

GRACE CODDINGTON HAS BEEN A SPECTACULAR FORCE IN FASHION FOR OVER 40 YEARS

Text Mark Jacobs

"THE SIXTIES were such a good time to grow up. Then it got to the point where I was struggling to get work a bit, and I felt like being a little more responsible, and they kept asking me at *Vogue*, 'Don't you want to come over and be an editor?' And I thought why not?" In 1975, *Interview* magazine succinctly quantified the charms of Grace Coddington when it wrote, "You cannot ignore the magenta red mane of hair, the air of magazine beauty that surrounds Grace." The list of the photographers with whom she has crystallised her unparalleled catalogue of images includes Guy Bourdin, Herb Ritts, Helmut Newton, Norman Parkinson, Annie Leibovitz, Steven Meisel, Peter Lindbergh, Irving Penn, Arthur Elgort, Mario Testino, Steven Klein and Bruce Weber. Grace wanted fashion since in her teens. She was a model in London during the '60s who knew everyone and went everywhere, before graduating to become an editor at British *Vogue* in 1969. (Corsica with Anjelica Huston, Manolo Blahnik and David Bailey? Check.) A call to become design director of Calvin Klein brought her to New York City in 1987, and Anna Wintour's *Vogue* happened to her soon after. Recently, Grace has been receiving attention for her part in the documentary *The September Issue*, which follows the making of the September 2007 issue of *Vogue*. Although initially hesitant to participate in the project, Grace eventually conceded to the filmmakers who handily went about revealing her as a compelling and charismatic character – one of the most dignified personalities to emerge from behind-the-scenes of fashion. I met Grace at *Vogue*, on the twelfth floor of the Condé Nast building in Times Square, in the surprisingly modest office she shares with her assistant Sonya. An imposing legend who has achieved lifetimes of lifetime achievements, Grace proves to be quick to laugh, generous with her stories, amusingly uninterested in the chores of public relations, and pleasingly down-to-earth for a person who has spent most of her life in *Vogue*. Behind her are pictures of her beloved cats, including Puff who sadly passed away on Christmas Day, and the latest addition Pumpkin. I sat in a chair below Nadja Auermann – who innocently wore a nose ring – from Grace's 1992 'Grunge & Glory' shoot with Steven Meisel. A 17-story electric billboard for Walgreens drugstores flashed green and pink on her windows as we talked.

I'm a bit intimidated. Should I be?

[Laughs] No, you shouldn't be at all intimidated. A lot of people are intimidated and I don't know why. I'm completely confused by it. But I'm always hearing that and I think that's a bad thing. I mean, it's a good thing in some cases but generally I think it's a bad thing. If you really look at it there's nothing to be intimidated about. I just do fashion, and that's not intimidating.

You were born and raised on Anglesey, a remote Welsh island and yet you still managed to subscribe to *Vogue*.

I was probably the only subscription in a hundred mile radius. I didn't really subscribe in terms of having it sent to me, I just used to go to the newsagent every month and hope that they had a copy. I always liked fashion and I used to make all of my own clothes.

What were those clothes like?

Probably pretty badly made! I didn't exactly have dressmaking training. My mother used to make everything, all of the chair covers and the curtains. She used to knit all her own clothes and most of mine, which was a bit weird. That area is kind of remote so they didn't really have great places to buy clothes. I used to get *Vogue Patterns*, actually, which was more to do with couture, just as fashion in those days was. The whole ready-to-wear industry didn't exist when I grew up. And so I would try to get some fabric, which was probably terrible, and achieve that kind of a look.

Did you stand out among your peers?

I didn't have any peers. I didn't have any friends. I mean there's nobody there. It's not densely populated at all.

It sounds like you were living one of your photographs.

Well, I don't think I thought about it that deeply. I would see those very chic models of the '50s and I'd make myself some drainpipe pants

and try to find a sweater, or I'd make a shirt or a dress with a tiny waist and a big skirt. We were pretty poor. My parents had a hotel and I used to help out. I guess I wore a swimsuit most of the time. Actually, it was kind of cold. Maybe a sweater on the top with one of my skirts.

That reminds me of one of your Helmut Newton shoots during his 'swimming pool period'.

Yes, when he used to shoot everything in a swimming pool.

There's that incredible shot in which...

I'm floating in the pool with sunglasses. [Laughs] I used to work with him as a model and then as an editor at British *Vogue*. We were in St. Tropez and I was walking around in a bikini and high heels. I guess I was trying to impress him, I don't know. Maybe I hadn't got my model thing out of my head. It wasn't planned. I had terrible clothes to shoot, really kind of frumpy boring evening dresses, so he said let's just stick you in there in your high heels and swimsuit.

I like that you chose that to wear on set.

[Laughs] Well, it was hot. It was the south of France and it was hot. I did have my Saint Laurent fuchsia pink shoes on which I loved, which I wore with everything until they fell apart. I was a big Saint Laurent girl at that time.

Was modelling school your first foray into fashion?

Yes. I came to London and worked in a coffee bar and did a course of modelling with Cherry Marshall and she said, 'Oh, you'll never make a model, you're no good.' I started working with Norman Parkinson after a friend of his came into the restaurant and said I should meet this great photographer, etcetera.

Was that the shoot where you were running naked through his farm estate?

[Laughs] Yes. Of course you have to bring that up. Who's intimidating who?

That was one of your first shoots.

Yes. I mean it didn't occur to me that this wasn't an everyday occurrence. I thought maybe that's what models do. I guess it is. Well it isn't, but it didn't bother me or anything. He's such an amazing man. I went on to work with him a great deal as an editor as well.

You've done a lot.

I haven't really, because modelling-wise, people didn't work as much then as they do now, flying backwards and forwards across the Atlantic, etcetera. And I'm sure on your thing there [points to a sheet of notes] it says I had a car crash in the middle and that stopped me for a couple of years. But I was still always around the same group of people and they were all so supportive.

It seems you found those core fashion people, the ones who were producing the images, very quickly.

Well I sort of fell into it. I think I was really lucky. I mean the *Vogue* thing, it just introduced me to all the right people. It does, you know. And so I started to work with all of them. And also, I've always had very good hair. Not also, my main thing is my hair. I was a model for Vidal Sassoon and that put me in with the right group of people. It was all connections, with people like Bailey and Mary Quant. I did shows for Mary Quant.

Did you realise how extraordinary your life was while it was happening?

Yes, it was good fun! I loved it. The 60's were such a good time to grow up. Then it got to the point where I was struggling to get work a bit, and I felt like being a little more responsible, and they kept asking me at *Vogue*, 'Don't you want to come over and be an editor?' And I thought 'why not'?

In the introduction to *Grace*, Michael Roberts writes about how when you started at British *Vogue* you always wore a headscarf or hat.

Well I was growing my hair and I didn't want to keep having it cut, because it was incredibly short. So to grow it from short to long is difficult and I thought the best thing to do is cover it up and don't look at it for nine months or a year.

I like the drama of the reveal. The way Michael wrote it...

Well he's a good writer. I don't think it was that dramatic. I have red



hair. It's probably not as red as this, well it's not red anymore, but it was reddish. And then I just decided I would do something shocking and make it really red. Suddenly I had hair this length after people hadn't seen it for a long time. I've had red hair ever since, thanks to Louis Lecari who helps with the hair dye.

What moments from the 60's and 70's in London epitomise that time for you?

Well the '60s I was modelling and the 70's I was editing, so I guess it was that moment when I made the switch. I remember on my first shoot they sent another editor along in case I didn't quite make out. And guess what? I didn't. They started me with a very little story on the painter Peter Blake. I had to go and photograph him and his wife and they didn't want to wear the clothes that I had brought. [Laughs] Having to deal with that really threw me. I know that sometimes I'd been a bit picky as a model saying, 'Ooh, I don't like that,' and suddenly I realised how dreadful it must have been. I thought it was so easy to put everything together for a shoot. Realising that it is actually quite complicated was a big eye opener. I mean my life really changed when I suddenly had an everyday job where I had to go to an office, from being a model when you never know if the next day's work will come. And very much in my case because of a car crash where my face was smashed. I never knew where the next penny was coming from.

Did you ever doubt yourself?

Oh yes, of course, all the time. I thought I knew better in the beginning of editing and then I realised I had to learn the job from scratch.

What's the distinction between fashion and luxury?

Maybe I still think in the old-fashioned way, that they're one and the same thing. I entered into that luxury world but disguised as an editor or something, and lived a lifestyle that I certainly couldn't afford to live myself. It was fun to do. That's why I considered myself so lucky. I guess

I go first class and things like that but perhaps I've earned it by now. And luxury clothes? I don't really wear tremendously... well I might have an expensive coat but I don't go couture. I've never been able to afford couture. I admire it from afar, I suppose.

I love the Amish story you shot with Ellen Von Unwerth and Christy Turlington. How did that come about?

It was the beginning of all of those designers like Helmut Lang and Ann Demeulemeester who were doing something somewhat minimal and black. I think with Ellen I did very narrative stories because that's what she and I were into. So we went to the Amish land and actually asked a few of the Amish people to model in the pictures. There was one young boy who was pushing the plow or driving the horses or something. It's so photogenic and the people are beautiful. I've since learned that it's full of puppy mills and things. I'm very upset about it.

What are you doing with fashion?

Hopefully we're somewhat recording it.

Are you ever astonished by the extravagances of the fashion world?

Oh definitely. I'm shocked. Like how much things cost sometimes. I tend to not ask. I keep thinking I don't want to know. Recently we have been forced to look at the cost of things since the big recession. When you have a rack of clothes, they put the prices on them now, which is a new thing. I'm like, 'I'm not going to pay \$10,000 for a miniskirt or something. This is stupid.' It is stupid. The thing is, you're not paying for that one skirt, you're paying for all of the things that go into it. Certain designers, not all of them, develop fabrics and things like that, so you're paying for that development which probably takes six months or something. And this is just a little snip off the end. You wonder why it's so expensive, but it's taken tons of people to get to this point. Nevertheless, very often it's a lot.

What I've always loved about fashion is the ideas. The collections are just parades of ideas, ideas, ideas, ideas.

You're fed all those ideas. It's great. I really like to be there. Looking at it on the computer afterwards it doesn't really do it for me. I find it really flat. I think you have to be there because you feel the mood and it just explains it to you so much better. And I always go back afterwards to have an appointment, not for every single show but all the major ones, so you really see the fabrics and everything up close.

You love what you do.

I do. Honestly, I've been doing it for 40 years or something. I don't think I could do something I'm bored with for 40 years. It would be terrible.

Was there ever a point when you feared the things you wanted wouldn't happen?

I think you always have to try hard to do the things you want to do. I'm still trying now to twist everybody's arm and photograph something that I really want or do the idea I really want to do. I mean, you win some you lose some. And even when you photograph it, it's not a surefire thing that it's going to run.

Your resources are certainly incredible. You have every piece when you need it.

You have everything to make it easy for you. And it's still difficult. **If your publisher turned his back and you could do any shoot you wanted, what would it be?**

There have been a few shoots that I've loved that have been killed. You move on. That's always Anna's big thing. Move on. 'That's not working Grace, move on.' She's very smart like that. It breaks your heart at the time and you want to kill her, but you do have to move on. Life moves on, fashion moves on, everything moves on. It's fine. Find another way. I tend to come at the same thing from another angle and represent it, and sometimes it gets through. But that's intriguing, too. Playing all the games and getting your own way is also fascinating. That's part of it.

How did you become acquainted with Anna?

I've known Anna since the 60's. I was actually working with her at British *Vogue*, briefly. I'd been under the editorship of Beatrix Miller for 19 years, then Anna came in and it was very different. It was a little strange. At the same time I was offered the job at Calvin Klein and I wanted to make the jump so I jumped. Then when I heard Anna was offered the job as editor of *Vogue*, I called somebody I knew working here and said, 'Do you think she'd offer me a job?' Anna's so amazing, I met her that evening and she said, 'I'm starting on Monday, if you want to start with me that would be great.' And this is Friday! [laughs] I'm like, 'Oh my God, I have to find Calvin to tell him.'

Did you start on Monday?

I did. That was her first day and my first day. And I've been here ever since. That's over 20 years ago.

Let's discuss models you've cultivated, like Stella Tennant.

I worked with her with Arthur Elgort. Arthur and I always had the joke that we make the kind of quirky girls more acceptable by, first of all, getting them in and making them smile. We take the opportunity during August when you can't get any models. So you get the difficult ones in and break the ice. You give them a kind of normal, fun, easy-going, colourful, happy story and then afterwards it's easier to get her back in the magazine on a regular basis. That's what happened with Stella and several other girls.

One of my favorites has always been Kristen McMenamy.

Oh, I love her. That wasn't with Arthur so much, although I did work with her with Arthur. That was with Meisel. And I had worked with her many years before at British *Vogue* with Peter Lindbergh. She's special. Crazy and smart and elegant as hell. She could wear a paper bag and you really would think it was designed by Balenciaga.

What do you think of digital?

I can't stand it. It takes all of the personality away. I'd like to say it makes people lazy but I'm not sure it does make them lazy. It makes certain people lazy, because you don't need to iron whatever because they'll take the crease out later, and the hair doesn't have to be perfect.

I was hearing last night that it's done all the time in movies now. What was I hearing about? It was somebody's head and another person was dancing.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button?

They're not dancing. Their heads are put on someone else's bodies. If I go on about it I'll sound extremely old-fashioned. Which I am. But there's something to be said for a Mr. Penn photograph, who still doesn't retouch. I'm looking today at a series of pictures I did and I'm just trying to call the photographer now because I'm so mad

because the hair is so retouched that it looks like a hat! It's like a clean line all the way around. And that's terrible. Hair isn't like that. It's a living thing. It takes the living thing out of everything. But actually, in the old days you found a way of shooting so models looked the way you wanted them to look. Now everything is, 'Oh, okay, don't worry we can change it in post-production.' When I was photographed for your magazine, it was funny to be on the other side of a digital set with everybody going, 'Left a bit, right a bit, turn your head!' Oh, and the hairdresser saying, 'Shake your head!' The photographer, sweet guy, was sitting there not saying a word. And that's what's happened. They all have suddenly become art directors. They're not even looking at you, they're looking at the goddamned screen. I mean, I'm guilty as hell, too, because I do it. And then of course there's no surprise when the pictures come in because you've all painted them the way you want anyway. So I don't like digital, but it's here to stay and it's only going to get worse! [Laughs]

What about the Peter Lindbergh Chanel biker shoot?

Right. That was kind of a nightmare, getting all of those girls together. It was the supermodel time. 'Oh, I won't do it unless she comes too.' Or, 'I won't do it if she's in the picture.' There was one particularly troublesome girl who I won't name, but we'd just gotten it all together, and it was traumatic because it was raining and there were these Chanel big taffeta dresses that I didn't really want to get wet, and we're in Brooklyn under the bridge. And you've just gotten it all together and then this one girl says, 'I want to go to the bathroom.' [laughs] And she would disappear in the middle and you would say, like, 'Fuck!' You know? We've only got two minutes until it's going to rain again! It was funny. They were funny.

When you have your ideas, do you get excited and call a friend?

I bore everybody with it and, you know, everyone is all into their own things. They're worried about their sittings and I'm going, 'Well I'm trying to get this guy to be the...' [laughs] Because that's what we all do. You do something and you get very, very obsessed by it.

One of the most impressive things about your career is how many of your ideas have been realised.

Well as I say, I've been extremely lucky and I've always had *Vogue* behind me. So I've had more opportunity than some.

Which is very gracious and modest, but you also had the ideas.

They come from all over. And they come from Anna a lot. You think she's this strict, difficult person to work with but she's so full of ideas and I just take them further. Many of the stories I've done with Annie Leibovitz, for instance, started out somewhere and turned out somewhere quite else.

Is it silly to ask what you're wearing?

A bit silly, yes. [laughs] Because I pretty much wear the same thing, or it looks the same even if it's not. I've got pants from Prada and a sweater from Balenciaga.

Well, thank you very much for your time.

You're welcome. Sorry I'm intimidating. [laughs] Get over it. [laughs] I'm not really, you know. I'm just as vulnerable as everybody else. It's just that I've been around a long time. I think that's what it is. Because I feel the same about Polly Mellen, for instance.

Really?

Well I did. She's not really much in the business anymore. But I remember when I was young, coming to American *Vogue* and I said, 'That's Polly Mellen's office.' And I'm like, 'Oh my God!' [laughs] I was scared to death because I'd always seen her going, 'Darling!' and all of that. But if you talk to her she's just funny, you know.

And then there was the first time you saw Irving Penn in the British Vogue offices.

I remember walking past him and he was such an ordinary looking person and I couldn't believe that great photographer could look so ordinary.

And you didn't say hello?

Oh, no. Are you kidding? [laughs] I didn't dare say hello. I knew my place. But I did meet him years later, then I did ads with him for Calvin, and then I worked with him here.

Thank you again. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

Don't forget your tape recorder 🎙