



HELMUT NEWTON

MANY AN HOMAGE has been made to the late, great photographer Helmut Newton. Now, with a new exhibition of Polaroids at his namesake Berlin foundation, and an accompanying catalogue from Taschen, we get to know the work of this iconic lensman like never before. We sat down with Matthias Harder, curator of the Helmut Newton Foundation, to delve a little deeper.

BY TALI JAFFE

How long have you been the Helmut Newton Foundation's curator?

Matthias Harder: Since the very beginning. I met Helmut and June Newton in Berlin in December 2003. During our meeting, Newton told me about his ideas for his Foundation and asked me if I would become its curator. I found myself in this position just a few months later.

Do you recall the first Newton image you saw? Or perhaps which one had the most lasting impression on you?

MH: Presumably, like many other young men, I was attracted by the subtle seduction of Newton's nudes since the early 1980s. But it is not only "Arielle after a Haircut" or his other nude photographs, nowadays it's more or less his complete oeuvre I look at enthusiastically. Generally, I love the combination of elegance and provocation in Newton's work.

What are your feelings toward photographers who emulate Newton in their work?

MH: Great artists and photographers inspire others and this is the case also for Helmut, of course. He has a lot of followers. But if the followers come formally too close to the ideas of the master, it's plagiarism.

What elements do you feel make Newton's images so iconic?

MH: Newton was unique. He created a style in photography over the years and decades that was at least on the same level as the high-class fashion, jewelry or models he photographed. As one example, through the combination of Yves Saint Laurent's tuxedo for women and Newton's mise-en-scene realized at night in Paris, it becomes something iconic. This is really special; it works as an icon even today. Helmut Newton was ahead of the zeitgeist and stayed very contemporary until the end. His iconic works are modern and timeless together.

When did Newton first use Polaroids in his process?

MH: First of all, the Polaroids were test prints. Newton started to work with this technique in the mid-60s and at that time he never thought about publishing them until 1992 when he did the book "Pola Women." After the publication, he was accused of imperfection compared with his actual fashion work. In today's fashion photography, we see a lot of Newton's visual ideas,

and we can also observe a play with snapshot aesthetics and imperfection.

There are more than 300 images in the exhibition "Helmut Newton Polaroids." How many were there before you began editing?

MH: The exhibition was an idea of June Newton. It was her and her assistant Angelo Marino who edited the works down from several hundred more. But nobody knows exactly how many exist today; nobody counted them. June curated nearly all of Helmut Newton's exhibitions during his lifetime. And she continues to edit all of his books and catalogues. Additionally, she is the president of the Helmut Newton Foundation. Nobody else knows his work better than she.

Is it true that Newton wrote notes on the edges of his Polaroids?

MH: Indeed, on some of the Polaroids, you find some handwritten comments by Helmut Newton. They are quite varied; some refer to the place and the date of the photograph, others to the magazine he worked for on commission, and a few have just numbers.

According to the wishes of Helmut Newton, the Foundation should not be a "dead museum," but rather a "living institution." What does that mean to you in upholding the Foundation's mission?

MH: We always try to attract our visitors with new exhibition ideas and, hopefully, we succeed. We have a lot of visitors from all over the world, about 500 a day for the current show. There are just a very few comparable institutions in Germany or Europe, such as the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in Paris, dedicated to such a master of photography.

Together with our partner institution, the Collection of Photography of the Art Library of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, we form the Museum of Photography in Berlin. We are able to display the works in several huge exhibition rooms, so there is always something on in addition to Helmut Newton.

Will the Polaroids show be traveling after it closes in November?

MH: There are no concrete plans yet, but there is some interest from institutions internationally, and I am sure that the show will probably travel next year, like other Newton shows have.

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