

# JUERGEN TELLER

## WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE TRUTH?

IRA STEHMANN

“Whenever I work with plates, then it is always a self-portrait as well.”

JUERGEN TELLER

In the 1990s, Juergen Teller, among a squad of other like-minded young photographers such as Corinne Day, Nigel Shafran, and Wolfgang Tillmans, created a furor with his straightforward documentary style and anti-glamor-photographs, insisting upon creating a narrative that appeared to go beyond simply “showing the clothes” and using idiosyncratic models.

Teller’s provocative, unprettified, and raw images were a rebellious strike against the stylized aesthetics of his predecessors. A photograph no longer had to portray fashion in order to be a “fashion image.” Instead it was supposed to help sell a lifestyle. An image should reflect a style, a special moment in time, or someone’s very personal interpretation of beauty. Everyday realities were much more attractive than elaborate styling, typical of studio photographs. The subjects were not models posing for a fashion photograph but women who seem to have been caught at a random moment.

Considered today one of the most sought-after and important photographers of his generation whose pictures traverse the worlds of commerce and art, Teller started off in London in 1986 and began to work for the music industry shooting record covers. He successfully took photographs of Sinéad O’Connor, Elton John, Simply Red, and Björk, while in 1991 he took a series of now-iconic photographs of Kurt Cobain, when he was invited on tour with Nirvana.

Through Venetia Scott, a well connected stylist at the time, he made contacts to the fashion industry. Both not interested in glamor and perfection, the pair was looking for unknown models who did not match the canon of beauty of the “supermodel” era. In the early nineties the duo won its first assignments from avant-garde *zeitgeist* and fashion magazines like *i-D*, *the Face* and *Arena*, followed by *Dazed & Confused*, *Purple* and *W*, which were all important magazines and sources for art, fashion, and design.

Teller’s gritty and realistic aesthetic began in 1996 when he took a series of photographs of the naked and pale model Kristen McMenamy for a story called *Moral und Mode* (Moral and Fashion) commissioned by *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*. His front cover shows the model with a drawing between her naked breasts. In black it says “VERSACE” and it is outlined with a big red heart. This shot established Teller on the Olympus of fashion photography and broke with conventions that governed fashion photography for most of its history, calling into question old notions of beauty and glamor. The response in the fashion world was ambivalent. Some did find it appalling and were shocked. Nevertheless, it seems for the first time that a photographer had added a human dimension to the flawless world of glossy fashion magazines.<sup>1</sup>

Teller prefers to shoot for selected fashion designers instead of taking pictures for such journals. He feels

that they give him the freedom to take photographs which are true, witty, and are based on unusual ideas. Teller worked on commercial campaigns for Marc Jacobs since 1998 for over a decade, offering some of the most celebrated and challenging concepts in advertising each season. He worked with Helmut Lang from 1993 until his retirement from fashion; he has teamed up with Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, and Vivienne Westwood and worked for Celine and Louis Vuitton. He is currently working for Yves Saint Laurent.

Until eight years ago, Teller’s technique was characterized by using a casual, quick shooting style, working with two cameras at once and a direct flash. He took many photographs during a session and most often was physically very close to his objects. He used to be famous for shooting analog and for not retouching. Over the last eight years he has only been shooting digitally with one camera.<sup>2</sup>

When he shoots, he concentrates on the moment and engages deeply with his subject. His strong intuitive feel for people, situations, and environments produces images of great immediacy and simplicity—his photographs contributing to the aura of personal intimacy and authenticity.

Acquired over the last two years, the Nicola Erni Collection showcases Teller’s plate works. The large plates, in an edition of one, made of glass-fiber with a polished Gel-Gloss surface, measuring 120 cm in

diameter, on which the artist had his iconic images printed, feature portraits of Kate Moss, Yves Saint Laurent, and Karl Lagerfeld, to name just three.

The plate depicting Kate Moss, the great fashion legend of the nineties, shows her slightly faded fuchsia pink locks sprawled over her pillow with dreamy intimacy after she had showcased her runaway job for Versace in 1999 (*Young Pink Kate*, London, 1998). This candid and intense portrait reflects the close and trustful relationship between the photogra-pher and the model. In a photo-biography Kate Moss talks about her most memorable shots: “I think the one picture in here that is the most me, though, is the Juergen Teller of me with pink hair in bed. Because it is us just having a laugh in my bed. There wasn’t a hair or make-up artist or anything. It’s more like working with an artist, working with Juergen.”<sup>3</sup>

Another large plate work shows an oversized Marc Jacobs shopping bag with legs falling out of it (*Victoria Beckham – Legs, Bag and Shoes*, Los Angeles, 2007). For the spring/summer 2008 Marc Jacobs advertising campaign Teller featured Victoria Beckham. Instead of looking like a glamorous celebrity, only her bare, high-heeled legs are shown in the shoes of the season. Like in this shot, Teller is constantly looking for irritating visual stories which have never been told before.

Teller took a couple of iconic designer portraits which have become part of our collective memory.

Such is the portrait of Yves Saint Laurent commissioned for *Dazed & Confused* magazine in 2000. It was taken at the occasion of the designer’s last haute couture fashion show. Teller had five minutes to take Yves Saint Laurent’s portrait but he managed to create this honest and captive portrait in only thirty seconds. In 2009 Teller shot Karl Lagerfeld sitting in his sports car. The designer had never driven it before; however, for the artist, he pretended to have just stopped the engine and was about to leave the car. The picture was published in *Purple Magazine*.

In these aforementioned works Teller does not idealize, romanticize or prettify. His sitters are deliberately featured without makeup, with freckles, scars, moles or other imperfections. His pictures aim for the very core of the subject and foreground the idea of imperfect beauty. The principal aim is to portray people with directness, honesty, and humor. All his subjects come together in astonishing poses and each of his photographs reflects different intensities of emotions.

The photographer’s surname, Teller, means plate in German and has inspired him to incorporate plates into a large part of his oeuvre. An exhibition of the artist’s work named *Enjoy Your Life!*, which took place in 2016/2017 in the Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, the Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin, and the Fotomuseum Winterthur, featured some of the plate works for the first time.

The Nicola Erni Collection, along with four museums, is the fifth institution to showcase Teller’s plate works. On view is a small selection of plates which thematically focus on fashion and celebrity. Tellers’s oeuvre is broader than that and comprises portraits of himself, his family, and friends, as well as portaits of landscape, his native area (“Heimat”), and everyday scenes.

Playing with his German name “Teller” and printing his iconic images on plates to display them in a museum context, reflect Teller’s humor, which is a typical ingredient of his visual language. It seems as if he wants us not to take ourselves too seriously and is telling us rather to *Enjoy Your Life!*

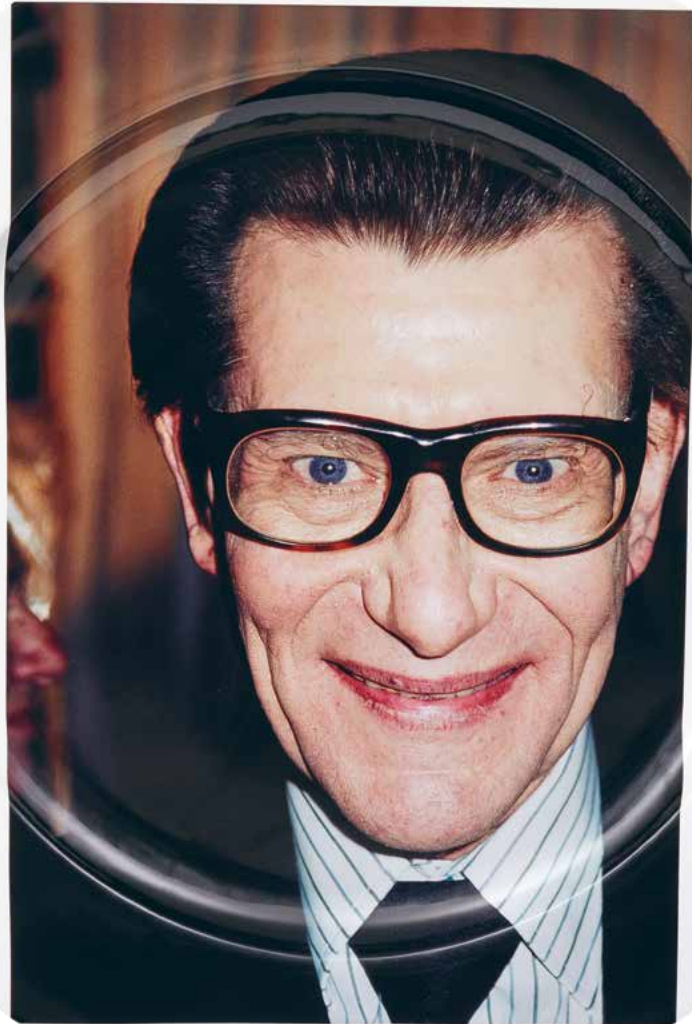
*Victoria Beckham – Legs, Bag and Shoes, Los Angeles, 2007*  
Fiberglass with polished Gel-Gloss surface  
Diameter: 120 cm



*Young Pink Kate, London, 1998*  
Fiberglass with polished Gel-Gloss surface  
Diameter: 120 cm



Yves Saint Laurent, Paris, 2000  
Fiberglass with polished Gel-Gloss surface  
Diameter: 120 cm



Karl Lagerfeld, Paris, 2009  
Fiberglass with polished Gel-Gloss surface  
Diameter: 120 cm

