

**TEDDY, CLAUDIA SCHIFFER
LONDON, 2006**

"This was taken in Claudia's country house for French Elle, 20 years after we first worked together. Now she is married with two kids and this big house, so I did a story about the many facets of a woman — the mother, the businesswoman, the model, the celebrity. And then she comes home and she is sexy for her husband and she plays with her children's toys"



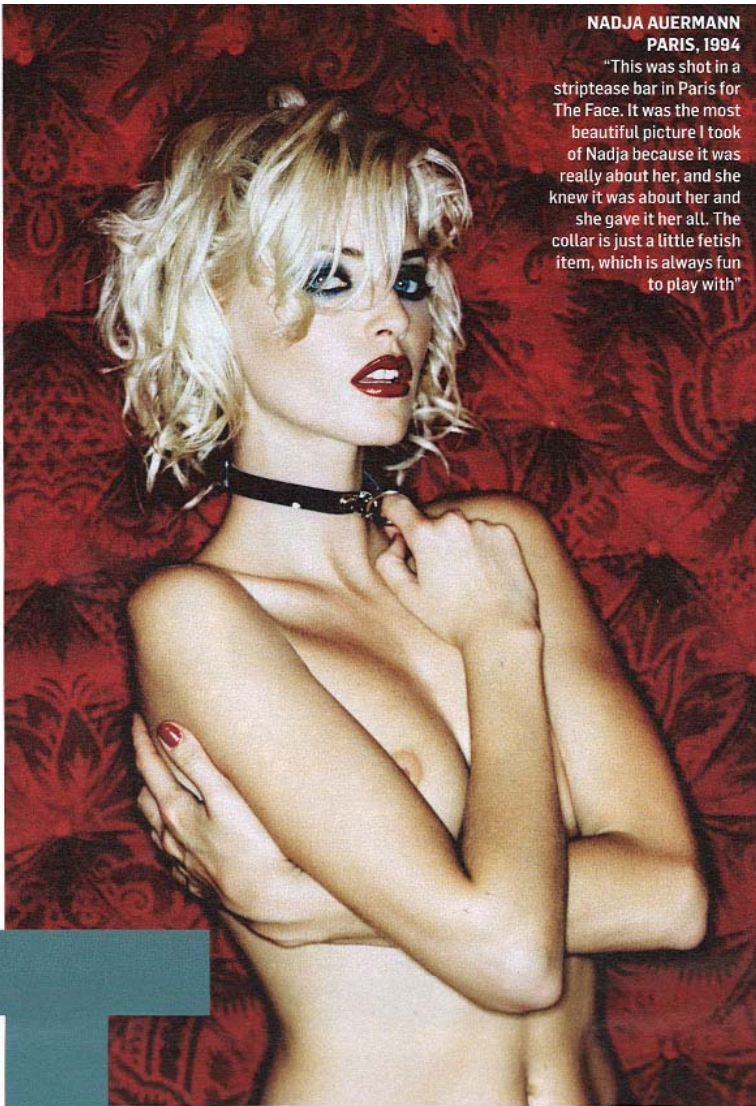
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SEX FACTOR

WHEN EX-MODEL ELLEN VON UNWERTH GOT BEHIND THE CAMERA, WHO KNEW SHE WOULD CREATE SUCH STRIKING, EROTIC IMAGES? KATIE ROIPHE EXPLAINS JUST WHAT IT IS THAT MAKES HER PHOTOGRAPHS THE SEXIEST OF CELEBRITY SNAPS

PHOTOGRAPHS *ELLEN VON UNWERTH*





NADJA AUERMANN

PARIS, 1994

"This was shot in a striptease bar in Paris for *The Face*. It was the most beautiful picture I took of Nadja because it was really about her, and she knew it was about her and she gave it her all. The collar is just a little fetish item, which is always fun to play with"



The timeless question of what makes a woman sexy may be best approached by what is not sexy. When I arrived at college, gothic arches in a blaze of fall foliage, there was a Great Beauty strolling through the yard. None of us had seen a girl so radiantly, so troublingly beautiful before, so it was a revelation to me when someone said she wasn't sexy — and it was true. The Great Beauty was perfect-looking; she also looked as if her bed would have a floral duvet and a beloved teddy flung across it. She looked, in short, like she might sleep with someone if she were madly in love with him, and if he had written her a sufficient number of love notes on nice stationery, and if he really pressed her to, but she would not actually enjoy it.

And therein lies the first principle of sexiness: someone who looks like they like sex. This seems straightforward enough, but it is not, as there are many lovely women too serious, busy, orderly or upstanding to project on a regular basis the true enjoyment of sex.

Ellen von Unwerth's ladies, however, are clearly enjoying themselves. More than that, they seem entirely happy on their own, though they might be even happier if another person were there. The idea projected is that their world is complete, full, brimming over, and another person would be extra. So that's another thing that is sexy: independence, self-possession, even narcissism. (And the converse is decidedly not sexy: clinginess, need.)

As von Unwerth's photographs suggest, what is also sexy is the extreme, the theatrical, the exaggerated, the obvious. There is dark lipstick, crazily high heels, thick eyeliner, leopard print, skimpy clothes, ruffled hair. Hers is the vocabulary of pornography, if a more relaxed and joyful use of that vocabulary. There is a kind of festive cliché at work in these photographs; this is one area of life where one doesn't have to be too inventive. In this, sexiness is unlike other things, unlike serious novels, say, or good conversation: obviousness is good.

Of course, it goes without saying that there is a whole rainbow variety of tastes. I remember coming across a slightly counterintuitive porn magazine for men who love hugely fat women, for instance. I have a male friend who likes women who don't shave, and there are porn sites for people like him, so there are, in fact, people like him. But for most of us, the regular things will do in terms of sexiness.

There are people who dissent from my theory about obviousness. I remember, also in college,

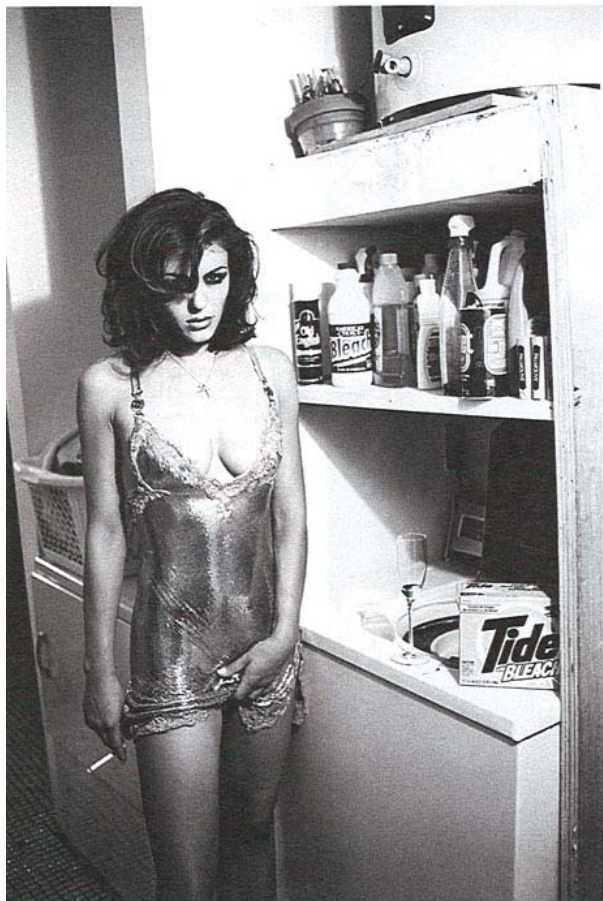
that my closest friend and I were perplexed by the allure of a very quiet, self-effacing girl, who was a bit plump, hardly charismatic, and pretty only in the mousiest of ways. A male friend of ours explained that she "smouldered". We had never noticed the Smouldering Girl when she walked into a room, but, of course, being crass and unladylike, we wanted to know immediately if we also "smouldered", and smouldering seemed suddenly critical to all our future endeavours. He said, alas: "No, you guys are too flagrant." So there are people for whom subtlety still works its gentle magic. There are people who like a nice, quiet, orderly girl.

But going back to von Unwerth's photographs, and to my own theory: subtlety, tastefulness, practicality, neat hair, flat shoes, understated clothes, all of that is not sexy per se. The suggestion of messiness, of one too many drinks, of possibility, of recklessness, of drama, of appetite, of life slightly overturned by too-strong feeling, is sexy.

It could also be useful, when pondering this important question, to think of women who are not conventionally beautiful and yet are very desirable to men. The young Iris Murdoch springs to mind. She wasn't exactly Kate Moss when she was cycling around Oxford, unruly hair, frumpy dresses, stockings splattered in mud, philosophy books in her bag, but enormous numbers of men pursued her and she had many simultaneous affairs. It was partly her powerful mind, the sheer playful force of her imagination that drew men to her; and also the fact that she enjoyed these affairs with an almost unmatched intensity. She was someone who threw herself into things, and it showed.

Or take the wild charms of a woman such as Rebecca West, whom Virginia Woolf cattily said looked like a cross between a charwoman and a gypsy, with shabby clothes and dirty nails. West provoked the love of her life, HG Wells, into inviting her to lunch with a fiercely witty and nasty review of one of his books. And he said, after they became lovers, that she wrote like God. Which leads me to the last and final point: what's sexy in women is also power and its occasional surrender. Good news for most of us, since power (think Claudia Schiffer to Iris Murdoch) takes many and various forms.





**ELIZABETH HURLEY
NEW YORK, 1997**

"This was actually in my New York apartment, so it is a very intimate, true moment. I like the housewife role, I think it's funny. This was the first time Liz and I worked together — she was still so alive then. Then I took some cute pictures of her calling Hugh to pick her up"

**MANNEQUIN,
VANESSA PARADIS
PARIS, 1998**

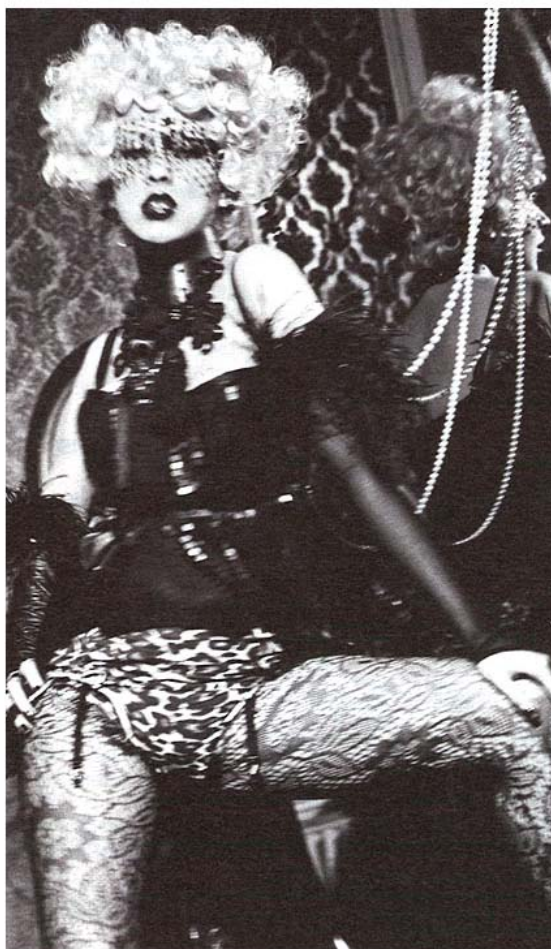
"Vanessa is kissing a mannequin in a strip bar in Paris. She is fun to photograph — giving, but also holding back. She is a mysterious girl: quiet and vulnerable but at the same time she had the strength to make a huge career from such a young age, like, 12. She's fascinating and very strong. And so sexy"



**PORTRAIT OF
THE ARTIST**

A male photographer would be lucky to draw such lusty pleasure out of his models. But then Ellen von Unwerth, the 55-year-old Bavarian ex-model, who — completely untrained — first picked up a camera after 10 years in front of it, understands how it feels when the flashbulbs pop. "I found it really uncomfortable," she admits. "So I know that you have to charm [your subjects] so they can feel free. Girls can be really naughty in front of each other — they won't do that in front of a boy." Von Unwerth has persuaded some of the world's most beautiful women into her erotically charged portraiture. "I admire women who embrace sexuality because it shows they are full of life," she explains. There's often a performing theme, inspired by her joining the circus at 16 (she was orphaned at 2). She loves "weird characters and outrageous costume" and "loud colours and lots of make-up". Von Unwerth is big on fun — to have fun, she believes, is to be in control, "which is the most important thing: a woman should fight for that". No wonder, then, that even the celebrities' mothers apparently love von Unwerth's pictures. It's unlikely that Helmut Newton could say the same.

Fleur Britten



**CHRISTINA AGUILERA
LOS ANGELES, 2004**

"She really knows how to bring out her sexuality — there are so many pictures of her in the book. But the performers and actresses who know how to be sexy — even Marilyn Monroe — are all very clever: they just pretend to be a little bit bimbo-y. I always say, if a blonde makes it, she is definitely clever"

Ellen von Unwerth: *Fräulein* is a limited-edition book published by Taschen, on sale from December. Pre-order from taschen.com

The exhibition *Ellen von Unwerth: Fräulein* runs from October 12 to November 15 at Michael Hoppen Gallery, SW3

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