of the famous Japanese fashion designer and founder of Comme des Garçons Rei Kawakubo with whom he started Dover Street Market together. 'When somebody of that importance tells his people to come by then you know you are doing something good and you will get feedback on your collection from the very best. The first day his buyers from New York came by. It turned out to be a golden deal to give her one of my hats with a knitted animal on top, a smaller part of this winter collection. It acted as the perfect business card and made sure that all buyer of the other shops also came by. They decided to place an order for all of their shops. An incredible compliment. It means that I will be hanging next to Walter; Hendrik clothes are not even hanging in these shops. Also for next season it will be important, since a lot of shops look at DSM. I start once again on top of the ladder. When I received my first order I was in complete shock: fifty sweater for their store in London, fantastic!'

Joost realizes that he now has to push through. Initially the plan was to make only one collection a year, but now a summer collection is inevitable. 'This fish I have to keep on the hook and catch it, so I already started full on with new ideas for the summer collection. There is hardly any time to celebrate the success, especially because the production has to start immediately. In a little over three months the first sweaters have to be delivered to the shops already.' In his summer collection he is probably going to work with linen a, as he says himself 'magnificent and traditional material' that suits very well within his story. Henrik is still coming by at his studio to see the collection and hopefully buy for his shops in Copenhagen and New York. And Joost will soon go and visit Walter to see whether there are possibilities to work together once again in the future. 'I miss Walter a lot and think it could fit very well to both of us. My CEO at EE Labels has in the meantime as a matter of fact included my knitted label into the label-collection books, there you have it.'

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MAXIMUM

Different than usual in fashion, there is no minimum set for orders that can be placed with Joost. This has a practical reason, the capacity of his knitters is after all limited and the production time short. But above all Joost wants to give out a signal with setting a maximum to create awareness on the value of his products.