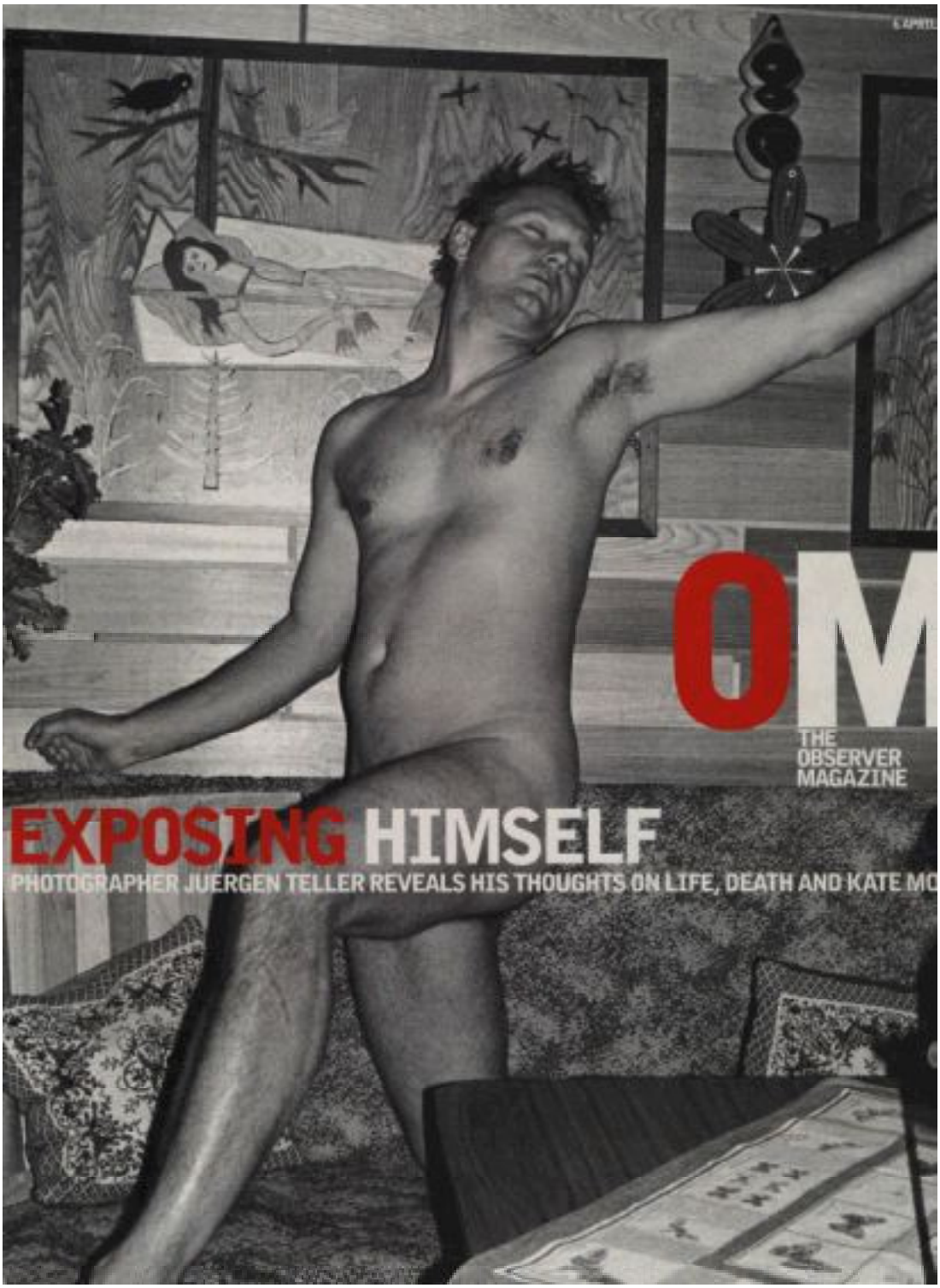

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OM
6 April 2003
pp. 14-20

COVER STORY: SHOOTING UP

JUERGEN TELLER HAS REINVENTED FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY. AND NOW HE'S REINVENTING HIMSELF. HERE HE TELLS INTERVIEWER OF THE YEAR SEAN O'HAGAN WHY HIS WORK WILL NOW BE LESS ABOUT KATE MOSS AND MORE ABOUT HIMSELF. PORTRAIT JILLIAN EDELSTEIN.

Here is a photograph of OJ Simpson relaxing in a Miami motel. It looks like a snapshot. Until, that is, you look closer. He is caught talking and gesticulating, his right hand covering his face, his left unconsciously making the shape of a gun. His left-hand index finger is pointing, again unconsciously, in the direction of a pretty young woman, who sprawls by his side, her head lolling back. The drink in front of her is blood red, like the rose on the table in the foreground. Suddenly, it is not a snapshot any more, but a carefully constructed captured moment, full of signifiers, resonances, symbols.

What, I ask Juergen Teller, did he talk to OJ about while he photographed him? 'I didn't really talk. He did. He was really open. He talked about his time in prison. I remember he was pissed off with the journalist who had just interviewed him. He kept saying, "He didn't even ask me what happened." Then, quietly, he said, "So, Juergen, what do you think happened?" I just kept shooting and said, "I really don't know, OJ, I wasn't there." He thought that was real funny. He laughed this strange laugh, and then he said, "Only God knows."'

Here is another photograph, this time of an empty table and chair. It looks almost mundane, hardly worthy of photographing, but there is something odd about it, almost ominous. Look closely and there are marks in the wood, as if someone has scored the surface with a blunt knife. As a photograph of an empty space, it is frill of possible meanings. 'That's my father's desk. That's where he had his 15-minute work break for breakfast, where he'd sit and drink a beer already. That's where he sat and sometimes got drunk. All that wood. The marks are from the buckles on his belt where his tools hung.' Teller's father committed suicide on 2 February 1988. 'It's a small picture,' the photographer says, 'about a big thing — absence.

Some people still persist in referring to the 39-year-old Juergen Teller as a fashion

photographer. The two images described above, though, challenge that reductive description. Likewise the harsh self-portraits and strange interior landscapes which, along with the work of three other photographers, are currently touring Spain and Germany. This is the shortlist for the lucrative and prestigious Citibank Prize. 'Part of my ambition in putting together the work for that show was to make people rethink me,' Teller, dressed in his trademark denims and scuffed Converse sneakers, tells me in the kitchen-cum-living room of his studio near Ladbroke Grove in west London. 'It was me saying, "If you think I am just a fashion photographer, think again."' It seems to have worked. Teller has just won the prize — further proof, if needed, that the man who reinvented our idea of what constitutes a fashion photograph is now busily reinventing our idea of what constitutes a Juergen Teller photograph.

These days, Teller finds himself doing less and less fashion-based photography. Such is his cachet and earning power in that unreal world that he admits he can afford to do only two campaigns a year. Of late, he has worked solely for Marc Jacobs, photographing Jarvis Cocker mowing a lawn, Sofia Coppola's handbag-draped arm and a model with her arse in the air to show off the New York designer's clothes and accessories. Though he insists that he still works cheap for magazines that he likes, Teller spends most of his time concentrating on his more personal, art-based projects, the latest of which is a book entitled *Märchenstüberl* — literally translated as 'fairytale den' — which brings together photographs of his family, his German homeland, himself in various distinctly unflattering nude poses, as well as the odd celebrity portrait — OJ in repose, Yves Saint Laurent looking corpse-like, and a pale and bleached-blonde Kate Moss.

Like his fellow German, Wolfgang Tillmans, who landed the Turner Prize in 2000, he is a photographer who sees the poetic in the everyday, in what some might consider the mundanely unpoetic. He numbers Lee Friedlander, Josef Koudelka and Robert Frank among his influences, while also namechecking, perhaps surprisingly, Helmut Newton — 'There's a directness there I like.' Teller's early fashion photographs undercut notions of glamour and elitism for a dirty realism that suited the burgeoning street aesthetic of the time. When he came to prominence in the late 80s, just ahead of Corinne Day, who ran with that same anti-aesthetic as far as it was possible to go, the images that littered the style magazines were dubbed 'grunge' or 'anti-fashion'. Everything was pared down, almost nondescript: the girls looked dishevelled and malnourished, the interiors functional rather than decorative. The clothes, though, remained distinctly non-grunge and emphatically elitist in their price tags. Nevertheless, Teller created a signature of sorts and one that has been endlessly replicated.

Back then, I remember a fashion editor dismissing that same signature as 'skinny girls and radiators'. I ask Teller if, in retrospect, the term 'grunge photographer' has become a

millstone around his neck. ‘Only naturally,’ he responds, having given it considerable thought, ‘Not because of what other people said. I was very selective and it was a very exciting time. I think the problems came later when I was doing American, French, British and Italian *Vogue*, as well as lots of campaigns with Venetia [Scott, his partner and longtime stylist collaborator].’ In the 90s, Teller’s work was ubiquitous in fashion editorials and advertising spreads for the likes of Hugo Boss, Katharine Hamnett and Jigsaw. ‘I think at that time I lost touch with what I had started out to do. Then, I began to actively resist all the seduction of fashion, money and travel for a while. That’s when I started doing the *Go-sees* project.’

For someone who made their name, and tons of money, from fashion, the *Go-sees* book, published in 1999 — subtitled *Girls Knocking On My Door*, and consisting of portraits of every aspiring young model who did just that between May 1998 and May 1999 — was both a gamble and a provocation. Here, amid the odd name —a downbeat Sophie Dahl, a chauffeur-driven Eva Herzigova — was a self-critical exercise that laid bare all the commodification and superficiality of the fashion world. Teller simply instructed all the model agencies to send along anyone they liked, and chose to photograph the girls literally on his doorstep in an exaggerated parody of the vetting system that attends the discovery process. Kate Bush, who curated Teller’s big retrospective show at the Photographer’s Gallery five years ago, elaborates: ‘Juergen is undoubtedly a master fashion photographer, but, for me, his best work has always carried within it a critique of the fashion industry insofar as it is all about the surface, and how seductive that surface is. The *Go-sees* series was a conceptual breakthrough, though. Those photographs, for all their apparent sameness, say an awful lot in a much more reflective and critical way. All those girls waiting literally on his doorstep, full of misguided ambition. The whole ritual cruelty of that world is there in those faces.’

While making a supper of cold meats and cheeses, and slicing into the biggest loaf of bread I have ever seen — ‘It’s almost as good as German bread’ — Teller tells me he came to photography by accident. Born in the small town of Bubenreuth, near Nuremberg, he worked for a time in the family business, making bows and bridges for violins. When he developed an allergy to the wood, the family doctor recommended a change of air, and Teller took off for Tuscany with his cousin, Helmut, a medical student who was also a keen amateur photographer. ‘Every night I’d be stomping around trying to put up the tent, and Helmut would be sitting quietly, waiting for the sunset. It was so bloody boring until, one night, just for something to do, I looked though the camera. That was it. I decided there and then, on a hilltop in Tuscany, to be a photographer.’

In 1986, on the run from national service and a fractured home life aggravated by his father’s alcoholism, the 22-year-old Teller arrived in London. He owned three cameras

courtesy of the German health system, which had also helped pay for a two-year course at photography college following the illness he now thinks was psychosomatic. Ironically, the first thing he did was sell two of them. ‘They were top end, really expensive cameras. One was a Hasselblad. I only kept the 35mm one, which is the format I still use. The money for the other two kept me alive for six months while I made appointments and showed my final-year portfolio around.’

He turned up at the studio of Nick Knight, the fashion photographer, looking for a job as an assistant. ‘That was a turning point,’ he says, ‘Nick told me I should stop trying to be an assistant and just take pictures. Even though my work was the opposite of his in many ways, he saw something that a lot of others didn’t.’ His second turning point came when he met Venetia Scott on a magazine shoot in Romania. ‘She said, “I like you, but I hate your photographs,”’ he laughs. ‘I was involved in all this funny Polaroid colour stuff, just experimenting. Venetia told me to stop doing that and to just be instinctive. She taught me I could do whatever I wanted. In the beginning, I guess, I didn’t really have the confidence to see my ideas through. That was a big leap, just having a vision and going with it all the way even if other people don’t get it at first.’

Scott and Teller have been together ever since, and she has collaborated on most of his fashion work, while also styling for the likes of Marc Jacobs — the fashion world is nothing if not incestuous. They now have a five-year-old daughter, Lola, who features prominently, as does her mother, in many of Teller’s recent photographs. They are not the usual mother-and-daughter portraits though: one captures Scott cradling the newborn baby in her arms, her belly still distended: she is staring hard at the camera as if facing her partner down. In another instant, she is caught while pregnant, crouched down on a leafy road, as if in pain or distress. Snapshots, but loaded ones. ‘I guess I try to get whatever’s there,’ he says, shrugging, when I mention these images, ‘I’m not sure about the term “snapshots”, though. I mean, if I was to do a portrait of you right now, I would do it black and white, hand-held, very simple, very fast, but I would get a certain thing of you that you would recognise, and other people would recognise in you. And that would make it a meaningful portrait.’

A few days later, I speak to the actress Charlotte Rampling, who, like many of his — mostly female — subjects, Teller has photographed, then forged an enduring friendship with. I ask her what sets him apart. ‘First, his charm. The way he works is very free and easy, he puts you at ease really quickly, just chatting and snapping. It’s not like one of those big formal shoots that can be terribly imposing. It’s more like happy snapshots. Plus, he gets the raw part ofyou out, the animal part. He doesn’t tend to go for the glamorous stuff. I like to get to the bone like that. I’m not afraid of not looking pretty; I’d rather look raw. But you have to trust someone to get to that stage. It’s important to feel

released, and you can only do that when the photographer's relaxed. It's a lot of fun and it's edgy.'

Given that he has taken one of my favourite ever mother-and-son shots —Björk and her equally elfin offspring posing amid the steam of a hot Icelandic spring — I ask Teller if becoming a father has changed the way he looks at the world through the camera. He thinks about this for awhile, pushing his wine glass around the table. 'I think the range of my life shows in my work,' he says quietly. 'One day, I'll be photographing Kate Moss in Paris, then I'll be on Stephanie Seymour's ranch with her hundred horses wondering what exactly it is I'm doing there.' He photographed the glamour model and erstwhile girlfriend of Axel Rose over a prolonged period for a book called *More.* 'But, in between, I'll be taking Lola ice skating, or to Germany to see her grandmother. Those caves I put in the show came out of my childhood, but I only remembered them when I took Lola to see them. I suddenly remembered how big the caves and the forest were in my own childhood, how big a part they play in German childhood generally. All those strange tales. I think I had blocked a lot of that out until Lola came along.'

On 2 February 1988, just two years after he arrived in London, when things were starting to really take off in his career, Juergen Teller picked up the phone and heard that his father had committed suicide. He remembers feeling 'shocked and a little helpless'. When I listen to the interview tape a few days later, I notice he has referred to his father's death more than once, usually fleetingly and in passing. I ring him up and ask him if he feels he can talk about it on the record. 'We can try,' he says. Clumsily, I ask if his father's death has impacted on his work in any way. 'Oh, for sure. The desk photograph. The one of my mother at the grave side. But in other more subtle ways, too. I think with *Märchenstüberl*, I've delved back into Germany and that small town, the caustrophobia of that village life, the fact that we were all on top of each other, at work, and at home — my mother, my father, my grandfather, my cousin. My mother is now with my uncle,' he laughs. 'It's that sort of place. They came from the Czech Republic and they held on to everything — the language, the food, the work they did. I was thinking that's maybe why I have been photographing a lot of food lately. My childhood was very beautiful in some ways, and very disturbing in others.'

How disturbing?

'Suffocating. Conservative. My father never really encouraged me or even took an interest after I walked away from the family business. No one did except my mother and my grandfather. To be truthful, I cannot remember one meaningful conversation I had with my father. When I became a father, all that stuff rose up again from the back of my mind. I suddenly realised how uninvolved my father had been in my life.' He pauses for a

moment. ‘In many ways, I think committing suicide was the bravest decision he ever made. He gave my mother and me a life.’

Germany looms large in Juergen Teller’s new work, too. Currently, he is working on a show that will feature both photographs and films, including a home movie he made while watching the World Cup final between Germany and Brazil last year. The camera remains on him for the duration of the game. He plans to show the work unedited. ‘It is,’ he says grimly, ‘the most disturbing thing I have ever seen. That a grown man can get so pent up, so emotionally out-of-it that some pure animal instinct takes over.’ He shakes his head. ‘No Hollywood actor could do this if he was asked to act it out. It’s all in the eyes, all that emotion and anger and frustration. I used to wonder why Venetia and my mother hated me when I watched football, but now I know. It’s hardcore.’

Why, I ask, thinking also of the unflattering self-portraits, has he turned the camera so cruelly on himself of late?

‘It sounds odd, but I want to have a bit of fun. Even the film is saying, “How pathetic are men?” I had this crisis recently where I photographed an actress whose work I have loved since I was young. It was great, really intense and excellent, and I even took the shots to her personally on the Eurostar, but when I showed them to her, it was a complete disaster. A total, utter disaster. I was so depressed. I called Charlotte [Rampling] and we went to dinner and had a really interesting conversation about women and ageing. I came away thinking, I have spent all this time photographing people whose trust you have to win, whose neuroses you have to deal with. I felt in some way that I was having to think too much about all this stuff instead of the actual portraits. I suddenly realised I needed to photograph someone who doesn’t care at all how they look. So, that, of course, can only be one person — me. In the end, the only person I can be as brutally honest as possible with is me.’

Still fascinated by the OJ portrait — the captured moment filled with meaning —I ask him finally, cheekily, if he thinks it is possible to take a good photograph by accident. ‘Yeah,’ he replies in a way that suggests he believes the contrary, ‘but that’s not enough, is it? That would never be enough. For me, at least.’