



Fotografiska

Ellen von Unwerth

Devotion! 30 Years of Photographing Women

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Let's take the bull by the horns, let's go past shame, rip off the plaster and take a leap into the unknown. There's no point in trying to soft-pedal the fact that an exhibition featuring Ellen von Unwerth's 30 years of provocative photography will rub some of us up the wrong way. Here, the world's most desirable women slink around sporting the most successful brands and are published in the most famous magazines – and they do it with pouting lips and naked chests.

During those years there has been a never-ending cavalcade of stars posing in front of her camera for photo sessions like no other. It's all about having fun and erasing the boundary between fantasy and reality. Like a film director von Unwerth creates a parallel universe where everything is possible, while always maintaining her professionalism. Since she took her first pictures during a modelling assignment in Africa some 30 years ago, she has produced a host of incredible images, nine photo books, an almost incalculable number of magazine covers and also various productions in her career as a film director.

These are the kinds of reflections that arise when one dips into Ellen von Unwerth in collaboration with Fotografiska, the exhibition *Devotion! 30 Years of Photographing Women* is presented in seven galleries reflecting seven emotional expressions: Love, Play, Power, Gender, Lust, Passion and Drama and an eight room content videos directed by von Unwerth and personal pictures wallpapers.

Here, your perception of the real world will be jolted. What is up and what is down, what is pleasurable sexy, what looks reprehensible and why do they seem to have so much fun? Whichever of those seven expressions her pictures portray, they are always approached in the lively, energetic, sensual style often with a slight humorous touch significant for Ellen von Unwerth.

– Much improves greatly if you play around with it. Don't take things so seriously. Let life come to you instead of trying to control everything. I want energy and movement in my images, because that's how life is. You can't control it. It will always surprise you, if you let it, instead of constantly labelling experiences as either good or bad, Ellen von Unwerth explains.

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This iconic beauty started out as a model but did not fancy the hard, controlling manner in which the models were treated: “stand still, don’t move”. So, with a small, simple camera, a present from her boyfriend, she began taking pictures of her model friends and enjoying herself. Before long she was commissioned by fashion designers such as Katharine Hamnett, she shot a major Guess campaign, discovered the then unknown model Claudia Schiffer and was the first to put Kate Moss on the cover of *Vogue* – and the rest is fashion history.

– We just love Ellen von Unwerth. Ever since she produced the witty, silly and crazy Diesel adverts Sweden has held a special place in her heart and she in ours. She contributed to our 2010 group exhibition *Fashion!* and to have her in the building again is really exciting, says Johan Vikner, Exhibition Manager, Fotografiska.

For von Unwerth it’s never about objectifying. Rather about playing with archetypes and stereotypes, with high and low. Perhaps some viewers may walk away with broadened horizons and a new perspective on what is beautiful and what is ugly, in regard to expressions as well as feelings. Is cute S&M dirtier than the missionary position? Are lesbian kisses more speculative than heterosexual ones?

It has long been believed that the role of art is to push boundaries, shed light on the absurdity of consensus and speak out about the Emperor’s new clothes. Perhaps it’s necessary to stir up emotions and create commotion, because if it isn’t allowed, if the powers who divide the world into nice and ugly, high and low, take over completely, then we are dangerously close to a time when the only colour allowed is brown, *Entartete Kunst*, anyone?

We will end up far from the beautiful scale of greyness which accommodates everything between black and white. Or as in von Unwerth’s colourful world, where every little colour explosion brings hope of a zest for life and an appetite for play, in photography that speaks of movement, warmth, energy and blurredness. She is famous for always treating her models with the utmost respect and love, for making superstars relax and drop their guard and dare to play. She calls herself a feminist and always portrays women as strong and never as wafer-thin depressed victims.

von Unwerth possesses a fantastic ability to create warm situations full of genuine life and movement. Perhaps it is a vital quality and survival strategy for someone who grew up in strict Bavaria in foster homes and orphanages after having lost her parents at the age of two. Looking back at a photographic career spanning 30 years provokes many thoughts.

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– One of these is that I have done so much. The photographs become like a diary of meetings, people and contexts that suddenly spring to life again. It's absolutely marvellous and emotional. Exhibiting at Fotografiska makes me incredibly proud. Another thing is that so much of what I did would never be published today, when so many things are considered too provocative. It's like we're being transported back in time to when puritanism defined our common reality. I don't want to go back there and if I can make people reflect on how crazy that would be, it would make me proud, Ellen von Unwerth concludes with a happy smile. ●

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