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Fashion History – Models Talking : Sabine Leonhardt by Nadine Dinter

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October 22, 2026



I met Sabine in 2024 at the launch of the book *Helmut Newton. Berlin, Berlin* at the TASCHEN Store Berlin. I was immediately drawn to her unique energy, and we stayed in touch. After following her activities on Instagram for some time, I became curious about her past as a model for Helmut Newton and others. Enjoy our conversation.

Please introduce yourself.

I'm Sabine Leonhardt, born on May 16, 1961, a genuine West Berliner and a Taurus. That means stubborn, loyal, and fond of a good meal.

How old were you when you started modeling?

When I was about 16.

How did you find your way into modeling, and what drew you to it?

My father owned a Rolleiflex and an 8mm film camera, so I probably learned to pose before I learned to read. At 16, someone first asked me whether I wanted to model, but I found the whole thing a bit shady. Then my best friend, who was studying photography at the Lette-Verein, secretly entered a photo of me in a competition. That's how I met Jan de Wit, who booked me for photos right away. So I was discovered by a friend with a sneaky streak.

Do you remember your first booking, your first runway show, and your first fashion shoot?

My first booking was a cinema ad for West cigarettes in Hamburg, a parody of the Yogurette commercials, shot on a sailboat inside a huge hall. I had never smoked before, so it took a while until I held the cigarette convincingly and delivered my lines without coughing.

My first runway show was for Bogner in Munich. My first photo job was a lingerie ad for Wegena at KaDeWe, shot by Jan de Wit.

Is there a photographer you wish you'd worked with? And do you have a favorite story from your early years?

I used to say Peter Lindbergh or Herb Ritts, but these days I'd go in a completely different direction: I find Szilveszter Makó's photos fascinating.

One of my favorite stories comes from a toothpaste casting in Miami. After two hours of waiting, I learned that I was supposed to kiss a male model, since the ad showed a couple on a Caribbean vacation. Then it turned out I'd be kissing several male models, one after another, as a "test." That was too much for me, so I walked out. I still got the job.

What are your favorite memories from the 1980s and '90s, and which production stands out the most?

In Miami, my agency often sent me to events, and at one of them I met Don Johnson without really knowing who he was. We talked for a long time, and he booked me for an episode of *Miami Vice* called "Cuba Libre." The episode didn't air in Germany until 11 years later, and at the time I didn't know the series or any of the other actors. I was meant to wear high heels with my evening gown, but Johnson is a bit shorter than I am, so I carried my shoes casually over my shoulder instead. It was a night shoot, and the crew had to re-wet the streets again and again to make them look rain-soaked. It took forever, but it was great fun.

My most memorable shoot was, of course, the one with Helmut Newton, whose work I had admired for years. He was incredibly polite and knew exactly what he wanted. He even adjusted my little finger into the right position himself. He also had a great sense of humor. I developed a close, trusting relationship with him and his wife, June. We met several times in Berlin, and I visited them in France.

Honestly, the memorable jobs weren't always the big ones. A shoot on the Orient Express from Venice to London felt less like work and more like a very stylish trip, complete with a chaperone, which even then seemed wonderfully old-fashioned. I also loved a two-week film production through Morocco for the ORB TV magazine *Trend unterwegs*, with luxury hotels like La Mamounia in Marrakesh, the desert, and a new outfit at every stop.

In Morocco I was also asked to ride an Arabian stallion into a scene, wearing a skirt. My riding skills were so-so, but I said yes. The horse bolted, and I somehow stayed on until the owner stopped it. The scene was in the can, though.

On the runway, I once worked with Vivienne Westwood and the choreographer Kevin Oakes at the Kongresshalle. Minutes before the show, we were handed different dresses that were essentially topless, and total chaos broke out. We all refused, so we were given little bags in the color of the dresses, which were then taped to our chests. Fashion is sometimes that glamorous.

How do you see the fashion industry, and modeling in particular, today?

Everything has become very fast-paced, fashion included, and quality gets too little attention. But quality has its price, and many people aren't willing to pay it. I'm hoping that slow fashion catches on.

Modeling may be a bit easier today, because models are accepted as individuals and are even sought out for it. You no longer have to be so polished, and Instagram offers more visibility and more awareness.

What advice would you give to aspiring models?

If you really want it, stay with it. Punctuality and reliability are essential. You also need to carry out the ideas of photographers and clients well, which isn't always easy. Personally, I never did anything that went against my convictions, and I would rather have lost a job than my principles.

What occupies you these days, and what does a typical day look like?

Since leaving my job at BMG Berlin (Bertelsmann Music Group), I still work occasionally in our family business. I'm also in the lucky position of doing something I've always wanted to do. I volunteer in a psychiatric clinic, where I lead a group based on

occupational-therapy talk therapy. I also provide pastoral support on the neurosurgery ward of the Charité hospital's Benjamin Franklin campus. I go to Pilates, swim regularly, and love going for walks. If there's time left, I grab my camera or go to exhibitions.

You've also been working as a photographer. What draws you to the other side of the camera?

Photography has always been part of my life. My father shot with a Rolleiflex that came with an external light meter, which I loved playing with. I found it fascinating that a picture could be created from a moment. Eventually I started shooting and developing my own photos.

I may have a soft spot for nature photography, but something completely different can catch me too. I see something, it won't leave my head, and I have to capture it. I don't do it for other people. These are moments that make me happy, mean something to me, or are simply beautiful: the way light falls, a detail that grabs my attention.

Color and black-and-white both have their place. When I want to show something deeper, or when shapes are extraordinary in themselves, I find black-and-white very expressive. But I don't want to commit to either. Still, there is an inner line that I follow. Beautiful moments are so fleeting, and I suppose I just want to hold on to them.

What's next for you?

I'll keep diving deeper into photography and see what comes of it. A little spontaneity never hurts, because life is what happens while you're busy making other plans.

And finally, is there a motto or mantra you live by right now?

"Make things happen and become the best version of yourself."

Text and interview by Nadine Dinter

Follow Sabine on Instagram at [@sabine_margrit_leonhardt](https://www.instagram.com/sabine_margrit_leonhardt)