

Kareem Rashed: What you do encompasses so many different things – it's events, it's products, it's entertainment, it's your own looks. When a new project comes along, what makes you think, "Okay, this is something that's right for me."?

Susanne Bartsch: I get an instinct. Basically, if it's something that I feel is creative – creativity is very important to me. Creativity, to me, it's like God: you have an idea, you have something inside you and you make it happen. And then as it happens, people come to see it, or people get inspired by it. They get joy out of it. They see something that you created and it sparks a response. Whether that response is good or bad doesn't really matter, it's just important to create. When a project is brought to me, I'm attracted when I feel like I'll be able to create something new, something that I can put my twist on.

KR: What is that thought process like? For instance, how do you go from seeing a raw space to saying, "I'm going to do a cabaret show here" or "I'm going to do an art installation here"?

SB: I think about the energy – how it feels – a lot, like, "Oh, you can flirt here", or "This feels cold". Most things I do are to bring people together, which is one of my callings. I unite people. So how the space works with people inside of it is very important because, at the end of the day, you can create until the cows come home but it's about the people coming and being able to experience whatever I've created. I like when there is a way to be interactive, which has always been my thing: bringing different cultures together, such as the house ball scene, the drag scene, the trans scene, art, fashion, uptown, downtown.

KR: And you manage to do that in new ways with every event you produce. How do those ideas take shape?

SB: I went to see a space yesterday and before you enter the dancefloor, there's this cool little lounge. When I walked into that lounge, I saw six blonde lookalike girls, naked with big cigarette holders – like 1920s meets now meets 2050. I don't know where it came from. They didn't even have any furniture in there yet. It had these high ceilings and the walls were lacquered this dusty oxblood colour and I just thought "This is what I would do here."

I don't really plan. Somebody said to me recently, which I never really realised, "I didn't understand how you worked, but I suddenly realise you see the whole thing before it happens." And it's true. I'm not a visionary, I don't know what's

going to happen in your life. But I see how a room, a look, an event will come together. Sometimes it can be a little bit hard because people don't know what I have in my head and might not understand when I explain it, but that's fine. Now, I wouldn't have thought of these six girls in that room if I didn't see the room. If someone said "There's a lounge", it wouldn't have come to me. It's almost like I meet the walls and the walls tell me something.

KR: Your events, and your fashion, take on a lot of different appearances. What would you say are some constants in your style?

SB: I like quantity of one thing. One of my favourite inspirations is Carnival in Rio, because there are thousands and thousands of turquoise feathers. Each school has feathers, as far you can see, in the same colour. Turquoise and yellow might be the colours of one school, so they're all in the same colour scheme. And when you're in the bleachers, you see them approach from miles away, all these feathers of the same colours. That's very me. Like at the Delano (Hotel in Miami, New Year's Eve 1999) they have 12 trees, like an orchard, and I decorated them all with those thick silver Mylar streamers – the whole tree, it looked surreal. It was a simple thing, just Mylar streamers, but the quantity of it just blew you away.

KR: I feel like that's kind of a Susanne Bartsch signature: turning up the volume to a hundred on something – taking it to an extreme or contrasting it with another extreme.

SB: Absolutely, and also, you know, to give it that chic-ness. Cheesy in my eyes is not cheesy in someone else's eyes, but even the people that like cheesy, when they see a version of the same thing but à la me – you know, well done – they will react to it. They will know the difference, even if they won't necessarily go "This is a better version of that cheesy thing." I'm very much not into the norm; I'm into things that we all know but done in a way that we haven't seen before. Like, if I have a burlesque performer, it's never about sex. I don't want a performer that just strips and has a fabulous body. I want a performer that does something you don't expect, like painting with his penis or making peanut butter sandwiches while spread eagle. It's about making people see things with new eyes. It's like with Joey Arias – he had his show and I told him to put on a dress and become Billie Holiday and his performance went to a totally new level. There's a million burlesque shows. Why is mine popular? Because you have burlesque performers doing more than what the audience expects them to do.

KR: So much of what you do is about aesthetics. Do you think there is such a thing as good taste or bad taste?

SB: There is and there isn't. When I do a look, it won't be tacky – if it was, I wouldn't feel good in it. But sometimes you see someone in an overdone, tacky look and it's so bad that it's good. It's a lot about pulling it off. Energy is the most powerful thing each one of us has in our lives.

Thinking can fuck it all up or make it all good – the thinking is the key. Just generally in life, if you have good energy, you feel good. I definitely have energy. I can give energy and make people feel really good; I know that. Somebody said that to me when I was like 16: I have charisma, I can walk into a room and make everybody feel really special and important. But I can also walk into a room and not do anything. They won't feel bad, but I won't get any positivity back. I don't think I'm an exception in that; I'm definitely very aware of it, though. It's a superpower.

I want to give people that energy and the look is what helps me amplify that. If I walk into a party dressed like I am now, I would *not* be feeling it. The looks and creating environments for my events, really everything that I do, wakes up that energy and enables me to give more of it. Dressing up and expressing myself with looks is actually a tool for me to go and do what I enjoy most: make people feel good. When I see people feel good, I feel good myself. So, it actually, selfishly, serves me. I mean, I'll never forget when I did my first show at the Roxy, *New London in New York* [1983]. It was the first fashion show I ever did, the first event I ever did, period. I arrived and there was a line of people waiting to get in that went around the block twice. Feeling that excitement of people showing up to experience something I'd created was just so amazing. It's such a high. You have an idea, you're excited about that idea, then it grows within and you make the idea come to life and *then* other people are excited about it. That is such a gift.

KR: A lot of what you do is out of your control, in a way. You're not the one playing the music, you're not the one performing in the show, you put all of these pieces together. How do you leave room for the unexpected in that?

SB: The unexpected is part of the charm. I like the unexpected. That's why I don't like to do rehearsals, because I don't want it to be perfect. If someone comes out at the wrong time, it's okay. Speaking of *New London in New York*, everything went wrong: we had the music blasting and there was just a curtain dividing the audience and backstage, so there was no sound barrier and, in the back, nobody could hear anything. I'd be screaming "Leigh Bowery! Leigh Bowery!" and BodyMap went on stage. It was a mess. But the success of that show and the big hype was the chaos. Nobody knew the chaos was not planned. They thought it was *it*, like a totally modern kind of fashion show, because they were used to the very proper, Calvin Klein type of shows.

When things are going wrong, I like to work with that. Like, I fell down in the Mugler show because he gave me shoes like ice skates. I was wobbling around and, of course, the minute I went out, I fell flat on the runway, wig flying. What do I do? I crawled down the runway and I lifted up my legs and had fun with it. It was the only thing to do.

KR: On the topic of *New London in New York* [1983], doing that fashion show and the *London Goes to Tokyo* show [1984], you were giving a platform to these young designers...that's not such a common thing for a small boutique to do.

SB: Well, I'll be honest. This is what happened. Like usual, I decided to open the store without really planning...I'd moved to New York and there was no one doing looks like we'd been doing in London, so I decided to import what I missed. That was in June, I think. I found a space in SoHo and then, in August or early September, John Duka from the *New York Times* came before I'd even opened and I showed him some samples. And I'm like, "It's all young English designers. Some of them haven't got a business. They're still working behind the scenes in design houses, or this one is in college. BodyMap's still in school." And he said, "This is amazing. This is street fashion." That term came from John Duka. Then the night before I opened, I had a whole page in the *New York Times*, and the *Times* style section never did a page on one person.

So, it became a big success. Donna Karan and Norma Kamali, they all came shopping there, and English fashion really became a thing. Everybody from Saks to Charivari, Bergdorf, Barney's, Bloomingdale's, Ultimo in Chicago, Maxfield in LA – they're all going crazy for it and they're all going to London. I was worried I couldn't compete with these big stores, so I decided to sign [the designers] all up. I didn't know how to do it, technically or financially, but I went to London and saw 18 designers, including Leigh, Galliano, Stephen Jones, Judy Blame. And I said, "I'm going to do a show in New York. I'm going to represent you. I'm going to have a showroom. You're coming over, you can show whatever you want. You have three minutes on stage." And they all came. It wasn't so much that I wanted to showcase my designers. It was "How do I survive this huge buzz I've created without even planning?" And then I got involved with everybody's business.

Women's Wear Daily in Japan heard about it and said, "We want to work with you", and we ended up in Tokyo doing a three-day show. The English ambassador and the Japanese prime minister came, then Leigh Bowery came out pant-less with Trojan and Rachel [Auburn], all in aprons: butts hanging out, bending over, balls dangling. Oh my God – scandalous. So, the reason I did those shows was to protect my brand. But I didn't plan any of it. Like with everything I do, it was all very organic.

KR: Even if it wasn't your initial intention, you wound up giving a platform to so many talents that, otherwise, didn't have much representation. I see that as a kind of theme throughout your career.

SB: I think it's the same with everything I do: the people are what motivates me. And that's why I like to give platforms to all these different people and embrace what is going on, culturally.

I'm definitely a pioneer. I finally admit that. I mean, I'm a forerunner for so many things. *RuPaul's Drag Race*, even. When I started out, drag was not well regarded. I put it into a different context and, through events like the *Love Ball*, I helped it become part of the mainstream. I set the stage for it, and Ru took it and made it happen. Like with the *Love Ball*, the house scene was very kind of isolated and had been devastated by AIDS, I'd been up to Harlem to see them and they were incredible, and with *Love Ball*, I put them on the map while also getting people to do something about the AIDS crisis – in those early days, it was just pain and loss, no one was doing anything to give people hope. I'm not saying I discovered voguing or was the first person to raise money for AIDS, but you know what I mean? There are so many cultural things that I set in motion. Trans people...even at my store in the '80s, I hired a Black trans sales girl.

KR: So many young people today are doing amazing looks, but it's something that they do for Instagram or TikTok; it doesn't leave their house. There's nothing wrong with it...

SB: No, there's not.

KR: But I was wondering how the physical experience of being out and interacting with people, how is that important to your looks and what you create?

SB: Well, this is a really interesting question, because not so long ago, I think my answer would have been different. The internet, Instagram and TikTok are really important. I never thought I would say that. There's good and a lot of bad. But the good is that it gives a lot of people exposure. Before, if a company wanted talent like they'd seen at one of my events, they would have to call me and say, "Where would I find a so-and-so?" Or they would have to go to an agent, they would have to work for it. Now, all they have to do is go on my Instagram and see what's up. They call people I work with and say, "Hey, would you like to do..." And I'm very happy for them. One girl was just telling me that she's gotten so many jobs because of me, because I'm tagging her, for example. There are opportunities for people now, which is fantastic.

In the '80s and '90s, designers would come to my events to see what's going on. You would see Gaultier and Mugler and Galliano and Margiela. You'd see these designers looking and getting inspired. Today, you don't have to do that. You've got Instagram. But these kids who are doing these looks on Instagram...I am able to give them a real-world platform, a space where they feel safe and they can come and do a look, do whatever they were doing on Instagram in real life. And that is priceless because on Instagram, there's no emotion. Real human interaction to me is now more important than ever: real people, real contact, seeing people's eyes and their energy, feeling each other. I really do think that is essential at this moment, because it has become so much about "How does this look on the internet? How does my

Instagram look?" It's devastating.

KR: For you, personally, is there a difference between what you create for Instagram versus what you create in real life?

SB: Really, 99.9 percent of things you see on Instagram are what I'm doing to go to a live event. I've yet to do looks just for Instagram. What I think is interesting, and Instagram has helped with this, is that what I do – creating looks – is now considered an art. And I think that's where I'm also a pioneer, so to say. I'm getting this looked at as art, whilst it could just be fashion, it could just be someone in a dress, in heavy makeup. For most people, getting dressed is about "I have to wear this because I'm going there", or "This is what's in this season." What I do is so not about that. My body is my canvas and I'm creating works of self-expression.

KR: Today, there are so many resources for discovering things, for broadening your horizons, but obviously that's all relatively new. So, I'd love to know when you were growing up in Switzerland, what were your influences?

SB: I think I was influenced by the Swiss lifestyle. You've got to get up at seven, eight o'clock in the morning – maybe that's why I'm against the nine-to-five thing because I was born in Switzerland with that base structure. There's the Alps, there's the valleys and it's very forbidding. The Alps stop anything from coming in, and you're in there and you're meant to be a certain way. And I guess I rebelled against that Swiss convention, which isn't exclusively Swiss: having the house, the white fence, the bank account and the car and the kids. I think I grew up knowing that's not what I want.

KR: What was your family like?

SB: My parents were very open, very embracing. So, I learned all the things that are the basis of a human being: to be kind and not cruel, and give, and forgive. I learned that, and that we're all people – we're all the same. I grew up with that philosophy. So, I was lucky that I never had to be afraid of who I am or what I am. And they were stylish parents; they were always interested in how we looked, the whole family: my sister, my mother, my father and me.

KR: So much of what you do is ephemeral: you create works that happen and then they're gone.

SB: It's definitely a one-night stand, yeah.

KR: Do you ever wish there was more permanence to what you do?

SB: Not really, no. But having said that, it's not a smart business; it would be good to have a product. I'm the product. But I like that when a party ends, people will leave with a memory. I like the idea of being a memory. It's like a love affair: that night was amazing, then it's gone, and you remember it. People are nostalgic about it. I think if you have something that keeps going the same way, it burns out. People get bored. I like that with each time, it's a new challenge.

KR: And with your looks, too, you essentially never repeat yourself.

SB: I get a lot of joy out of doing my looks; it's never a chore. To me, a chore would be to repeat the look. Which is funny, because a lot of people who are known for their style have a style that repeats. Like, Kim Kardashian is always just Kim Kardashian in another outfit, even Marilyn Monroe. My style is not having a style. I'm constantly going with what I feel, and that to me is real fun. I might be tired or feeling low, but I get turned on the minute I sit down and start doing my hair and makeup. It's an invention, saying "Okay, we're going to do this, we're going to do that." I never get tired of it.

KR: Your style has evolved and nuanced. When I look at pictures of you from the '80s, your looks are almost conventional compared to what you do today.

SB: In those days, it was more about something that people wouldn't wear or hadn't seen... more about the feeling of it. Then I was doing head-to-toe, a full look, and now it's more about mixing. I dress to the makeup, I'd say. Now, it's more about transformation. It's like Leigh Bowery – he painted a little here and there, then suddenly became this sculpture. I'm the same. I'm no Leigh Bowery but I've become more and more creative with my own self. You know, I never just wear a wig from the store, I rarely just wear a dress as it was made. I always ask myself, "How can I make this something different from what it is? How can I make it mine?" If the hair is very Hollywood glamour, then I'll have the makeup be futuristic. If the outfit is very Baroque, I'll have the hair be punk. I like to experiment. One new artist I'm working with made this dress out of plastic sculptures – amazing but a nightmare to put on. I couldn't deal with it so I said, "Fuck it, I'll put it on my head." To me, fashion is one thing but it's another art form to see a piece of clothing and make it into something else, to make it your own. Back in the '70s, when I was in London, it was about dressing to be part of a scene...the punks, the rockers, the New Romantics. Today, it's more about individualism.

KR: In a way, you've created your own scene.

SB: I've designed my life. I haven't designed that glass or that bag; I've designed a lifestyle, made a space for all these different things to coexist. I guess you could say I'm a designer of life.

KR: You've been a muse to so many designers and been instrumental in launching so many careers. Was there anyone in your life that was that kind of mentor?

SB: There were two boyfriends. Paul Reeves, who I met in England, really saw the potential in me. There was a moment where I could have gone back to Switzerland and he encouraged me to stay. He was incredibly creative himself; he had a store, Universal Witness, and every rock-and-roll person – from the Rolling Stones to the David Bowie, you name it – went there. The other was Patrick Hughes, the artist; I moved to New York on Valentine's Day to be with him. Being here in New York with Patrick was when I really started to

flourish. In London, I was just a part of things, taking it in, and here, I started to do my own thing. Other than that, the people I gave a head start to are actually my mentors. To see RuPaul on a go-go box at Savage and say to him "You're a fucking star", he mentored me in a way. Leigh Bowery, Mathu Andersen, ZalDY, Galliano...there are too many. As much as I helped propel them, they were mentoring me by being in my life and letting me recognise their talents. They made me feel like, "Okay, I have the eye."

KR: From the beginning, you've been mixing and defying all of these kinds of groups. What do you think it is about you and your work that attracts all of these different people that, theoretically, are not supposed to like the same thing?

SB: It's probably one of the simplest answers. I embrace them all: the Brooklyn kids, the uptown ladies, the eccentrics, the regular guys from New Jersey and everyone in-between. With me, people know that they're going to be accepted – everyone's on the same level. It's a bit like when you go to the cinema and have to wear 3D glasses: everyone has to wear the glasses and if you don't, everything is blurred. No matter who you are, if you're coming to one of my events, you're putting on the glasses – acceptance is the price of admission. Anything and everything goes. As humans, I think we all have a desire, deep down, to connect with one another, to be part of something. For some people, maybe I'm taking them out of their comfort zone but I think even the most closed-minded people are curious; they're only closed-minded because they haven't been exposed. So, I create a place where all different cultures can be exposed to each other and step outside of whatever world they live in, or think they live in. That's what it's really about.

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