

OCTOBER 13, 2010, 12:05 AM

Bettina RHEIMS' Return to America @ Edwynn Houk – part I



4 juillet II, Paris, 1990

Bettina Rheims has been creating intensely erotic images of women, for more than three decades. My introduction to Rheims' work was marked by the purchase of her hugely successful **Chamber Closed** – a copy of which has graced my tri-continental travelling library since, 1998. Two weeks ago, I spoke with Bettina over the phone, in Paris, about her work ...and return to New York City, after many years of absence. Her first major gallery exhibition in the United States, in nearly 20 years, is held at the **Edwynn Houk Gallery**, until October 30, 2010.

Homa Nasab – In what way do think your background as a model has influenced your work?

Bettina Rheims – I don't know that it did influence me. What it did tell me was that I did not want to stay on that side of the camera. Though, my experiences in front of the camera – even as an actress for a brief period – may unconsciously have given me the feeling that I don't want to make women uncomfortable... though it's sometimes necessary for my work.

HN – OK, but how did you get into modelling?

BR – I did not go to college or university and I was just pretty enough to be a model... but I did it unconsciously. I was never a supermodel; I was never on the cover of Vogue or something like that. That was a time when people did not care so much about – or have as much respect for models. In the 70's, we were asked to take off our clothes and we did it. Sometimes we were promised campaigns and sometimes did not get it...

HN – As difficult as it maybe, how would you define your work's character?

BR – My work is about getting to know myself better. It's about what it is like to be a woman. A question that comes to me, often. And, then, there are others... for example, what is religion or faith? I ask myself what it is like to be a man who suffers for 10 years to become a woman? So, in some ways, it's all really more and more about becoming a woman better...



5 mai I, Paris, novembre 1991

HN – So can one say that, in some ways, your images are self-portraits?

BR – That's right! I don't do self-portraits but my pictures are self-portraits. My various series reflect what I am into in that moment... and it is my way of expressing what it is like to be a creative.

HN – How do your ideas begin?

I am a writer with images and the funny thing is that my work, every project, starts with a list of words. I start with my notebook of ideas which is full of words and, then, the words become images.

HN – Let's talk about your collaboration with Serge Bramly. I am always intrigued by creative couples who work together ...

BR – Serge was a photographer and I was a journalist and I was as bad a journalist as I was a model. Serge and I were a team for a while until we became lovers. He was not a good photographer and he pushed me to find that which made my life better, more alive.

Before meeting him, 10 years earlier when I was 14 years old, I loved being in a dark room. He gave me a camera – that time it was a roller flex – and, the moment I looked into that square I knew that was it for me. And, I owe this re-discovery to Serge.



6 décembre, Paris, 1991

HN – And, you have been working together ever since...

That's right. After the birth of my only child (Virgile Bramly) who is now 30 years old, we separated. However, every 3-5 years we get together and work on one of my big, heavy projects. They often require a lot of money and energy; you must remember, nobody works like that in my country. France is not America (in that sense). The logistics of making a movie are too much for me. I cannot deal with that. So, Serge and I are like ping pong players: I pose permanent questions... and may be for the next 3 years we won't work together. He may write a novel. We have done 5 projects together: *Chambre Closed* (1992), *I.N.R.I.* (1998), *Shanghai* (2003), *Bettina Rheims: Retrospective* (2004), *Rose c'est Paris* (2009).

HN – Having lived in Europe for nearly a decade, until about two years ago, I hadn't noticed your absence from the American art scene. But you weren't showing your work in the States much. Why was that?

I have shown everywhere in Europe and everywhere in Asia. I could have said that in the (George W.) Bush Era, my work was a bit too much and over the top. So, it was a difficult time for me, there. Though, perhaps I could have tried harder. But I am shy with that sort of thing and it is not my job to do it. I wait for things to happen and *I don't like to force destiny...*

HN – So, you think that the heavily erotic and controversial nature of your work prevented it from being properly shown in the States.

BR – Yes, I have done a lot of work on gender issues and what it is like to be a woman and more and more about people of everyday life... I have done photographs of transsexuals, and in *Modern Lovers*, for example, of androgynous teenagers. *I introduced sexuality into contemporary production and fashion. And, now sex is everywhere. So, perhaps I opened the doors too soon.*



Breakfast with Monica Bellucci, Paris, novembre 1995



- Madonna sitting on the floor and lifting her dress, New York, septembre 1994

HN – But, you don't think that your portraits of celebrities and movie stars bring you closer to the American art (consuming) public?

BR – ... Well, aside from some works with Madonna and other Hollywood stars, in the mid 1990's., I have been shooting a lot of French & European actors, lately, and they are not so popular in America, these days.

HN – Nevertheless, now you are back in NYC where you have an exhibition at the Edwynn Houck Gallery which runs until October 30th.

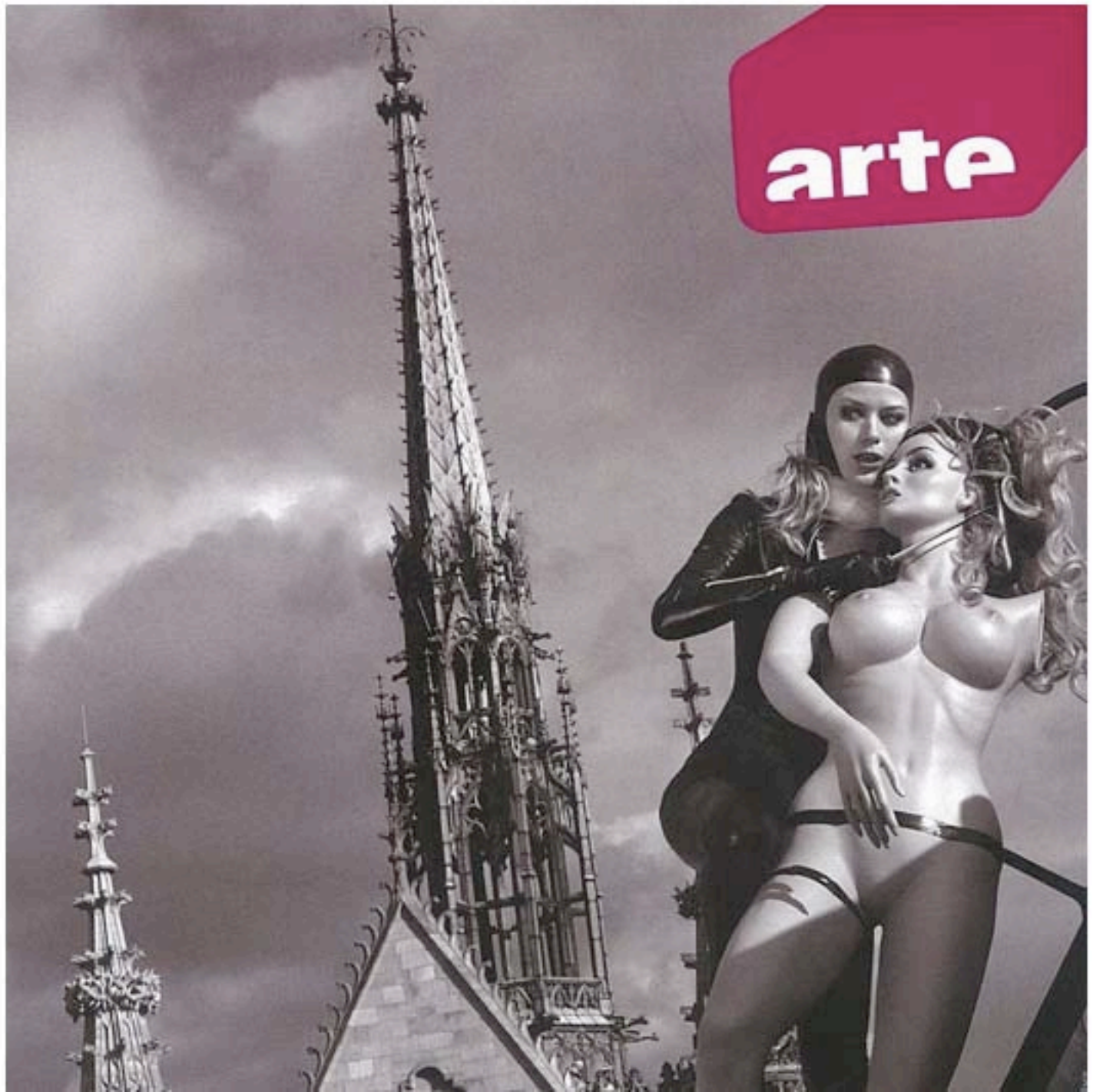
Yes, I feel that I have never really been exhibited properly in America, until now. This is, also, the first time that I am starting a long-term relationship with a gallery.

HN – As a curator, I am curious to know how did this arrangement (of working with an agent) come about?

BR – I have been working with **Jed Root** for 20 years but, until recently, it was never his thing to touch the art side. The whole thing started about 2-3 years ago. I told him, why don't you become my agent and he loved the idea of moving from commercial to fine arts. He has always been attracted to art but he never had a chance to step into it.

HN – How did the transition of working with Jed on projects that went beyond purely commercial basis evolve?

BR – Well, Jed began to work with me in Asia where he represented me in Shanghai and Beijing and he really liked it. It was another side of the work that had he already done. So, we decided to come to the States. You know, my work is big and heavy so it's not too easy to carry around...



HN – What's your next project in the US, then?

BR – Again, I haven't had many shows in the US but will be showing my latest work, **Rose c'est Paris**, at *Edwynn Houk*, in 12 months' time. I am really happy to be back in New York. I used to live and work there and it was a source of inspiration! As for other American cities: Los Angeles? I have done a lot of work, there, too. But, then, I found more excitement in Paris and Berlin... but I think that NY is back on track!

MUSEUMVIEWS HOME

OCTOBER 15, 2010, 10:48 AM

In Conversation with Bettina RHEIMS – part II



Audrey Marnay, Paris c'est Rose, Taschen, 2009

HN – Last time, we spoke you said that for a while, you “found more excitement in Paris and Berlin... but I think that NY is back on track!”

BR – Ah, yes, speaking of my return to the United States: I don't know why there was this sense of shyness that kept me away for all these years. It seems that from our side of the ocean, it is hard to reach the people there. Having said that, I have so many friends in America and it's a country that I love so much. After all, I started my professional career while living in NYC. I know every street there because when I lived there, I was young and would run around with my portfolio. So, I know NY better than I know Paris.

HN – At one point did you realize that living in NYC wasn't for you?

Well, at one point, early on, I was offered a great contract by a leading fashion magazine and I could have moved there with my son, Virgile Bramly, and have him enrolled in *The Lycée français de New York (LFNY)*. But then I realized that I needed to stay in my own country. I was afraid to be swallowed up by magazines and editor who take you and turn you in to what they want you to become. I know so many photographers who lose their souls to the fashion world.

HN – Have you ever regretted leaving NYC?

BR – At times, I have regretted leaving when I would see my colleague in their limos when I was taking cabs [laughs]. But, I am really happy that I stayed close to my roots, my beliefs. I am deeply French, you know, though I become annoyed with this country, sometimes. This is where my family is ... where my friends are. When I am scared about my work or the direction that it's taking me, sometimes everything gets too big, too frightening... I can go home to my normal people and they prevent me from going crazy...

HN – But now you are ready to return to your ‘professional’ roots, if you will?

BR – Yes, absolutely. Now I feel strongly that I can come back to the States because I feel that I have nothing to lose anymore. I know what is for me and what is not for me. It is working in that country that I like and working with my agent, Jed Root, whom I love. And, I am happy with my new gallery, Edwynn Houk. I feel supported by the States. And, now, it is time for the Big Move. Now is the time to be there. And, because it is big and exciting...



La sublime joueuse de billard Marion Cotillard, Juin 2002, Maisons-Lafitte

HN – *We touched on this a bit, last time that we spoke, but tell me more about your work with Edwynn Houk.*

BR – Well, we just started working together where I have my first show [until October 30th]. The people from the Houk Gallery really love my work. Edwynn and his assistant came to Paris to see my work and looked at all the archives. Edwynn had a fairly specific plan as to what the exhibition at his gallery would look like.

HN – *What was it about Houk that appealed to you the most? I am certain that most prominent galleries in the city would have loved to have worked with you.*

BR – I love the way Edwynn talks about photography. Working with him is very different from being with an art gallery. He really loves photography; he loves the idea of looking at contact sheets. And, I love that!

HN – *So, do you only work with film or use digital as well?*

BR – Oh, of course, I use digital cameras, especially for commissions and commercial work. But, I mostly do films. I like the idea of doing film and the time that it takes to process it. I love the moments that I wait in my studio for the lab to return the pictures, wondering what the contact sheets would look like, while everyone has gone to lunch or on a coffee break.

HN – *Photography as a collective art; you must really trust your printer, then!*

BR – I have an amazing printer who really knows how to do/develop skins! I have always told him that the day you stop working, I will stop. Well, perhaps that won't happen but I love photographs for what they are. I love the smell of (developing) products. I love everything about photography. *I love the mystery of appearing images ...like a miracle. It's as if there is something almost magical, almost religious about it.*



- Madonna, 1994

HN – *As you go back and forth between film and digital... how do (or if) you use photoshop? Because, it seems to me that, from looking at certain groups of your of erotica, fashion and celebrity images, they are, shall I say, more raw than what we are used to seeing in the media.*

BR – Oh, yes, you need to use photoshop for commissions. And, it's more or less the same with film since we go through various stages of

digitization. However, you are right, I don't retouch my photos as much as my colleagues do. You can look at my pictures and recognize the person. Some of what you see out there is not about photography anymore. Last week, I was working with a huge American star, whose name I won't tell you [giggles] but I was pleasantly surprised when she asked me NOT to retouch her. She said, "Look, I am 35 years old and I want to see some of my wrinkles."

HN – And, she was an American star? Well, then, I would say that that must have been quite a surprise [both laugh]. But retouching is in?

BR – Yes, for commission work, you have to do retouching... and sometimes we need to get approval for retouching, before and after, which is quite exhausting, and time consuming.



HN – Speaking of commissions, let's talk about The Book of Olga...

BR – I am glad that you brought that up. People never talk about it! I receive commission portraits for society women, all the time. These are not movie stars. There are men who want photos of their wives taken; women who want keep images of themselves either for their grandchildren... or, for younger lovers. But, over all, I love doing portraits of people who are not used to being photographed. **Andy Warhol** and **Robert Mapplethorpe** did it!

HN – What excites you most about this process...? What differentiates taking photos of random unknowns than of Monica Bellucci?

BR – I love the process of helping people to get in touch with their own desires... and desirability. Ok, sometimes, it gets very bizarre and when it gets bizarre, you get *The Book of Olga*! Olga, was really interesting: she did not care much and was willing to pose whatever to please her husband.

HN – How did that 'process' unfold?

BR – Olga just started as a straight forward commission by her husband (**Sergei Rodionov**). We got together about three times and each time, I proposed a different theme. Since I did not know who she was, I invited her to the country and figured out some things about her and got her to open up. She was very funny, sometimes full of pleasure and sometimes bored. We laughed a lot and had a great time. I would take series of photos of her and send them to Sergei who kept asking for more.

HN – So, you did not set out to publish a book about the project, at first...?

BR – No, at first, it was not meant to be a book project, at all, but a series of images which I took with her over a one year period. Then, he decided to publish a book; so, I thought that he wanted a private oeuvre that he would share with some friends. But, no, he wanted to go public. He loved her and was very proud of her and was very happy to show her to the world. I proposed the project to **Benedikt Taschen** by sending him five images from what we had produced.

HN – How did you decide on working with Taschen?

BR – He is the only person I know crazy enough to do it. And, then, it became a huge success. I did not think that it would. But people saw in it something very modern. The fact that a Russian oligarch who was doing an art project with his wife and kept pushing me to go further... Some of the images were exhibited in a museum in Milan, and they were present. He was very happy to talk about the project.



The Book of Olga, Taschen, 2008

HN – Well, I imagine that you will be receiving a call from Peter Brant for a similar commission, soon...

BR – Oh, yes, you mean for Stephanie (Seymour)...

HN – Yes. I think that that would be a perfect Christmas present for her (him?)! I take it that he has been rather busy over the past several months. But, it appears that he, now, has more time on his hands ...

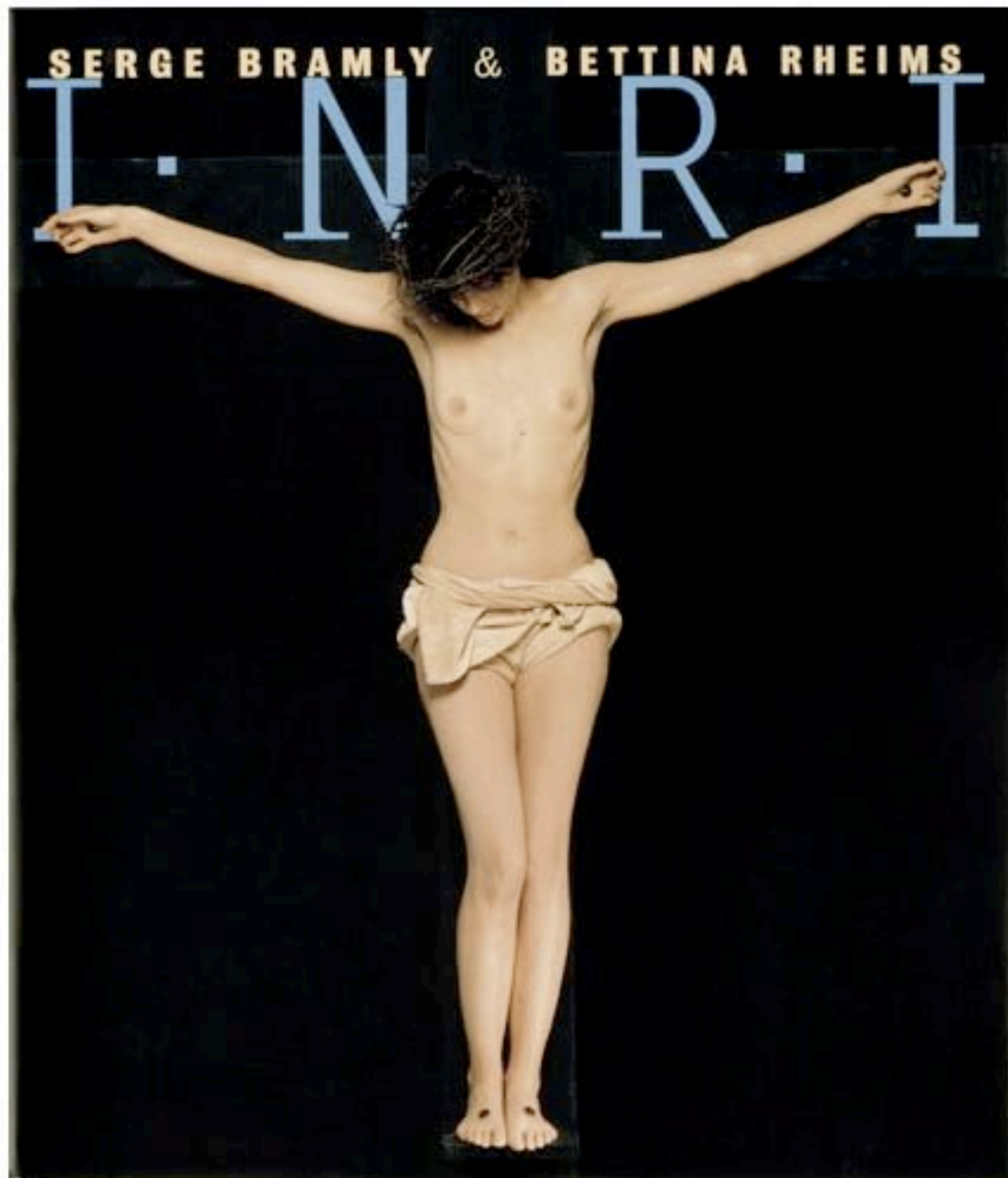
BR – [Laughs] I would love that... to work with Stephanie!

HN – As someone who is passionate about learning the relationships between collectors, artists and art institutions, I am curious to know how would you describe a Bettina Rheims collector?

BR – Oh, I have no idea. Most of the time I don't even know who is buying my work. I recently picked up a glossy interior design magazine and there was a society lady who was standing in front of one of my photographs. She is apparently a major collector. I mean, it's not like I am **Jeff Koons**; I don't make a few casts of something and keep a clients' list.

HN – In the meantime, your next project with Edwynn Houk will be a (partial) exhibition of Rose c'est Paris which you had shown at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in Paris, last summer. How did that project come about?

BR – Rose was another collaboration with Serge (Bramly), and, as with all our other projects, it took on a different form. When we did **Chambre Closed**, he came up with the idea, the story, of a man who arrests women on the street and asks them to take off their clothes. He wrote the script and I was doing the photos; but, of course, he wasn't in the room... because, the whole idea was that I, as the photographer, would experience voyeurism that this man (character) had experienced. Also, it was very intimate... and, that is the effect that we wanted. The women being vulnerable... So, that was our first project.



I.N.R.I.: Jesus Nazareus Rex Iuderoum, 1999

HN – And, then you did I.N.R.I.

BR – That's right. For this project, we wrote the text for every image together. Well, not the story, since it is the story of the **Bible**. But, we prepared, set up, shot (almost) every image together. Nowadays everybody does that: two people collaborating and working together to shoot photographs. But, back then, people were confused. They wanted to know, "Who is taking the photographs?" and, the answer was "We are taking the pictures... together!"

HN – Next stop: Shanghai. Today, everyone is China-bound. But, that was 8 or 9 years ago...

BR – Right. Shortly before we went to China, I had read a novel about women in China, in Shanghai, and how they were going back and forth between Western culture and their own...since just then the country was opening up a bit more. By the late 1990's, the start of the millennium, women were being allowed to get in touch with their own (feminine) roots; to wear their grandmothers' traditional costumes and put on make up, etc. And, at the same time, they were starting to get all kinds of things from the West. So, as with all my work which has always been about that thin line... where boundary meet and touch each other... I wondered what it was like to be a woman from Shanghai who is suddenly subject to two extreme opposite civilizations. What went on in their (these women's) heads?



Shanghai, 2003

HN – How did you manage to convince Serge to join you on this journey?

BR – At first, he wasn't interested. He was working on a novel. So, I told him that we'll go for one week. But we stayed for six months. We went everywhere and met everyone. The Vice Mayor of Shanghai who was a woman; business women; a transsexual in the army; prostitutes; writers; movie stars... all really extraordinary women. They were the proprietors of this rising city. That erupting volcanic city! No one spoke English. The next year that we returned, everyone spoke English. We almost became Chinese. When we left, we threw a big party and invited all our friends; all six hundred of them. And, they asked us, "Ah, you are going on a vacation. When are you coming back." But, we said, "No, we are going back home." It was extraordinary! I recently went back... and, they were all there. Really amazing!

HN – You mentioned that you are going back to China, soon.

BR – Right. Parts of the *Rose c'est Paris* will be exhibited in Hong Kong. But, don't ask me where... I cannot remember. It is in a public (cultural) center.



Rose c'est Paris, Taschen, 2009

HN – ... And, by the time you began work on *Rose c'est Paris*...

BR – ... By then, Serge did not want to write any more texts. He said that people don't read writings in photo books anyway and he decided to do a film, instead. His writing studio is just across the street from mine. We began to work by creating a list: list of our memories; why we loved Paris; our desires, etc... And, it turned out that much of our list was pretty similar. Finally, we decided to give tribute to Paris and try to understand why we never moved out of it.

HN – So, what was it about Paris that kept you at home...?

BR – We figured that in every city's life, there was a moment of glory. For Paris, it was definitely the time between the two World Wars. **Surrealism**, artists living here, you could have ideas and do everything and nothing was too much. **Picasso** doing costumes for theatre. **Marcel Duchamp** playing chess. Such a high concentration of talent, of genius.

HN – But, *Rose* is somewhat unusual among your oeuvre since it is a work of narrative fiction, albeit non-traditional narrative...

BR – *Rose* is a story that came to us separately but the same one. It is somewhat of a Alice – not in Wonderland – but Lost in Paris. The main character, Rose, is searching for her missing twin sister and, in order to find her, she has to cross the different worlds and in order to pass through them, she has to become all sorts of different characters. So, she gets to penetrate all forms of hidden places in Paris, that you would never get to see as a tourist.

HN – How did you cast your characters that are so diverse?

BR – Well, finding Rose was the most difficult thing to do. But, we found her, "Rose appeared." As with everyone else... they are my family and some are just friends. That's how I work. They just move (in and) around with us. And, they all keep coming back: **Monica (Bellucci)**, **Charlotte (Rampling)** and others. I call them and they don't even ask what the project is. They just show up.

HN – Talk a little bit about your treatment of architecture and cityscape as a third character in *Rose c'est Paris*...

BR – I always do bits and pieces of architecture but never show them. I like to do still lives but not in the **Irving Penn** tradition. I just don't have the patience to spend six hours on a set of object, etc... but I love architecture and I love to put people in places; I love watching the collaboration between people and architecture. So, for ***Rose c'est Paris***, we started using these hidden places where I did not know anyone. I would ring door bells of houses I had never been to, because, for example, I thought that I would have the best view of a particular site. I would give the people my name and website and have them to look at it and hope that they would let me in. Some did and some did not. I basically forced my way into people's homes.



- *Rose c'est Paris*, Taschen, 2009

HN – When I lived in London, I would commute to Paris once every 4-5 weeks and stay with a family of artist friends who had a house in the middle of the city, in the Marais on Rue des Ecoiffes. I found out that the building, which my friends owned, was a bordel (Bordello) in the 19th century. So, yes, Paris is full of hidden histories...

BR – Well, I am talking to you from around the corner where you lived [names location]! And, indeed, we were looking to discover Paris private, hidden histories. The undergrounds, the rooftops where, by the way, a whole different life is up there. The Paris of the rooftops is fascinating. Eventually, we got authorization to work in all kinds of places. It was a cold winter and everyday we would invent a different story for the next day.

HN – So, you did plenty of improvisation rather than stay glued to

the/a text?

BR – That's right. The ideas kept changing because the models that were being shot naked would be freezing, etc. We had fifteen people working together. It was like cinema done by schizophrenic people.

HN – The project was exhibited at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Does this mean that they commissioned you to do the project... or, how did that happen?

BR – Oh, they had wanted to do a show of my work and when they heard that this is what I was working on they just took the project without having even seen anything. I told them, "Well, let me send you some images." And, they said, "Oh, no, that's fine." And, that was it! Louis Roederer became our sponsor for the show.

HN – You mentioned that Serge had wanted to do a film rather than write the text for your images...

BR – Yes, Serge shot the film, which actually is not about *The Making of...* the project. He told his version of the story through the film and I told mine through my photographs. So, the exhibition is the confrontation of our respective relations to the story.



Rose c'est Paris, Chapter 4 (extracts), Courtesy Bettina Rheims, Serge Bramly and Productions Campagne Première

HN – Americans will finally be able to experience Rose c'est Paris when it is exhibited at Edwynn Houk Gallery, in NYC, sometime next year. Now, here is a New York Centric question: where do you think is the center of the art world (assuming there is one – which I don't believe that there is)?

BR – Neither do I. It's not NY anymore. It is all over the place: Berlin, Mexico – I am sure exciting things are happening there -, Asia... Everywhere really. Everything is global. It's not one place anymore.

HN – As great a city as it is, I think that NY is too commercial (for its own good) and far too expensive for majority of artists, especially emerging ones, to live in...

BR – It's everywhere: too much marketing. Too much communication. Maybe we are going to explode. I don't want to explode on my own [both laugh].

* All photos courtesy Bettina Rheims