

THE SUPREME SUPERMODEL

On the cusp of releasing a book of newly uncovered photos, 74-year-old Veruschka traces her radical journey in fashion. By ELIO IANNACCI

Interview

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IN A WORLD WHERE MODELS ARE OFTEN viewed as faces and bodies without voices—those pretty entities solely chosen to usher in designer trends—74-year-old model Veruschka, born Vera von Lehndorff, will always be known as a cat among starlings. From the moment she broke into fashion in the '60s (before fierce femmes of the Naomi and Linda variety were even crying in their cribs), von Lehndorff was dominating camera lenses like a champ.

"Insisted on collaboration from the start," says the six-foot-tall beauty from her home in Berlin, moments after working on a painting made with ash. "I wasn't anyone's dress-up doll. I was born an artist, and back then photographers would work with me so that we could plan what the images would be. I wanted control." »

A recently unearthed sample of von Lehndorff's early shoots with Italian photographer Johnny Moncada showcases the growing need she had to readdress the job description of a model. Titled *Veruschka: From Vera to Veruschka*, the book is regarded by von Lehndorff as a time capsule that collects the first of many metamorphoses she experienced before she worked alongside lens legends such as film director Michelangelo Antonioni (she cameoed in *Blow-Up*) as well as famed photographers Helmut Newton, Richard Avedon and her then boyfriend, Franco Rubartelli.

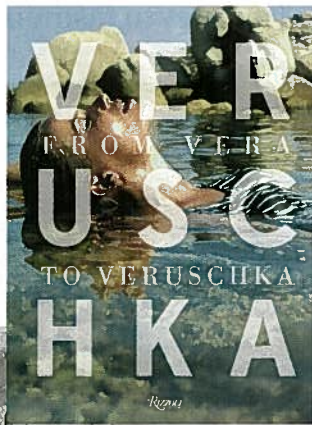
"I was very young and innocent," she says, reflecting on the days when she wished to emulate Greta Garbo and craft an identity

that strayed from being the daughter of Count Heinrich Graf von Lehndorff-Steinort and Countess Gottliebe Gräfin Kalnein. "The photos in the book where I put on a black wig—I remember that was quite amazing!" she says. "Before then, I'd never seen myself transform that way. It stirred something up."

What donning those raven tresses did was fire up von Lehndorff's creative streak, a force so fascinating to the editors of French and American *Vogue* that they allowed her to conceptualize and dictate shoots.

"Sometimes I would do my own makeup and hair," she recalls. "We got the clothes, styled them ourselves, shot without a hairdresser or anybody, really. It was just the two of us. We would go to places like Africa and do what we wanted. The Libyan desert shoot we did was very special. I designed all the clothes, and you could order them at Saks Fifth Avenue. It was a limited edition."

The limitations she has witnessed in the fashion industry over the past 50 years seem to go against the devil-may-care process she helped create in



ABOVE: VERUSCHKA: FROM VERA TO VERUSCHKA; LEFT, A SHOT FROM THE BOOK

the '60s. "[Photographer Steven] Meisel always tells me that I would hate the way people shoot fashion today because it's so fast and I wouldn't have a say in anything," she scoffs. Von Lehndorff says she felt the industry's sea change happen when Grace Mirabella took over Diana Vreeland's editor-in-chief position at *Vogue* in 1971 and told her that she would have to follow the rules and cut her hair (the trend of the season) in order to be in the magazine. "They told me, 'We have to tell you now how you have to look.' Right away when they started this, I knew I was not going to go on. So I left Paris and I didn't do anything for a long time."

It was the industry's conformist attitude that kept von Lehndorff at bay for years, save for her walk down Giles Deacon's runway in 2010 ("I hated it—I didn't have something powerful to wear and the light was horrible"). She strongly believes her heyday was much more progressive.

"You can't compare today to the '60s. We were in a real revolution," she says. "The pill and women's liberation happened, the people revolted. It was a time when so many ideas came out and people woke up. But escaping into the '60s is also wrong—it can't be repeated."

When asked about the envelope pushers coming out of fashion today, von Lehndorff says she is intrigued with the way transgender women have not only made it to the runway but are currently starring in campaigns.

"These types of models...they are fantastic-looking," she says. "It is always a sign of freedom when people express themselves and get attention. I understand that they want to transform [because] I also always did that throughout my life and work. Somehow it's always in me to use my body as an instrument, just like them. Nothing should stop evolution." □

