

Hot Seat

Ellen von Unwerth

The German-born erotic photographer tells **Paul Kay** why disco gets her in the mood

When it comes to the subject of assessing erotic femininity (and doesn't it always eventually?), there are few as experienced as Ellen von Unwerth. Formerly a top-class model in her own right, von Unwerth has forged an impressive career since stepping behind the camera, and has photographed a veritable who's who of the world's most beautiful women in little more than their birthday suit. In her new limited-edition book, *Fräulein*, von Unwerth shows off a tantalising collection of images shot over the past 15 years and featuring such modern sex symbols as Claudia Schiffer, Vanessa Paradis, Eva Mendes, Monica Bellucci, Dita Von Teese, Christina Aguilera, and many more. We called and interrupted her latest photo shoot to ask, who is the fairest of them all?

What are you doing right now?
I'm in Paris. I'm shooting a story for *Stern* magazine. It's about sexy boots made of all kind of materials: leather, glitter and what not. Lots of amazing specimens.

Sounds kinky. Do you think Paris is the sexiest city in the world?

Paris is sexy, kind of mysterious, but New York is more sexy to me because of all the different races, all the different people, the cars which pass by with music blaring...

Tell me about your new book.

It's kind of a retrospective, but the theme is about the kind of woman I like: lots of personality, very sexy and sassy and fun and free-spirited.

How does it differ from your previous books?

It's different in size – it's very big, with 500 pictures. I always arrange my pictures according to themes because it makes it easier to choose.

Of all the women you've shot, who was the most memorable?

They're all memorable. There's always a story to every picture. The picture of Claudia [Schiffer] that we did for Guess – that was a big moment because [it got me] started. Also, Liz Hurley – the first shoot I did with her I ended up using the picture with her in my laundry room. And Lindsay Lohan, and Britney Spears... But every time it's a great moment, otherwise it won't make a great picture.



And the sexiest?

Some people are very sexy, and some people are very sexy in front of the camera. But I don't know the sexiest. I haven't made a list. Maybe I should!

Do you try to avoid preconceptions when shooting someone you've never met?

It depends. When you have a [famous]

“It's great when a woman goes there, feels free enough to do it”

personality, you're always kind of curious what they're going to give, and you have to try and feel out where they want to go, and if you can push it. With models, it's always more like I make up a story and I tell them the characters they're going to be. So it's always a discovery. Funnily enough my best pictures were often the first ones I took when I didn't know anything about them.



Who would you most like to shoot?

I would love to have photographed Marilyn Monroe, who's my total ideal.

What makes someone sexy in front of the camera?

[Some are] very kitten-y, like a sex kitten, others are kind of fierce. But for me, the most sexy thing is in the eyes.

Did it feel strange the first time you photographed someone nude?

No, because you work together, and it happens or it doesn't happen – going nude or not – but it's very natural. And it's great when a woman goes there, feels free enough to do it.

Do you have any tricks to put your subjects at ease?

Well, you know, music helps. A glass of Champagne... Disco is always good. Everybody likes disco, so that puts everyone in a good mood and creates an atmosphere.

Do you think being a model has made you a better photographer?

I don't know if it's made me a better photographer, but I know at least how people feel. When I was a model, I was always very uncomfortable. I didn't like all the pulling around of my hair, I always thought I looked ugly when I had the make-up on, my shoes were always too small because I have big feet... so I know how the person feels in front of the camera, and I try to make them more comfortable.

What turns you on?

There are so many things. It can be someone you see in the street, someone at a party, music...

Do you think erotic photography still has the power to shock?

I think there are always ways to be a bit provocative, there's always something new and surprising... something more to do. [Laughs]. *Fräulein* is published by Taschen, and will be available in Hong Kong later this year. See www.taschen.com.



Don't shoot! Ellen von Unwerth has experience on both sides of the lens

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