



# Glamorama

From those epic late nineties Calvin Klein campaigns with Kate Moss, to working with an endless list of the worlds most well-known brands and celebrities, collaborating with the Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic and filming and directing music videos for the trip hop band Massive Attack—this is the story of a man, DUSAN RELJIN, whose work as a photographer has picked him up and shaken him around the world, time and time again.

It’s an early Manhattan morning in a city that never really went to sleep. It’s always lit and full of sirens that keep calling for attention, full of nocturnal beings buzzed by the energy the city oozes, pulsating. Now the islanders are on their way from a to b to c to d, to whatever letter the day will finally end on, and the yellow taxis are lurching forwards like tortoises. Dusan Reljin is new in America, in New York. He’s strolling up one of the avenues to join the infamous punk-inspired, spontaneous photographer Craig McDean, by whom he’s recently been hired as a first assistant. A few hours later, they’ll be on their way to Miami Beach to shoot a campaign for Calvin Klein. Yes, one of those epic late nineties ones with Kate Moss. They’ll glide over the turquoise ocean before the airplane squeaks as it reduces speed on the runway, Reljin and McDean will arrive on a set full of important beautiful people and their assistants and their respective assistants who also have assistants, who probably have assistants too. The energy is tangible, to say the least. Kate Moss is in the height of her career and Dusan Reljin is new to all the craziness.

He has arrived smack in the middle of the era infamously described in Bret Easton Ellis’ book *Glamorama*, where New York—and America—is still a haven of blind hope, large words, excessive spending and flashiness. 9/11 was yet to be a memory everyone wishes they could forget; it was pre-Bush, pre-warfare and pre-economic crisis.

—A lot has changed since then. It was perfect coming there as a 24-year-old and experiencing that time in New York. There was a mass of weird energy all around the city, at all hours of the day and night, and heaps of freedom. The most wonderful thing for me personally was moving from Europe—a place I felt was highly conservative at the time—to America, which felt much more free and open, and to a city where you literally could do whatever you wanted and be whomever you wanted without anyone caring. Now I feel that the tables have turned, Reljin says.

24 years prior to the CK shoot, Reljin was born in the capital of Serbia, Beograd, where he crawled around in pastel-coloured comfy clothes for two years until his father got a job with the Yugoslavian airline company JAT in Australia, and the family packed up their belongings and flew down under. They lived amongst the kangaroos and koalas for 8 years, moved back to Beograd for a few years, and then decided to move to Oslo when Dusan was 14 and in the prime of his puberty. Two years later, as the internal ethnic wars in Yugoslavia really got going, his parents moved back to Serbia—JAT had become a thing of the past—while Dusan stayed in Norway to finish his education at The British school, majoring in art. At this point, he was highly inspired by Andy Warhol’s honest and sincere polaroids of rich and beautiful celebrities popping in and out of The Factory, but to an even larger extent, it was Warhol’s movies that gripped him. He applied to Colombia University with the aim of studying film. He received the thumbs-up, but failed to get a student loan, so he went on to study Art Direction at Westerdals. He couldn’t stand it for more than a week and decided to quit. Shortly afterwards, he began working as an assistant for the Norwegian photographer Nils Vik.

—My personal opinion is that instead of spend-







ing time studying photography, one should assist as much as one can. You'll go through theory and practice at the same time, all of it in a constant mode of stress which is realistic for the profession, and you'll be forced to become a quick thinker. I much prefer that way of learning, Reljin says.

After two years of fixing sets, holding reflectors, changing lenses and running errands for Nils, the two of them met Nils' good friend and old schoolmate Craig McDean in London. McDean asked Dusan if he'd like to assist him on a few shoots and the two of them got along perfectly. So perfectly, in fact, that McDean asked him if he wanted to become his first assistant and move to New York with him. And there we are, right back at the beginning of the story.

—Looking back, I feel that I was lucky to be a part of it since I personally feel it was without a doubt the most interesting time in Craig's career. He did the thing for CK, he did the *Jil Sander* campaigns, the *Yoji Yamamoto* campaigns and so on. He had a completely unique vision, something people hadn't seen before, says Reljin.

This was a time when analogue photography still ruled, and patience wasn't a virtue, but a necessity as you waited for the film to be developed. McDean often let Reljin come to the studio to test things out beforehand, to experiment with settings, lights, types of films and developments. Reljin wrote every single setting and detail down in order to remember, in order to learn. He was in his mid-twenties. 1999 turned into 2000, and then 2001, and 3 1/2 years into their professional and close relationship, Reljin decided it was time to stretch his wings and fly by himself. Still unaware of his exact style, he was sure of his technical skills and he had accumulated a wide net of contacts. A friend of his was tattooed from face to feet and knew a whole lot of insiders in the tattooing industry, which led to Reljin's first personal project, where he took photos of tattoo artists in natural daylight in their own surroundings. He went on to show these images to a friend, Alex White, who was the fashion director of *W Magazine*, and ended up being booked for a shoot for W, in addition to the first issue of *Número magazine*; all this on his very first week at the helm.

Since then, it has never stopped, declined or become less impressive. In the early 2000s, as Reljin assisted McDean, his Norwegian girlfriend, Hilde Pettersen, a makeup-artist and all-round creative spirit, came and joined him on his New York adventure. They ended up living in the city for 16 years, making three babies, and seeing their careers blossom. Reljin has worked with some of the most sought-after models, celebrities and brands in the world, spanning from Natalia Vodianova and Erin Wasson to Julianne Moore, Alexa Chung and Kim Kardashian, to brands like L'oreal, Gucci and Nike—all in addition to shooting regularly for top magazines including *Vogue* and *Elle*. After 20 years in the profession though, he is ambivalent about the vast changes he has seen.

—After 9/11, and a few years later, the crash of the economy, a lot changed. People started holding back and they've gotten extremely careful with what they're placing their money in, cutting back wherever they can. So the freedom that once was has gone. When we shot Yohji Yamamoto's campaigns in Paris in the late 90s, we had 5 days of shooting, whereas nowadays we have only one, and what you lose then is the room to experiment; you simply don't have the time. The client expects something, the story board has been set, and they pay you to excel. In general, I find myself missing the playfulness and curiosity you have when you're just starting out, when everything is new and fresh. I still have times when I feel like I'm 5 years old and just playing around, but I have such a level of responsibility now that it's a lot different. Times have changed, says Reljin.

Music has also been a vital part of Reljin's existence, starting from an obsession with Kiss when he was 8, continuing on to a Debbie Harry crush at the age of ten, then to punk rock and Velvet Underground LP's throughout his teenage years. He loved music that was different and imperfect, and had an underlying political or social message. During his career, there's always been music on his sets, carefully curated playlists that are either provokingly loud drum-and-guitar orgies, or danceable stuff like New Order. Each must be perfect for creating the right mood of empowerment amongst the models and celebrities he shoots. Massive Attack have been

a favorite since Blue Lines came out in '91. In 2011, their vocalist, Robert Del Naja, and Reljin finally met. The two have become close friends, and Dusan has directed and filmed two of their music videos. The latest was inspired by a strain of LSD preferred by Woodstock hippies called Ritual Spirit, with Kate Moss in a dark room swinging a lamp, non-photo-shopped, in a beige bodysuit, creating a mystical, almost optical illusion that makes you wonder if it's really there or all in your head. Now, Del Naja and Reljin are working on an album-project where Reljin plays the drums, expected to come out this fall.

With three kids under the age of 15, Dusan and Hilde moved back home to Oslo recently, but his photography picks him up and shakes him around the entire planet on a bi-monthly basis. They are also in the early stages of creating a documentary film; he has two large projects in the upcoming years together with Marina Abramovic, and he wants to make a full-length feature film, inspired by David Lynch, Oleg Novkovic and Roman Polanski—who has helped Reljin tremendously in his career. He also wants to photograph Iggy Pop, and the way things have gone for him so far, he probably will do all of this—and more.

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