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AFRICA'S GLOBAL
STYLE & CULTURE
MAGAZINE FROM
THIS DAY

ISSUE 6 • €4.95

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FASHION MUSIC CULTURE POLITY

My style: Iké Udé

THE NEW YORK-BASED, NIGERIAN-BORN ARTIST, PUBLISHER AND STYLE AMBASSADOR TALKS ABOUT LIVING ART, BEING YOUNG AND LEAVING A GOOD-LOOKING CORPSE

WORDS CHIOMA NNADI

For the budding sartorial connoisseur, Iké Udé's Style File: The World's Most Elegantly Dressed is requisite reading. The book's introductory chapter, Style and Sympathy, is a list of commandments for sartorial empowerment. "Style is the ultimate mode of autobiography," reads one of the aphorisms – a statement that is a constant theme in the author's own fabled history.

Udé is undeniably a walking, talking example of his own style manifesto. Even lounging around his apartment-cum-studio in Chelsea, New York, he wears a suit and tie. "I have conversations with my clothes," says Udé, perched at the end of a cream chaise longue. The Nigerian-born artist, publisher and style commentator has chosen a particularly immaculate outfit for our interview, including a perfectly fitted navy-blue blazer (adjusted by his tailor in Chinatown) and a salmon-pink tie with hand-stitched detailing (something he picked up in Paris).

DROP-DEAD GORGEOUS

Udé is looking forward to his ritual siesta this afternoon. He naps in full regalia: shoes buckled and cravat fastened. "In my Style File questionnaire I ask: what attire would you rather be caught dead in?" he says, reaching for a book from the shelf of his drawing room and turning to a picture of Manet's *The Dead Toreador*. This elegantly dressed body, argues Udé, is a sartorial triumph over death. "At least one can be a picturesque corpse," he says (just for the record, he puts on pyjamas and a robe at bedtime).

The Style File questionnaire has been a staple feature in Udé's magazine, *aRude*, since its launch in 1995. The publication came about as a natural extension of his artwork and lifelong obsession with printed matter. Udé tends to eschew media conventions, favouring the timeless over the timely, the sophisticated over the sensational. "I will not interview an actor because he has a movie out; I will interview him because he is a great actor," he explains. It's why institutions such as Harvard University, The New York Public Library and

London's Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design subscribe to a magazine that runs on an artist's unpredictable schedule.

The new book features 55 of Udé's style luminaries, from fashion aristos such as Diane Von Furstenberg to New York club kid Kenny Kenny. Through this cast of characters, the style versus fashion battle lines are clearly drawn. "Fashion is first and foremost prescriptive, whereas style is about freedom and independence," he says. Udé has little time for the fashion world: he finds fashion shows in their present form "pedestrian". His personal style relies on a 1920s system of tailors and hand-crafted elegance, and most of his style references predate even this era. The book, for example, includes reinterpretations of 1890s journal *The Yellow Book*, with self-portraits of the artist in dandyish poses and attire.

Udé is best known for his self-portraiture, such as the female incarnations in his *Cover Girl* series, which began in 1994 and remains one of his most famous and ingenious to date. By transposing his image onto magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, he turns the glossy, glitzy world of fashion on its head. He describes it as "a farcical yet earnest reading of the marginalising tendencies of mainstream magazines." This autumn, he will also appear on

the cover of a book about black dandyism by Monica L Miller. Udé, however, isn't particularly excited by the subject matter. Labels like 'dandy' mean little to a man whose identity is in constant flux. "For me, the self is negotiable," he explains. "Doing something out of the ordinary, for example, that's the self shifting."

Leaving a strict boarding-school upbringing in Nigeria as a young adult was, he says, the best way to explore these multiple selves, and New York proved the perfect environment. Style reigned supreme on the city's club scene, and Udé compares the milieu to a drawing room of the 1800s. "In the 19th century, the drawing room was a place to sharpen your wit," he says, "a training ground for social skills."

FINE AND DANDY

The young emigré's flair was quickly noticed and he became a doorman at André Balazs' *MK*, one of the hot spots of the time. Unlike many of the era's tragic, bright young things, Udé did not get pulled under by the scene's seedier, self-destructive undercurrent, and credits his strict father and boarding-school upbringing for that cast-iron self-discipline.

Ironically, his upcoming projects will be a homecoming of sorts: there has been preliminary work on a portrait series with Nigerian albinos, and another with Nollywood stars. Ultimately, Udé would like to open a school for the arts in Nigeria or Ghana. Despite a slight aversion to aeroplanes, he seems ready to relinquish the safe, controlled environs of his studio for a while.

In the far corner of the room hangs what looks like a large, floral painting. On closer inspection, it turns out to be a painted collage of a certain celebrity's body parts. "Paris Hilton," he chuckles. True wit and personal style are obviously all about attention to detail. ●

IKÉ UDÉ'S STYLE COUNCIL



BRYAN FERRY
"The former Roxy Music singer is the epitome of suave, debonair and dandyish detachment."



JOHN MALKOVICH
"Malkovich makes the list for his air of aristocratic mischief and elegance."



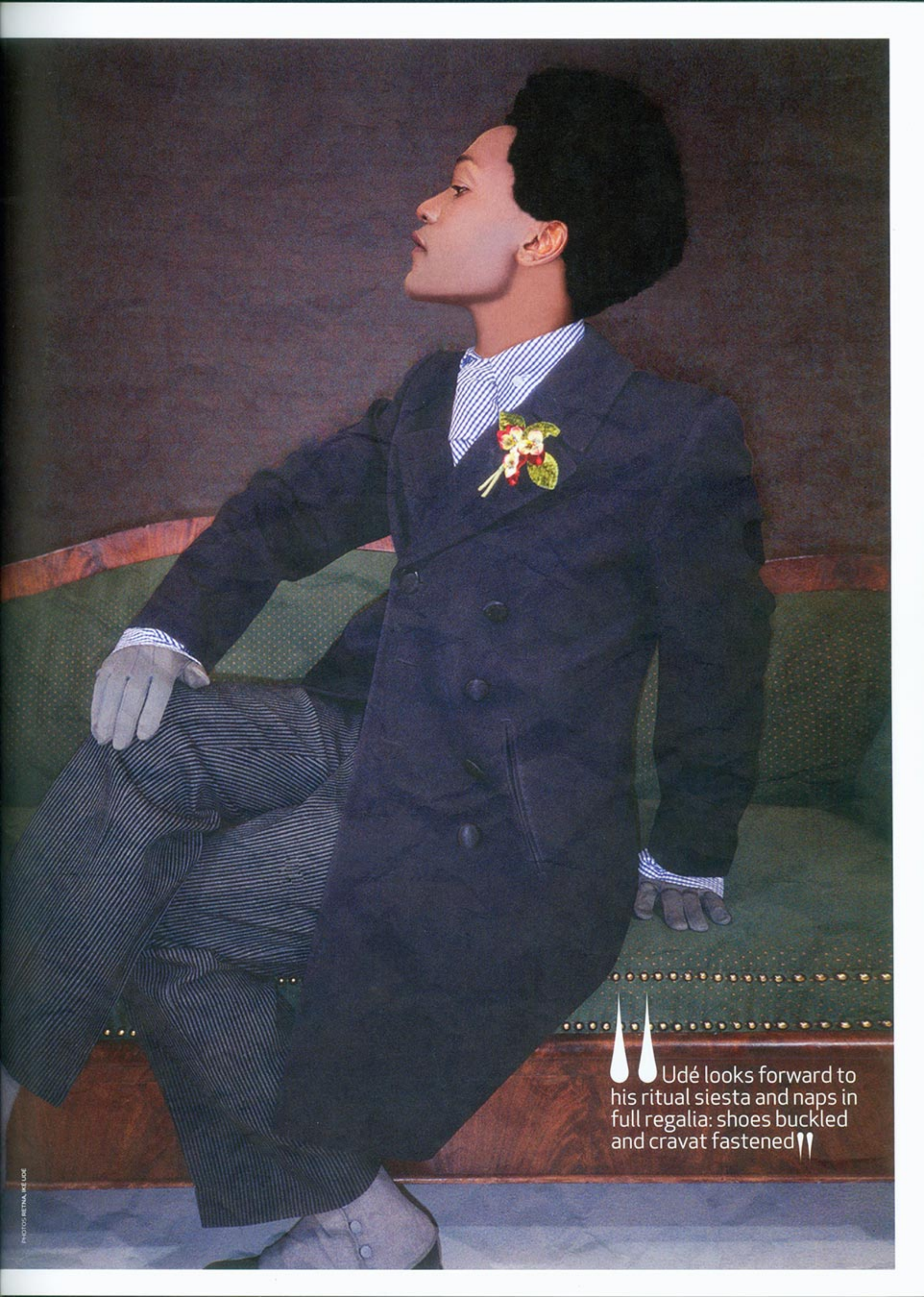
DAVID BOWIE
"For his impishly informed attitude and capacity to anticipate new sartorial modes."



JOHNNY DEPP
"His ease with period costumes evokes a poet's disposition and atypical attitude."



TERENCE TRENT D'ARBY
"His style and songs show his intelligence and utter confidence."



Udé looks forward to his ritual siesta and naps in full regalia: shoes buckled and cravat fastened