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One Man Show: Exploring New Territory, Photographer Juergen Teller Still Stands Alone

By Tim Blanks

Juergen Teller's photographs have a deceptive plainspokenness ("People think it's just a stupid snapshot," he says, "I get that a lot"), but they are penetrating. Even when his subjects aren't show-offs, they'll reveal things for Teller that even their loved ones don't get to see. His collaborators, like Marc Jacobs, for whom he has shot fashion campaigns for 14 years, and his subjects, like Charlotte Rampling and Kate Moss, return to him again and again. Recently, Teller's work has taken a turn for the lyrical, as in the new, usually serene landscapes that made up part of his recent show at New York's Lehmann Maupin Gallery during New York fashion week. Tim Blanks sat down with Teller in Paris to talk power, privacy, endurance, and sex—and why he still works with a camera in each hand and no assistants.

Tim Blanks: Let's talk about the Louis XV series with Charlotte Rampling.

Juergen Teller: I was very happy when I did the Louis XV series, the naked self-portraits with Charlotte Rampling. I sold it as a series of 28 photographs. It's a complex and difficult work for people to buy. But it was a very important work for me to do, to show that I can make some kind of living out of what I really want to do and not just selling handbags, to use the money from the fashion work I do to do other work.

So Louis XV was a particularly personal project?

I would think so. For me, this piece of work is about the intimate relationship between two human beings, me being a slightly overweight 40-year-old guy and Charlotte Rampling, a 65-year-old woman. It's not the usual concept.

Louis XV? There's an idea of power in there somewhere.

I think it's about the power of being in control yourself, to be not afraid of going to places which you haven't been and to be brave enough to explore it, and not be afraid of stereotypical political correctness. It's about the power to be able to trust yourself and be confident to go on this adventure together.

I wonder if that work is a gateway to the rest of what you do. You'd have to be a very strong person to organize something like that with someone like Charlotte Rampling, but then you put yourself in the pictures almost in the position of a vulnerable child.

First of all, it was very important I keep the integrity completely intact for Charlotte. I can be the ugly clown, but in every picture she had to be the most beautiful-looking. Since I was very little, I was quite intrigued by these Helmut Newton pictures, the first nude she'd ever done and the *Night Porter* film. So she's this French-English movie icon and she has this incredible, mesmerizing presence, on-screen and in real

life. I was drawn towards her like a magnet when I first met her at the Crillon, maybe 14 years ago. It was for a portrait for *Libération* and she came extremely forceful and threatening, "Here I am, you have 10 minutes," and I said, "You know what, can I take five minutes out of the 10 to show you my book?" I'd published my first book, that's another good thing about books, you can show people your work when they don't know it. So she looked at the book, closed it, and said, "I like it very much, I'll stay as long as you want," and then she kind of opened up.

We kept in touch, and Marc [Jacobs] knew I knew her very well, and he said, "I'd love to have her in an advertising campaign," and I said, "Forget it, she's not going to merchandise a product." Then I thought, "Fuck, I want to do it too." I thought how I could interest her in the process. What about doing self-portraits with her, me being the male model with the clothes? She said, "Why not?" We had the Louis Quinze suite here in the hotel. But the night before the shoot, when I tried on the clothes, it was completely ridiculous, the only thing that fitted me was a pair of shorts. But there was an instinct. While I have her here and everything, I want to go really far. Why don't I ask her if I can kiss her and stroke her breasts? Because that's what I really wanted to do. I thought because of the power of this photography thing I might get away with it. In normal circumstances, I'd think this was the stupidest thing I've ever said in my life. I was just in these shorts, sweat running down me, she was sat in her armchair. She went to her handbag, got a cigarette out, lit it, and said, "Juergen, let's start, I'll tell you when to stop." So that campaign turned out really well, Marc was laughing his head off, it came out in American *Vogue* and *W* and everywhere. And I thought this was so much fun and made so much sense, and I called her up and said, "Charlotte, I've got another idea, I'm going to get rid of these shorts and just be naked." "Come next weekend," she said, and I continued this whole series for six months.

You said there's no separation between your life and your work. So here's an instance of something professional combining with something that was entirely personal.

I agree. A lot of people when they look at that book think it was just a drunken night, but when you look carefully at the beginning of the book I'm about seven kilos thinner than at the end of the book. Because I thought, I'm Louis Quinze, I've got her, I'm kissing her, I wanted to be opulent, to feel this tacky room with all this gold and glitter. I put on weight, and I wanted to drive my ridiculousness even further. I liked me being fatter, it was more aesthetically pleasing in the photograph when I was getting fat. I started eating more, drinking more, I stopped exercising. Through the processing, the editing, the printing, another idea came to me. I've never seen a photograph of a woman shaving a man. And then Charlotte came up with an idea. But for me, it was very important to have Sadie [Coles, Teller's wife] around pressing the button. It was a safety net for Charlotte and for me to have my wife there. I remember we were both lying on the floor, and I said to Charlotte and Sadie, "What are we going to do now?" And Sadie just said, "Why don't you suck her toe?" And I said, "That's fucking weird, I'm going to do that." And Charlotte said, "Go ahead." It took ages to do this picture because she was giggling the whole time. Then another idea would come through that. So it took a long, long time.

You return a lot to the same subjects. Is that kind of intimacy essential to your work?

It means a lot to me. I don't go, "Oh, now I'm going to photograph Madonna, now

I'm going to photograph P. Diddy." Those five minutes don't interest me at all. I find it good to continue with people I like and who are important to me.

But what about someone you haven't worked with before? Are all your working relationships that intimate?

I think they are. I can very quickly assess someone. It's like a psychiatrist or something. I can feel myself into that person very quickly, which is why I can do good portraits of people. I would never ask anything inappropriate of anyone. If that person is very extrovert, certainly you go like that, but if someone is very shy then it will be a very shy picture. I just photographed Norman Rosenthal [the British curator, formerly with the Royal Academy]. I met him 12 years [ago] when I met Sadie and Sarah Lucas and everybody, and we couldn't quite understand each other at that time. It was a bit weird at the beginning, but I went to his flat, and his daughter was there and he asked me if I could photograph her, so I did the most beautiful pictures of the two of them together. It doesn't have to be ongoing, like with Charlotte or Kristen McMenamy or Kate Moss. I can achieve something in a very quick moment. But it does get very personal. I think I open up a lot too. I don't come around as the archetype fashion photographer dude, playing the big guy with the horde of assistants. I let them know I'm also nervous or insecure. Then I let them relax. The way I photograph is quite hypnotizing. I found a way to hide my insecurity—I have two cameras and I photograph like this [*mimes cameras in each hand moving hypnotically*] and this helps me to figure out what I should do, where they should go...it's so intense, so psychologically draining, it's like my brain works on overdrive in those minutes—or hours or days—I'm photographing. That's why I can't do it so much because I'm really super-concentrated. Other people think it's a stupid snapshot—I get that a lot—but it's very precise. And it has to be very fast because if I'm on a job or something, I can't just doodle around and days go past and I take a picture. Sometimes there's a lot of money involved and I have a responsibility to the client to get the fucking thing done. A lot of other people say, "Stand like that, stay like that," and they do a Polaroid and everyone—all the assistants, the hair and makeup, everyone—stands around looking at the Polaroid or nowadays looking at the screen, then they say, "Let's do it, shoot," by which time the model is so tense the Polaroid is better than the end product. I ease that up where they don't feel necessarily, "*This* is the big decisive moment." It's more like a beautifully composed classical concept, more like a performance than a photograph.

You compared it to an animal moving round its prey. Are you sweating a lot when you're taking pictures?

Yes, it's physically really demanding on me. I have to be careful at 48, I've stopped drinking now and started exercising. When it gets really bad is when I do a fashion job, two or three days, continually photographing, you're always like this [*crouches*]. One day I can totally do it, next day, there's so much tension everywhere here. My physio guy says it makes complete sense, it's completely unnatural to squat like that. I'm a long time in this position with these two cameras.

How much of this intensity is sexual tension?

None.

I was always really curious about your photos with Kirsten Owen. So intimate but so unsexual.

I was completely in love. In '88 or '89, Robin Derrick was the art director of *The Face* and he got me to do something. Then he said, "I'm leaving, I got this job in Italy," just as I thought I'd got a foot in the door. This was the time when Carla Sozzani took over Italian *Elle*, and Peter Lindbergh, Steven Meisel, and Paolo Roversi broke their contracts with Italian *Vogue* and went to *Elle*. Robin took Nick Knight with him so he had all these people, and the first issue was a Paolo Roversi cover, with a blurry Romeo Gigli. It was Kirsten Owen, and she was an angel, a beautiful hippie. Robin said, "Come to Italy, I'll give you a week in the studio." I'd never been in a photographic studio in my whole life. That kind of thing never happens anymore—put a young spring chicken photographer in the studio for a week and they pay for the whole thing. So I'm sitting at the Hotel Diana in Milan in the bar on my own, I didn't even know what an assistant was, and there was Peter Lindbergh with Kirsten Owen, and I looked at her and I fell completely in love with her. I doodled around in the studio trying a couple of things, I actually got two stories out, they were for the fourth issue, but after the third issue they fired Carla Sozzani, fired Robin Derrick, and they killed the whole thing off, went back to jumping girls. But that was an amazing experience. Then in '93, backstage at Helmut Lang, I finally met Kirsten, super-shy and everything. Let's fast-forward six or eight years to another Helmut Lang show, I finally had the courage, while we're sitting on the floor waiting for backstage to kick off, to tell her, "Kirsten, I was so in love with you." I was with Venetia [Scott, his then-wife], so I was safe. She just turned round and said, "So was I." So that was that.

It's a classic relationship in photography: Lartigue and Renée, Bailey and Shrimpton, Penn and Lisa Fonssagrives. I guess people would say she was a muse. Do you think you think like that about those long-term relationships with women like Kirsten or Kristen or Kate?

Muse is a weird word. I just think I'm really interested in them, and they're really interested in me, and we find it interesting and stimulating to go on that journey together. And I like their company and I don't get tired of them visually, but it's work, there can't be any sexual tension. Otherwise, you just fuck them.

But that's what the lens is for.

I don't think like that. It must be somehow really, really, really in the back of my mind but I'm really driven about doing this work. For example, with Mariacarla, who I find sexually attractive, it never occurred to me when I went to Rome to photograph her in the daytime, that in the evening I'm going to fuck her. It would never occur to me. Even on my own with them, in the evening in the hotel room. You think I'm going to drag her into the bedroom?

But with Kristen you can go a lot further than you can with Kate. You actually said that in your talk at the German Embassy. Am I going too far? For example, the photos you did of Kristen in 1996, the "Versace" photos, were profoundly disturbing.

They were shocking to some people, but they made complete sense to me and Kristen. I think people were losing the plot, I thought this is just how she is, and the whole idea had such a warped idea of sexuality and beauty. Kristen really looks like

this, she is so extrovert and out there. This is how she is.

But at the time those photos appeared, she was so far out there, there were rumors of self-harm and all sorts. I think that was a very challenging moment for people because of the confusion: Is this a fashion shoot? What is this?

I remember so many enemies after that shoot. People crucified me, how I ruined Kristen McMenemy's career. What kept both of us alive at that point was that we were absolutely 100 percent behind our pictures. If she had flaked and had problems, then I would have thought, "Oh, I did something wrong here," but there was never a doubt. We were like blood brothers.

And there *was* blood. But you did say in the talk that you were more interested in negative responses anyway, after your experience with *Die Zeit*.

In that case I think it's boring if someone says, "Oh, your pictures are great." You wanna have criticism as constructive. I constantly want to learn, and I constantly reassess my photographs and think about them. I don't stop and say, "Oh, I'm a great photographer," and that's the end of the story. There's a picture I did when I was in Germany at my mum's, a black-and-white photograph I did naked on my dad's grave with a beer bottle and a cigarette in my hand and I was resting my foot on a football. That was very meaningful for me. I wanted to be closer to my dad. I had problems with alcohol and he was an aggressive alcoholic. He was smoking, I was smoking. But he never really liked football, he was very musical. My mum was sporty so we always watched football together. Then killing himself, blah blah blah, cut that story short. I had a lot of grudge against him obviously. It was difficult, but I wanted to make this photo to make peace with him, to recognize that I have problems too and I wanted to be there. It's a shocking photograph for some people but I think it's a sweet photo. Anyway, my mum was rambling around in my luggage—why? Me a grown-up man—and stupidly enough she found this photo. All hell broke loose at home, she was crying and she very strongly denied me to have this photograph published. "What are our neighbors going to think?" she was saying. It's a huge issue for her. I have no neighbors but she comes from the countryside. But it's something I really had to do and I published it anyway, because otherwise I wouldn't be doing my work. I felt really bad and guilty, I really felt like an asshole and therefore I did another portrait of me as an asshole.

And how did the neighbors take to that one?

I don't know. That was a small book which didn't circulate too much in the village, except for maybe the gay guys. But what I love about that photograph is that where I come from, we have a sauna and our relationship with being naked is so much more normal than it is in England. I'm holding this football magazine and the headline says, "And now we have to let it rip" [*he lets rip with a loud farting sound*].

You talked about the meaning that photos take on after they've been published. Have these photos all taken on meaning for you, now that the initial story is out of the way?

Sometimes I do something as a real force and it comes from somewhere really deep. There's an intellectual thing hovering around my head about why I do things, but

what comes from my heart, from my stomach is so overpowering that I'm kind of like a runaway train going towards it, nailing it. Afterwards I'm like, woooooah, where am I going here? Sadie says, "Have you thought about that?" And I had to do it, the complex complications come along afterwards. My instinct is so strong, it's quite natural, quite in harmony with my understanding of what's right and wrong.

And how would you assess that? On a moral basis? On an aesthetic basis? You've moved the goalposts pretty radically. But you mentioned photographing children in your talk, which is interesting, given what happened to people like Sally Mann and Jock Sturges when they photographed children.

I do see that as quite problematic what they do, I'm quite conservative in that way. I would never photograph my children like that naked. Then publish them and sell them as art? That's not right. I photographed Ed, but he's not naked...well, he's naked but you don't see anything. I've known Vivienne Westwood for 16, 18 years; the last five or six years, I did her advertising campaign, so I've been dealing with this dress code of her fashion a lot. I'm mesmerized by who she is, what she stands for, I totally admire it and I think it's fabulous. Plus the way she looks, her white skin, her red hair, and the way she is so uninhibited. I had a real longing to know how she looks naked. Immediately, she said, "Yes, come next Sunday." Whenever I'm super-nervous, I take my wife with me, and Ed came. He was probably about 4 and a half at the time. So Andreas [Kronthaler, Westwood's husband] and Vivienne made a lovely early dinner for us, and Ed was on the couch playing with his PlayStation or whatever, and she said, "Are we going to do this or not?" because I was too shy to make that step. Then she gets undressed and Ed comes and says, "What's going on there? Why's Vivienne naked?" And I said, "Because I'm interested to see what she looks like and I want to photograph her and she looks really beautiful, I think." And he goes back to playing on his PlayStation. But then I'm in the middle of the room and Ed comes across [*whispering*], "Daddy, Daddy, can you photograph me nude?" I said, "Of course, when I'm finished with Vivienne, you can just lie down there," and he said [*fierce whispering*], "No, no, don't say anything to anyone. When we go back home." And I thought this was so lovely.

What do you think it meant to him?

I can't speak for him, but I think it was like something really nice to do, experiencing something together, having a human relationship with somebody else. I think I taught him something proper, and he enjoyed it, he was interested in how he would look in this photograph, and wanting to do something with Daddy. I think that's what photography is a lot for me too, doing something active with your life and having experiences. That's why I did this other series, *Ed Having a Haircut*.

I'm noticing lately there seem to be more children and animals and landscapes—more a sort of lyricism.

I always have that. Have you seen that book *Nürnberg* I did? And *Ed in Japan*? That's very romantic. There's always been this element of prettiness and gentleness in my work, but people always see the naked pictures or the fashion pictures.

As you get older as an artist, you start to see the continuities. I'm fascinated by how you revisit your work all the time, recontextualize it, look at things with older eyes.

Sometimes in the middle of it, you become very insecure, you think you've lost the plot, you've done all your work, it's complete rubbish and nothing is moving forward, and you're just lost. But I think it's a normal process one has to go through. You just have to ride that out and once you let loose and give up and start living, suddenly it's right here again, and you think, oh, *that's* what it is. And you go on and do it.

"I do this for myself first of all." You do say that.

I wanted to learn something in life. I prefer to be with older people than with younger spring chicken people. I love listening to the stories of William Eggleston and David Hockney, I find it comforting. Time slows down. We sit there for hours and hours and we talk, and it's really lovely in this age where everything is mobile and e-mail and running from place to place. I learn a lot from them. It's complicated being German, growing up in the aftermath of the war, and I feel like they didn't tackle it so well, they were talking around this Nazi shit in school. The badness was so present and so terrible but they couldn't explain it so well, for me it was not good. And I came to England in '86. I escaped from the army. I couldn't speak any English and when I got a bit better with my stuttering English they said, "Oh, just don't mention the war." I thought, did I just hear that? That was a bad joke, the English sense of humor. They think that's really funny. I thought, what the fuck! I'm just trying to speak English and communicate with you. And now, coming back quickly to this, here's Norman, a Jewish German growing up in England and he was telling me this story about his mother's sister married to some Nazi officer and an SS officer hid them through the whole war, and that's where photography takes me, to interesting things. I'm interested in a wider spectrum of life.

But surely fashion's been a passport to experiences for you.

By no means am I slamming down fashion at all. I think I have a natural gift for photographing clothes very well. I find it very easy to interpret how designers like to see a woman in their creation. You have to have a sense of a body and how they shape it. I came to fashion a strange way round, when I got introduced to it in England through magazines like *i-D* and *The Face*. I started doing record covers and portraits and in these magazines were all these crazy fashion pictures. I thought, this is such a theater, this is fun, and I realized a lot of music movements pushed the fashion forward—the Beatles, the Sex Pistols, new wave, grunge, that was what came first, then came the fashion industry to make money out of it. I never want to lose sight of the seriousness of the business and how much money it makes, but I don't want to lose sight of the fantasy of it either. That fits in very well with me. There's a lot of fantasy in my photographs. It gives me a passport onto a theater stage.

So that's what your collaboration with Marc Jacobs has been all these years—a fantastic voyage.

To a certain extent. But it started because I could relate to his work very well. And on a personal level, I entered this whole relationship in a beautiful way 14 years ago. Venetia turned down the work with him because she was just about to give birth to our child, but Robert [Duffy, Jacobs' CEO] and Marc were kind of persisting. This was our first child and we were nervous and then they flew us over to reconsider

their offer and I thought they were very understanding and nice and clearly Venetia couldn't say no. Then Marc suddenly said, "Kim Gordon is in London and she's wearing our dresses on stage and would you photograph her? We have a little bit of money to place it in a magazine," and I thought that would be a nice thing to do, to go to a Sonic Youth concert. I said, "As long as I'm in control of my image and about how it's going to appear on the double page, and I want to design how your logo is in relationship with my thing," and that's how I created Marc's visual imagery in a way. Then I did numerous things for free, same as the beginning at Helmut Lang. It was just the pleasure of being involved in such a thing. Then when Prada came on for Helmut and LVMH bought into Marc, I have to say they were very fair in giving me a proper share of earnings. But people were saying, "How do you get away with that, being in control of how it looks?" and I said, "Well, I put my heart and blood into it."

That's quite a body of work now, 14 years and counting. It becomes like a chronicle.

I never thought it was going to stop, even then. He never doubted it either. The better we got, the more confident we got, him with his design, me with my work, and the work we did together was an excellent package. And then I got insecure and he said something really profound. He said, "I really like that you get the best result if I let you do what you believe is right." Nobody said that to me before. He gave me the nod of confidence. So every time I had to jump into the cold water and deliver the goods to him. I could not hide behind an art director who I could blame, or the art director could blame me. Most of the time it was me on my own with a handbag of cameras and a handbag of bags and shoes. No assistant, no stylist or anything. That's how it started.

The only precedent I can think of is Guy Bourdin at Charles Jourdan, where the artist's aesthetic is at least as strong as the designer's aesthetic.

And it's probably Guy Bourdin who won over Charles Jourdan.

True, who remembers the shoes anymore?

That's what I mean. [*Laughs.*] But I'm not saying that I'm a Marc.