



Norwegian-born Madeleine Østlie is nailing her fashion career in London.

By Caroline Krager

She does the casting for some of the world's most important fashion magazines and brands - and she's best friends with supermodel Adwoah Aboah. She invited us to her place for a chat.

Despite having called London home since the early nineties, the 34 year old hasn't forgotten her roots. As she opens the door to her Dalston flat-share she welcomes us in an unmistakable Norwegian 'Trondheim' dialect [dialect or accent?]. Before we get the chance to comment on it she says «I know, I sound like an old grandma» with a huge grin.

The flat is massive and white with stacks and stacks of magazines covering every available surface. A SMEG refrigerator suggests that this space belongs to successful creative people, whilst a bong and a wide variety of vagina art winking from the walls reveals that the residents are young or, if not, at least liberal.

Østlie studied for a BA in Merchandise Management at Westminster, and followed it up with a career as a stylist and buyer. Then life suddenly decided to take her down a different path, into casting direction. Her long-term friendship with the renowned British fashion icon Lulu Kennedy proved to be instrumental - as did her love for parties. They led to her being booked for a fashion spread in Love Magazine.

– Whilst I was still working as a stylist I went to a bunch of parties and got to know all of the South-London kids. I added them all on Facebook, I had their phone numbers, so I was able to suggest them for modeling jobs. And then Katie Grand, the editor of Love Magazine, asked if I wanted to do the casting for a fashion shoot. And that's when I asked Adwoah if she wanted to help me, Østlie tells us.

– After that, things exploded.

Supermodel partner-in-crime

Adwoah Aboah started modeling in her mid-teens. Her star has soared over past couple of years, propelled by a searingly honest interview on the popular Youtube-channel «StyleLikeYou» in early 2016, where she talked about her battle with depression and drug abuse. Suddenly her name was everywhere.

Now, two years later, she's been picked up by most of the world's major Fashion houses and appeared on the cover of every important fashion magazine.

The appointment of Edward Enninful as editor-in-chief at British Vogue, after Alexandra Schulman held the position for 25 years, was a major milestone in Aboah's career. He chose her to be on his first cover. It became the most shared fashion image in the history of Instagram.

At the same time she's started an international network called «Gurls Talk», which aims to inspire open and honest communication between young women.

Østlie and Aboah met the old-fashioned way - at a party in someone's flat - where they connected immediately.

– She's such a smart, fascinating and brilliant person. We'd been best friends for years when we did the casting for Love Magazine. Soon after we were asked to do the casting for a huge W Magazine shoot with the photographer Tim Walker, and that really got the ball rolling. We literally came up with the name of our company AAMO, a combination of our initials, in the bathroom of a club. Then it was official.

Shortly after, with an ever-increasing pile of jobs landing in her lap, Aboah chose to cut the cord with AAMO

– We're still the best of friends and I feel like what we created was so lovely and all about the inclusion of all sorts of models. What we mutually stand for and really believe in when it comes to our current endeavors is being kind to everyone, being honest, and treating everyone the same. All the jobs I'm doing with clients, companies and brands are based on deep trust.

Her list of clients and collaborators now include many of the heaviest hitters in the industry; Adidas, Nike, Balenciaga, Vogue, i-D and Burberry - to name just a few.

I'm not sure everyone knows exactly what a casting director does though. Could you explain it a bit more?

– Well the role involves sort of being a link between clients and brands, whilst being constantly aware of the model's perspective. It involves presenting new ideas within a creative landscape, scouting and street casting. And of course there's the business aspect where you negotiate money, how many of the photos are going to be used and where, contracts, flights, hotels, that sort of production element of it all. It's also worth mentioning the creative elements as well where you're giving feedback on models, sharing your opinions, functioning as sort a creative consultant at times.

– And obviously it's important to constantly keep a close relationship with the clients.



About discovering new faces on the street - or in gay squat raves.

Despite her charming Norwegian «grandma accent» we decide to do most of the interview in English. Words and sentences fly out of Østlie's mouth at a Formula 1 pace as she's rushing around the flat getting ready for an upcoming Pilates lesson, scribbling things down in her massive diary, responding to e-mails and taking quick «Oh-I-really-need-to-take-this» calls. After our chat and photo session someone from Refinery 29 is coming over for another one.

If you suggest that she should do one thing at a time her face would properly look something like an interrobang.

– Several people have told me that I'm extremely impulsive and chaotic, but it works for me. My everyday life is extremely varied and I work all the time. Well, as long as there's no distractions like boys to meet or parties to attend, she says with a cheeky smile.

– My one and only positive distraction is working out. And I love my diary and having everything written by hand and then circling the things that I've done. LOL. My life really evolves around my work. Sometimes I'm so, so busy, and other times I'm less busy and that's good. The fashion weeks are obviously wildly busy when I'm doing tons of castings and lots of shows. But in general I'm happy and grateful that I have a lot of control.

During the past five years there's been a major shift in terms of where you discover new faces, she notes.

– You no longer find people through Facebook because almost none of the kids are on it anymore. It used to be a vital tool for me when I was discovering new people but now Instagram is increasingly taking over – I just DM people. I actually do think it's quicker and easier to find people there than it was on Facebook.

– But in terms of street scouting it's really something I do all of the time and it can be exhausting constantly being on the hunt. I also want to stress that I don't work for a modelling agency. I don't want to start one because then I'd have to be responsible for all these people and I really don't wish to give them false hope and say «Hey, I'm gonna sign you and make you a huge star», you know? What I do is tell them what my role is: we can do a quick shoot, I can send the photos to an agency, and then we'll take it from there.

– In the back of my mind I always have lots of boys and girls I've met that I plan on doing shoots with or I wanna use for a particular kind of job. It's slightly overwhelming.

When asked about her most memorable moment scouting for new faces she mentions a gay squat rave in Tottenham.

– It was the most fantastic place ever and there were so many people and everyone looked so incredibly amazing! Also... the music was exactly the same as when I started going to raves in the same area ten years earlier, which I thought was strange! How on earth could the same damn type of techno be trendy now?! Anyways, yes, I found so many gorgeous, unique new faces there.



– People generally find me to be pretty crazy and most men are afraid of me because I'm way too confident which is something I've always been.

Østlie and Aboah both work with an eye to diversity, an issue they care about deeply, both in their mutual and separate endeavors.

– I think there's a palpable change in the air in regards to these things, I think people can feel it, it affects them and their choices. Lately we've seen an increased acceptance of people from South-East Asia, from Bangladesh, India, The middle east, with prominent noses, big hair, big eyebrows. And not to forget transgender people! I think it's really important that everyone in this industry becomes aware that we're operating and presenting ideas on an authoritative platform and what we're actually telling young people is «Hey! This is a girl that was booked for this job in this magazine and you know what, she's transgender» or «Look at this guy in this L'Oreal ad, he is a transgender person». Young people are easy to influence and they need to see this sort of thing.

– You know who I wanna give a shout out to? Lotta Volkova, who's casting work for Balenciaga has had a massive influence. She travelled the world for three months to meet people she wanted to include in the campaigns and shows for the brand. I take my hat off to that dedication.

– I think it's so important not to sit in silence on your high horse but actually give the people who deserve it a tap on the back and say 'you did a bloody brilliant job. Great work!'

As for the future, she hopes that the modeling industry will overcome the ageism issue.

– Older people are not at all being presented on commercial media platforms. And that's baffling to me, I don't get what we're shying away from, 'cause they're so, so beautiful. I see gorgeous, interesting old people on the street all the time and I wish I could give them my card and cast them for all kinds of things but I know that, with the exception of the odd editorial, there just aren't any jobs out there for them.

Slowly but steadily, Østlie tries to persuade the crowd of celebrities and successful fashion people she's surrounded with to make more progressive choices.

– I'm of the opinion that when you find yourself at parties, dinners and that sort of thing, it's an important place to express your views and talk about the big issues, 'cause you could actually have an impact on people.

– With that said people generally find me to be pretty crazy and most men are afraid of me because I'm way too confident, which is something I've always been. But if you're a woke person, you read a lot and you're interested in what's actually going on in the world and you're expressing what's in your heart, I think you're always gonna get away with being yourself.