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THE NORDIC ART REVIEW

VOL. II NO. 6/00

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ISSN 1404-207X



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# Talking looks

In November 2000, a conversation took place between fashion legend Diane Von Furstenberg and art dandy Iké Udé at Von Furstenberg's Town House in the West Village, New York City. A perfect match. Udé's recent solo exhibition *Beyond Decorum: The Photography of Iké Udé* investigates the glamour and myth-making aspects of fashion and media. The fashion designer Von Furstenberg is glamour. The conversation started with the legendary life of Diane Von Furstenberg and ended with the soon-to-be legends of Iké Udé.

BY IKÉ UDÉ AND DIANE VON FURSTENBERG

**Iké Udé**, Self-Portrait (from *Uses of Evidence*, 1988, c-print left). Courtesy of Galerie Anah. **Diane Von Furstenberg** (right). Photo: Helmut Newton. Courtesy of Diane Von Furstenberg Studio L.P.



## Iké Udé on Diane von Furstenberg

IKÉ UDÉ: What becomes a legend most?

DIANE von FURSTENBERG: One becomes a legend when one... well, even a baker can become a legend for making pecan pie, but ultimately it's when a person does remarkably precise work in whatever field of endeavor, then he/she is a legend. In short, when one is remembered by everybody for one exceptional thing, regardless of whatever else great or little one has achieved.

IU: Why is it that legends stay eternal in any age?

DvF: Because they have left an impact in and beyond their own time.

IU: What was life like before Egon Von Furstenberg and New York City?

DvF: That's when my life began. Everything began at the same time. I wanted to model. I had this idea to make fashion that is easy and sophisticated. Thereafter, I went to Italy and did my first mini-collection. I sailed to New York with a suitcase full of my collection. It all happened at the same time. Then I got pregnant, and got married to Egon.

IU: What really changed for you after these two events?

DvF: Life before Egon was growing up and fearing that nothing would happen for me and deep down knowing that everything would happen for me. When I met Egon, he saw something in me, encouraged, pushed me, believed in me before anyone else. He is very important in my life. He encouraged me to work and to have my children.

IU: As a young fashion designer, who were the fashion designers that you most emulated and aspired to be like?

DvF: I didn't aspire to be like anybody. But I loved Yves Saint Laurent, Giorgio Saint Angelo and Ossie Clark.

IU: In March 22, 1976, Newsweek chose you as their cover subject over the then American President Ford. How come?

DvF: My dress had become a social phenomenon, every American woman had my wrap-dress on, it was easily recognizable. It was truly sensational. I was living a true American dream.

IU: Were you prepared for this?

DvF: Yes, it was a fantastic experience. It was a joy.

IU: Are the factors in the '70s that led to your meteoric rise and success – a multi-millionaire in your twenties – still available to the budding, ambitious young designer of today?

DvF: Yes. With my dresses I realize, today, that it was in part a certain spirit of freedom for the modern woman. As I watch with great joy and pleasure the rebirth of my dress in today's fashion, it occurs to me that in fact the modern woman is what I was already. I created a mode that is continuously relevant today. What I did, modesty aside, is an intellectual equivalent of feminism. Look at Coco Chanel, a free spirit who took English men's clothes and successfully turned them into women's suits. Conversely, I took a T-shirt and turned it into an attitude.

IU: Beyond the public Diane, what is the private one like?

DvF: I live my life very intensely, my private, family, and public life are one big event.

IU: In a word or two, three or four, what does the following mean to you: Your daughter Tatiana...

DvF: My best girlfriend.

IU: Your son Alexandre?

DvF: My best male friend.

IU: Egon Von Furstenberg?

DvF: Very, very generous.

IU: Barry Diller?

DvF: He loves me unconditionally.

IU: Marisa Berenson?

DvF: Kind, loving and funny.

IU: Your first and second invitations to the White House?

DvF: Intimidating, impressive and a touch disappointing.

IU: Your brush with cancer?

DvF: Accept, deal with, but don't surrender to it.

IU: And, if you allow, sex?

DvF: Natural, pleasant, and common. ■



Left: Iké Udé, Nigerian Vogue (from the Cover Girls series), 1994, type-c print mounted on aluminum. Courtesy of the artist. Right: Diane Von Furstenberg on the cover of Newsweek, March 22, 1976. Courtesy of Diane Von Furstenberg Studio L.P.



## Diane von Furstenberg on Iké Udé

DIANE von FURSTENBERG: When did you know that you were different?

IKÉ UDÉ: I was, I think, about 7 years old, in the company of my elementary school mates, perhaps I was imagining things, but I looked up to the sky, like an epiphany I saw a momentary form, a quivering hand amid a slightly overcast sky gingerly holding a rather small golden vase against a Robins Egg Blue sky. And I had this peculiar will to control the movement of clouds, especially when it's too sunny and you want shade. And as a young lad, between the ages of nine and twelve I had this unrelenting ambitious desire to build an exquisite mini pleasure car for boys my age, so I would go to the library to research automobiles. Soon, my interest faded because I didn't fancy the mathematical/physics aspect of it.

Since I wasn't athletically inclined, reading, drawing and reverie were my chief refuge. I loved my dreams, especially when they seemed unattainable, far more than reality, and the company of myself more than other little boys. I was also taken by the world of perfume, talcum powder, especially Penhaligon's, the indeterminate aroma of my mother's sumptuous textile collection, the enigmatic smell of unreadable leather-bound books, and a strong aversion to vulgarity, muscularity, and commonplace activities. For all this, kids my age, even adults, found me rather unusual. On occasion, and with much relish, I'd impulsively, with a sling-shot, fire at people when I took objection to their heads, torsos, noses, lips, legs, or clothes.

DvF: You seem to remember the discipline of boarding school with great fondness. Tell me about it.

IU: In retrospect, especially now that I'm relatively grown up, I can appreciate the rigors that were the hallmarks of a rather hardcore English boarding school. It fundamentally shaped me in regard to my appreciation for academic excellence, style, independence of thought, individual responsibility, neatness, physical fitness and a vague romantic longing for arcadia. But to be sure, the discipline was by turns far too demanding for my artistic temperament – what with the sadistic punishments, for one.

DvF: What was your first object of desire? Romantically, sexually, or otherwise.

IU: If I remember correctly, it was my desire to own an Egyptian-cotton white suit adorned with a calla lily on the left lapel and standing on the solid foundation of an English burgundy brogue. Or perhaps it was my mother's quaint perfumed body cream that I shared with her without her approval or knowledge of my sharing. Then again, I think that she somehow knew that there was a secret sharer, probably me.

**"What I did, modesty aside, is an intellectual equivalent of feminism. Look at Coco Chanel, a free spirit who took English men's clothes and successfully turned them into women's suits. Conversely, I took a T-shirt and turned it into an attitude."**

—Diane Von Furstenberg

"I began as a painter, then moved on to conceptual art where I employed photography as my main medium. I have always been – even with my paintings – fascinated by, or drawn to, veils, the appearances of things in general, especially people. In a sense, my work is about the way we use textual signs or fashion, clothes, make-up and other visual accoutrements to conceal or reveal what we want." —Iké Udé

DvF: If you could be someone else other than yourself, who would you have liked to be?

IU: A combination of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, Miles Davis, Oscar Wilde, Mohammed Ali and Des Esseintes, the quintessential decadent of J.K. Huysmans' 1884 novel, *À Rebours*.

DvF: Why?

IU: They were to a commendable extent, great, exemplary and accomplished dandies. Wouldn't you say?

DvF: Why did you decide to come to New York?

IU: Prophetically, one of my smart friends, then in Lagos, always but fondly mocked me with, "Iké from New York". In order words, he believed that I belonged to that 'IT' world of New York, where everything is the most chic, hedonistic, wicked, smug, artistic, etc. I knew that his assumptions about me were rather on point. Although Lagos, Enugu, Port Harcourt were quite cool, I also knew that New York, besides the challenge that it was bound to pose for me, was also the hothouse where all the stars were fed and wined, and that I wanted to breathe the very air of New York with the star of *Saturday Night Fever*, John Travolta, the star of *Off the Wall*, Michael Jackson, and immerse myself in the contagiously glamorous whirlpool that was Studio 54, where all the beautiful smart set raved. I couldn't wait. It's

funny, but I knew New York so well – even before I set foot there – through photographs, movies, radio, television, maps, and my older brother's friends, who painted varying pictures of what it was like.

DvF: How did you decide to create a magazine – it is a very bold move... were you ever afraid?

IU: Oh no, my dearest. In fact, I'm more afraid of catching sight of a hideous cockroach, a moth, a Rambo type of guy, an exceedingly obese or fat-ankled type, say, than I am of engaging in such an adventurous endeavor like aRUDE magazine. aRUDE magazine was for me, a natural and logical progression after my *Cover Girl* exhibition in the Fall of 1994 at Exit Art, New York. Parodying popular magazines such as *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar* within a conceptual/semiotic context emboldened me to consequently launch aRUDE. Secondly, being an admirer of the late, clever and great Mr. Andy Warhol also served me as a source of inspiration.

DvF: Now that you are part of the New York life, how do you see Nigeria and what would you like to do for it?

IU: I have occasionally – perhaps, it's a mere fancy – toyed with the idea of being President of Nigeria. Wouldn't it be just lovely! After all, the great Fela Anikulapo Kuti once ran for the Nigerian Presidency. Becoming a Nigerian President would certainly give me the honor and opportunity to cure some of its ills and impediments. Wouldn't you say? On the other hand, as an artist and private citizen, I plan on establishing a Bauhaus-like workshop for some of our fine, gifted young talents – of whom there are many. It's always been one of my undying dreams, which I'm bound to realize. Perhaps, my great uncle, who is now the deputy Governor of our state, might be of help since they are now clamoring for foreign investors and such. Who knows!

DvF: Describe your art...

IU: I began as a painter, then moved on to conceptual art where I employed photography as my main medium. I have always been – even with my paintings – fascinated by, or drawn to, veils, the appearances of things in general, especially people. In a sense, my work is about the way we use textual signs or fashion, clothes, make-up and other visual accoutrements to conceal or reveal what we want. But beyond appearances, there is often a subtextual intervention – sometimes, exceedingly nuanced – in some of my work, like the *Cover Girl Series*, *Celluloid Frame*, *Beyond Decorum*, to name a few. On the other hand, as an aesthete, I'm profoundly sympathetic to certain formal, classical and beautiful aspects of art. There's always room for art for its own sake and beyond.

DvF: What is your current project?

IU: Besides my touring exhibition, *Beyond Decorum*, and doing aRUDE magazine, I'm engaged in various art projects, new paintings, two book projects, a collection of essays. I'm also in the process of finishing my first film, *Je Te Veux*, a dance/fashion film featuring superb world-class choreographers such as Bill T. Jones, Stephen Petronio, John Kelly, Desmond Richardson, Melissa Finley and designers such as *Comme des Garçons*, Yohji Yamamoto, Martin Margiela, Rive Gauche/YSL. I've also been approached to do a limited edition menswear line, but that has to wait for now. It's funny, but it's all one big project.

DvF: What authors are your favorites?

IU: Chekhov, Achebe, Walter Pater, Baudelaire, Max Beer-bohm, José Ortega Y Gasset, J.K. Huysmans. Contemporaneously speaking, Wayne Koestenbaum's style interests me.

DvF: A wish for humanity...

IU: One would frankly wish that we could all witness and enjoy a more artistically – inclined world, well educated, rather democratic, with refined faculties, hopefully.

—Iké Udé and Diane Von Furstenberg



Spring collection 2001 by Diane Von Furstenberg. Courtesy of Diane Von Furstenberg Studio L. P. Photo: D. Lecca.