

## The Best of Both: Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin

When you look at the list of clients, gallery shows and museum exhibitions [Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin](#) have amassed in their nearly three decades making photographs, it can be difficult to imagine that they began as most photographers do: frustrated, making calls to editors, pounding the pavement in New York City trying to show their book and having very little luck getting work.

Now, of course, they are creating print campaigns and films for fashion houses like Balmain, Chloé, Dior, Lanvin and Yves Saint Laurent; are contributing to *Vogue Paris*, *V Magazine*, *W* and the like; their fine-art work is represented by Gagosian Gallery; and they have a new, two-volume special-edition book, *Pretty Much Everything*, published by Taschen.

While all of this success certainly has to do with the pair's vision as photographers and artists, their work alone isn't the full story. Their character, enthusiasm and—brace yourself—love for one another, have been equally important.

"They seem [to be] very happy people, which I think is a big secret in life for a lot of things," explains *Vogue Paris* editor Emmanuelle Alt, who has collaborated with van Lamsweerde and Matadin for nearly a decade. "They treat everyone with respect and they are always in a good mood," she adds. "When you travel with people for [a shoot], and you're together every day, you discover [who they are] very fast, and I have to say, they have the best behavior, always."

"I think [clients and collaborators] feel that we're two people who love each other and want to have an amazing time working," van Lamsweerde says. "We always say, 'This is it, this is our life,' so every day that we are shooting has to be amazing, has to have an amazing atmosphere, good food, great people around, good music—it's almost like you are hosting a party every day, and I think that's very important."

The atmosphere on their shoots is calm and easygoing, van Lamsweerde says. "Both of us are secure enough in a business that can sometimes breed insecurity; both of us feel strongly about what we do, so it just flows, everything just goes naturally."

"Sometimes the conditions are difficult," Alt says, "But they work and they find the positive in every situation ... You feel very safe with them, I think."

Early on, their relationship played a pivotal role in giving them the strength to stick with their vision. During fashion's moody, black-and-white "grunge" era, van Lamsweerde and Matadin were pushing against the trend, making high-gloss, color photographs. Nobody was interested, yet van Lamsweerde says she and Matadin never gave a thought to changing what they were doing. "You support each other and you tell each other, 'We're not giving up ... eventually they will need us for their campaign and however long it takes is how long it takes.'"

It took until 1994. The Dutch couple had returned to Amsterdam from New York City, where they lived while van Lamsweerde had an artist's residency at MOMA PS1 from 1992 to 1993. British fashion magazine *The Face* published their story "For Your Pleasure," which had originally appeared in a Dutch magazine, and almost immediately they moved back to New York City and were working for *Vogue*.

They also collaborated with *Harper's Bazaar* creative director and *Visionaire* and *V Magazine* founder Stephen Gan. Gan, who saw their photographs in *The Face*, recalls, "Their early work stood out to me because, like *V*, it was so glossy and so glamorous in a sea of gloomy post-grunge fashions." As they had predicted when they were struggling to find work, fashion houses began to decide they needed van Lamsweerde and Matadin for their campaigns.

If *The Face* gave van Lamsweerde and Matadin their fashion-world introduction, the most widely circulated image from the story signaled their intention to question and provoke. The photograph shows a pair of blonde models in tight shorts and tank tops standing over bicycles, sharing a Popsicle, while in the background a space shuttle blasts off. The image is sexually provocative while also questioning and ultimately undermining the method of provocation. The rocket mocks, or at least pokes fun at, the image's perceived sexuality.

This duality has defined van Lamsweerde and Matadin's work. "What we're looking for is this tension, this slight unease," van Lamsweerde explains. "For instance there is always the tension between the beautiful and grotesque; and high-fashion/low-fashion; the spiritual and the mundane; male/female; there is a lot of gender and identity stuff going on."

The photographers weren't always conscious of their attraction to dualistic images, but working on their new book from Taschen, which covers nearly 30 years, made them realize that certain ideas have persisted throughout their careers. In the

book, which took them the better part of nine years to complete, this underlying theme is expressed through image pairings, some of which show similarities in images shot decades apart.

“[Working on the book] showed us that our inspiration still comes from the same source,” van Lamsweerde says. “It also showed us how experience and confidence have made us grow as artists ... We used to, in the beginning, be so excited about all the ideas that we wanted to cram them all into one photograph,” she explains. “We learned that it’s better to separate your ideas and use them in photographs one idea at a time, and space it out and feel confident enough that you can do that.”

Van Lamsweerde and Matadin met in the mid-Eighties while attending art school in Amsterdam, and began working together officially in the early-Nineties. While their 1994 story published in *The Face* introduced them to the international fashion scene, their 1993 fine-art series, “Thank You Thighmaster” and “Final Fantasy,” which, respectively, question the depiction of the female form and explored issues of child sexuality, garnered them attention from the art world. Each employed digital manipulation techniques. The former is a series of nudes in which the subjects’ nipples and vaginas have been removed and smoothed over, while the latter superimposes the mouths of older men onto female toddlers.

Manipulating and combining photographs has remained an important mode of communication for van Lamsweerde and Matadin in both fashion and fine-art contexts. Photographic representation has sometimes fallen short of what they want to express. The computer, and collaborations with design firm m/m (Paris) and van Lamsweerde’s uncle, sculptor Eugène van Lamsweerde, have allowed van Lamsweerde and Matadin to “cut through the surface” of a photograph. “You corrupt the notion of a photograph being a direct reflection of time,” van Lamsweerde says. “For us it’s very exciting, that idea of being able to go back in and change what’s there in order to visualize a more emotional state or internal psychological idea, and I think that’s been a huge revelation for us.”

While van Lamsweerde and Matadin have enjoyed numerous exhibitions, including a retrospective that originated in 2010 at Foam Fotografiemuseum in Amsterdam, before traveling to the Pavilhão da Bienal de Arte in São Paulo, Brazil, in 2011, van Lamsweerde feels their work hasn’t been fully embraced by the art world. “There is more of a fascination, and a kind of obsession with the glamorous side of what we do,” van Lamsweerde says. “It’s always been a little bit hard for people to understand that we can exist in both worlds and that we’re independent of either world. That’s a fine line that we balance on very deliberately, because that’s the most interesting to us, to be like a free agent and play with the context of both sides.”

The fashion world has seemed unequivocal in its embrace of van Lamsweerde and Matadin. The business has changed a lot, van Lamsweerde says. Whereas in the Nineties there “was still a certain division between high fashion and low fashion,” now “all the photographers work for the same brands,” a development that van Lamsweerde says has increased the level of creativity in fashion photography. The shift to digital, which the pair made a few years ago, enabled them to take on a higher volume of work. Despite working at a breakneck pace, they’ve been able to maintain their creativity by drawing on their combined decade of art school. “I always say to every young photographer that asks me, ‘Stay in school as long as you can; study, study, study; try it all without the responsibility of having to do 12 images in a day,’ which is our reality at this point.”

The pair also creates fashion films for design houses and editorial clients alike, and the demand for them is growing rapidly, van Lamsweerde says. “It’s an open door for us that offers so many new inspirational things and challenges, and new people to work with, things to think about.

“There is still a resistance as far as budgets are concerned because film is expensive, there’s just no way around it,” van Lamsweerde says. “But we always say video lives on the Web for years. People still comment on the videos we did two or three years ago for Yves Saint Laurent, and people keep seeing them and revisiting them. For a brand it’s a very long life for one collection, whereas a one-page ad in a magazine, one month and it’s gone.”

When Kathy Ryan hired van Lamsweerde and Matadin to create portraits of Oscar-nominated actors for *The New York Times Magazine*, they added celebrity portraiture to their list of credits. For the assignments, they’ve devised a similar lighting set-up and black-and-white esthetic. “Those [Oscar portfolios] have been an incredible experience,” van Lamsweerde says. Working with celebrities “is never difficult,” she adds, despite the fact that they’ve convinced Bill Murray to put flowers in his beard and Viggo Mortensen to paste lace onto his face. “We’re very direct and honest and open ... We always try to show someone with as much respect and dignity as we possibly can, and I think this openness of discussing what it is you’d like to do, most people are like, ‘Yeah, great, let’s do it.’”

Van Lamsweerde admits that there are times when they have been discouraged by the fashion industry, “moments where we’re like, ‘Oh my god, we’re not feeling it right now,’” she says. Whenever they hit one of those points, though, something comes along to spur them on. “Usually it comes in the form of a trip to a new place that breeds a lot of new ideas, or in the form of a commission, or in the form of a persona, or in an exhibition,” van Lamsweerde says. In 2011 the pair was inspired by a series of collaborations with Lady Gaga. “There is this freshness there, this completely un-jaded, super-excited side of her that is just intoxicating. She gives 100 percent and we tend to do the same, so it really clicked in that way.”

In other words, van Lamsweerde and Matadin found in Lady Gaga what their collaborators have appreciated about them. “They work very seriously, they are open, you can share opinions with them, and I think they are very passionate about what they are doing,” Alt says. “They still have the same enthusiasm as [ever] to do an incredible picture.”