



**AVEDON'S  
FRANCE**

OLD WORLD  
NEW LOOK

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Robert M. Rubin

In the spring of 1993, Richard Avedon had just turned seventy. A major retrospective was set to open soon at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (*Evidence 1944–1994*) and then travel to Europe. Invited to Arles for Europe's preeminent photography festival that summer, he granted a rare interview to *Le Monde*. The session started smoothly and flowed easily. Michel Guerrin, the paper's critic, knew and admired Avedon's work, and Avedon was eloquent. At first, the photographer talked movingly of his youth and family, especially his sister Louise's mental illness, institutional confinement, and early passing.

When the subject turned to fashion, Avedon shifted gears. He spoke ominously about his "subversive" thoughts about fashion as a "carapace," describing "... those women lunching at cafes, full of anxiety in the afternoon, armored in their perfect surfaces at night..."<sup>1</sup> — hardly comporting with the exuberant pages of *Harper's Bazaar* magazine in the 1950s, where an Avedon-lensed Parisian imaginary arose from the ashes of World War II. Why was he distancing himself from the work that made him famous? This was a new Avedon. Indeed, *Evidence* would contain only a handful of fashion images, as if that body of work were just an early sideline.

Guerrin led him back to a more spontaneous outburst on the "delirium" of postwar Paris: "I photographed a prewar Paris, a Lubitsch Paris, a Paris that didn't exist... it was the moment in my life when it was all beginning... the age you first read Proust, Sartre, eat your first truffle. I was presented to Colette by Cocteau!"<sup>2</sup>

### I Am Not an Artifact

Avedon, however, was bent on moving the discussion toward other aspects of his work. A few hours later, he lost his cool. He ripped off his microphone, threw it on the table, and announced that the interview was over:

"I'm getting so fed up... it's terrible what you do to me. I'm a photographer and you're interested in goddamn Paris fashion... it's demeaning... you want to take me as a Horst, as an artifact of the past... I'm a functioning photographer."<sup>3</sup>

After this bit of theatre, Avedon regrouped by cooking pasta for everyone, and then allowed "one last" fashion question. It was a good one. Guerrin asked about Avedon's role in the making of *Funny Face* (1957). Avedon himself had brought up the film earlier, in what would become a standard sound bite in his personal narrative: "[Fred] Astaire ended up playing me in the movie... It's all very strange. I'd learned how to be me by pretending to be him and then I had to teach him how to pretend to be me."<sup>4</sup>

The question was: Who pushed the button on the film's famous freeze-frame sequences — Avedon, director Stanley Donen or cinematographer Ray June? Said Guerrin:

"I remember in the film when she [Audrey Hepburn] just lets go of the balloon[s], the position of the balloons could not be more perfect. I don't know if one-tenth of a second earlier, one-tenth of a second later, it would have been not quite as good. The same with walking down the steps by the Victoire de Samothrace

[in the Louvre] and [she] goes, "Take the picture, take the picture," with the scarf billowing, "Whoosh!" Again, half a second earlier, half a second later, it would not have been so good."<sup>5</sup>

It was, of course, Avedon who pushed the button. He was not just the source of the film's fashion world ambience. He was also the basis of the Fred Astaire character. His first marriage was the source of the film's story line. His life had become a Hollywood movie, shot on location in Paris.

### Avedon's France: a Psychogeography

*Avedon's France* — rather than *Avedon and France* — was chosen for the title of this exhibition because Avedon's France is a country with its own special geography. It was not exactly invented, but rather reinvented, out of the postwar ruins of its interwar avant gardes, packaged for middlebrow America by magazines like *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue* and *The New Yorker*. The Christian Dior show of 1947 — immediately dubbed "the New Look" — was Ground Zero. Marcel Proust and the Belle Époque would be thrown into the mix, and remixed. Hence, "Old World, New Look."

French culture underpins virtually all of Avedon's art. Even before he actually set foot on French soil, his formative years were spent learning from, and then working for, Alexey Brodovitch, the art director of *Harper's Bazaar* who had lived and worked in Paris between the wars. Twice a year, beginning in 1947, Avedon would accompany Carmel Snow, the magazine's editor-in-chief, to Paris. Paris

editor Marie-Louise Bousquet took Avedon under her wing and into her Thursday salon.

France is where he returned in the late sixties to rebuild his vision, through a collaboration with Jacques Henri Lartigue, after the critical failure of *Nothing Personal* (1964), his second photobook. And France is where he returned to collaborate with Nicole Wisniak for her magazine *Egoïste* in the eighties, after his lucrative but artistically suffocating stint at *Vogue*.

The Avedon conversation has always been as much about the man as the artist. A skilled self-promoter, Avedon was complicit in this. He liked to be referred to as "the world's most famous photographer." He certainly had "elbow," as Brodovitch once described his unfettered ambition. Yet it didn't seem to bother anybody until he actively sought the recognition of the New York intelligentsia — not the middlebrow readers of *Harper's Bazaar*, but rather those who ruled on what was and wasn't Art. In a 1958 *New Yorker* profile of Avedon, he was still unselfconscious enough to say that he made almost as much money as Picasso.<sup>6</sup> Those who didn't would never forgive him for it. In today's art world, where paintings have become negotiable securities and some artists become billionaires, Avedon's machinations are common. It was Avedon's misfortune to be ahead of his time.

Hewing to his long-term plans for posterity, Avedon stepped out of the preserve of fashion magazine work in 1959 and published his first book, *Observations*, with text by Truman Capote. He



Announcement card, Richard Avedon Retrospective, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1962

mounted a revolutionary, though unnoticed, exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's Photography Gallery in Washington D.C. in 1962.<sup>7</sup> His self-penned capsule biography, published on the occasion as a handout, is an excellent snapshot of his idea of himself at the time:

This 100-foot collage, which Richard Avedon personally prepared here in the Photography Gallery, represents a cross-section of his creative portrait and fashion photographs. Born in New York in 1923, Avedon received his first formal photography training in the Merchant Marine. After World War II he studied experimental photography under Alexey Brodovitch, and in 1945 joined the staff of *Harp-er's Bazaar*. In 1956, he was visual director of the movie *Funny Face*. *Observations*, a collection of Avedon's work, was published in 1959. He is on the faculty of the Famous Photographer's School, Westport, Conn.

Note in particular the inflation of the title "visual consultant" — his actual title on the crew of *Funny Face* — to "visual director." The juxtaposition of the terms "creative portraits" and "fashion photography" is also interesting, as if the relationship between art and commerce was a given. Most striking is the scenography: a 100-foot collage. The Smithsonian show was a radical photography installation compared to what the New York art museums and galleries (to the extent that they showed photography at all) were up to. One observer described the show as consisting of "Gigantic stats, contact sheets, proofs of magazine ad pages, telegrams, sample layouts, rich

full-toned black and white prints, and a wall sized (rear projection) screen that changed pictures every three seconds."<sup>8</sup> Avedon would do a similar show at the McCann Erickson advertising agency offices in New York, filmed by pioneering *cinema verité* director D. A. Pennebaker for an unrealized documentary. The young dynamo captured by Pennebaker is pure Avedon, with all his elbow, at the peak of his early career.

*Observations* was well received. But his second book, *Nothing Personal*, was destroyed by drama critic Robert Brustein in an ugly, *ad hominem* attack in *The New York Review of Books*.<sup>9</sup> A decidedly "New York is a small town" story, I nonetheless tell it in some detail below because it is the seminal event leading to his project with Lartigue, the photo-book *Diary of a Century* (1970). Avedon's naked ambition, wealth, good looks, and fluency in the gray area between high and low art had become threatening to the gatekeepers of the art world. Terms like "fine," "high" and "low" may seem so Last Century to us today, but in the sixties they demarcated hotly contested territories. He was knocked for a loop by Brustein's vitriol. For several years, he retreated into his magazine work, and avoided making the "artistic portraits" that were the hallmark of *Observations*.

I like to refer to the next phase of Avedon's career as "Avedon, Inc." It began with his move to *Vogue* in 1965, and was marked by an increasing tendency to self-curate rather than just put his work on view. He was aiming for posterity, but he often ended up shooting himself in the foot. Stung by accusations of superficiality,

he drew self-conscious lines between his commercial and what he referred to as his "serious" work. He would have been far better off embracing the continuum of his practices.

This awkward revisionism reached a crescendo in the Whitney show of 1994: its puzzling suppression of his so called "fashion work"; the resurrection of some of his early "street photography" that he had wisely chosen to buy back from *LIFE* magazine in 1948 rather than see them published at the time; and, finally, his exact recreation, down to the shades of grey on the walls, of the little room in which his sole monographic Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition had been held a mere two decades earlier.<sup>10</sup> Avedon would have been better served letting his fashion work speak for itself; leaving the *LIFE* photos in the drawer rather than trying to shoehorn them into a tradition of New York "street" photography, of which he was only tangentially a part; and remixing his presentation of the MoMA photos of his father rather than suspending the moment in curatorial formaldehyde. Through these strained reinventions, he seemed to be trying to force-feed the spectator his importance in the history of photography.

The more Avedon pushed, the more the intelligentsia dug in their heels. MoMA photography curator John Szarkowski, an early supporter of his work, would eventually exclude Avedon from the canon.<sup>11</sup> Far from gaining the recognition he craved, Avedon died frustrated and perplexed by his relative marginality at MoMA, *The New York Review of Books*, and their international counterparts. The exhibits he did obtain, while impressive



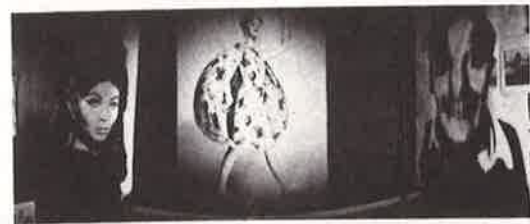
## AVEDON SHOW

There has never been a photographic show like this one.

Richard Avedon, photographer, iconoclast, and showman, produced what must be called (for the sake of accuracy) the most spectacular photographic show ever. On leaving the McCann-Erickson ad agency exhibition hall, some—including this writer—were convinced that photo shows will never again be the same. This explosive talent called Avedon will have long-range effects on all men who think seriously about hanging pictures on walls.

The show was part circus, part Happening, part Broadway opening, and all exciting photography. Gigantic stats, contact sheets, proofs of magazine ad pages, telegrams, sample layouts, rich, full-toned black-and-white prints, and a wall-sized (rear-projection) screen that changed pictures every three seconds—these were some of the parts from which the show was made. There was a telegram from former President Eisenhower telling that he couldn't make a sitting, and a note from the Daughters of the American Revolution telling how much they liked Avedon's photograph of them. Plus a door: when it was opened and

By JOHN DURNIK  
Photographs by Gene Pyle





Director Stanley Donen and Avedon select photographs to dress the set of *Quality Magazine* for *Funny Face*, 1957

to us in retrospect, were mere consolation prizes to him. The ones he really wanted never came to pass: a major monographic exhibition at MoMA in the early seventies; a New York venue for his masterpiece, *In the American West*, in the eighties; and, in the nineties, a Paris venue for his Whitney show. In his biographical note in his later photobook, *The Sixties* (1999), no mention is made of *any* museum exhibitions in his lifetime, as if what really mattered was his career as a working photographer. After nearly sixty years, they just didn't add up for him.

Then again, Avedon didn't make it easy. Photography museums were still considered art world ghettos, and he turned down their offers. He wanted to be up there with the great portrait painters in the Louvre, or his brush-wielding contemporaries at the Centre Pompidou or the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. In time, he is getting there. The big tent of contemporary art has opened to photography-based practices in ways that Avedon significantly pre-figured. He rejected the idea of "truth" in photography (we can file that word with "fine," "high" and "low" under Last Century) before the Pictures Generation — Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman and their cohorts — took the final steps of its deconstruction. His work — and not just his commercial work — ushered in the desacralization and hybridization of the photographic image throughout the entire landscape of visual culture, from magazines to museum installations, even as he himself sought affirmation as an artist from the gatekeepers of the White Cube. Succeeding generations will increasingly recognize Avedon not

simply as a portrait maker (or, as I prefer to think of him, a history painter) with a keen eye for the *Zeitgeist*, but also as a harbinger of our image-saturated, digital present. What better way to explore these themes is there than a "photography" exhibition about a movie, a book, and a magazine: *Funny Face*, *Diary of a Century*, and *Egoïste*?

### *Funny Face*: the New Look of American Lyric Cinema

Trying to characterize Richard Avedon's contribution to *Funny Face* while also giving Donen, the director, his relative due is a complicated matter. The facts are not in dispute: Avedon, as visual consultant, contributed the title credits, and the freeze frame stills in the "Think Pink" musical number and of Hepburn at various Paris landmarks and tourist spots. He advised Donen and June on lighting (both studio and exterior), filters and optical effects generally. He also served as a consultant to the film in terms of "authenticating" its representation of the world of fashion and fashion photography. Avedon's contract was for nine weeks, only one of which was supposed to be on location in Paris. However, rain delays kept him there longer. He was paid a thousand dollars a week (the same as June). Avedon was also paid a flat fee of five hundred dollars for the use of still photographs (several of which can be seen in the film in the offices of *Quality* magazine) and another two hundred and fifty dollars for each still photograph he might make at Paramount's request for additional set dressing.<sup>12</sup> Presumably, this covered the iconic

image of Hepburn that Astaire/Avery/Avedon develops and hangs in the dark-room before their first kiss.

Other photographers had consulted on films in ways distinct from being mere "still men," as they were called — set photographers who took pictures for continuity and publicity purposes. Avedon himself cites Eliot Elisofon's work for John Huston on *Moulin Rouge* (1952) and George Hoyningen-Huene's for George Cukor on *A Star is Born* (1954) as precedents for photographers working as visual consultants with movie directors.<sup>13</sup> *On the Waterfront* director Elia Kazan's personal copies of Weegee's photobook *The Naked City* (1945) were bookmarked by Kazan to note interesting visual signifiers that might translate well to his film.<sup>14</sup> Soon afterward, Stanley Kubrick would bring Weegee on in a similar capacity for *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). As Avedon put it, "Fashion photography and photography in general was more inventive at that moment than was Hollywood."<sup>15</sup>

How Avedon came to Donen's attention is emblematic of the way he advanced his commercial and artistic practices together. Other aspiring artists who worked with still cameras, like Robert Frank, took on commercial work quietly, to pay the bills. Still others, like Diane Arbus, embraced editorial work for the likes of *Esquire*, but shot ads and fashion spreads without fanfare. For Avedon, on the other hand, photography existed on a continuum. He came to Donen's attention through his work on the ad campaign for Helena Rubinstein's "Jazz, Red Hot and Cool" lipstick; the lighting piqued the movie director's interest. (There was also



Ernie Kovacs on the cover of *LIFE* April 15, 1957; photograph by Ralph Morse

a tie-in to the ad campaign in which a Dave Brubeck record with an Avedon image as the cover was included with a lipstick purchase.)

Avedon's use of blurry colored lights in the background caused a minor stir in visual arts circles. The *LIFE* photography editor sent a memo around that his staff photographers should take note, resulting in a magazine cover of Ernie Kovacs that "uses the technique of the colored lights in the background to a fare-thee-well."<sup>16</sup> Maidenform then asked Avedon to work that effect into their bra ads. All of this was recounted in an ad industry newspaper column, the source of which was clearly Avedon. It served two purposes: to remind his Madison Avenue clients that, even after *Funny Face*, he was still not too busy to take their commercial work, and to make sure everyone understood that, even though Avedon didn't actually shoot the *LIFE* cover, he was the *auteur* of its visual effects, and should be credited for his impact on current photographic practice. Not coincidentally, that issue also contained a four-page spread on Avedon's work in *Funny Face*.

Avedon's collaboration with Donen was loose but one of mutual confidence (and youth — Donen was thirty, Avedon thirty-three). Donen sought Avedon out — "I wanted certain scenes in the picture to have a soft smoky focus, to look like some of Dick's fashion shoots," he said.<sup>17</sup> The key moment of their collaboration was in the innovative way they froze the shots. At that time, freezing a frame was technically primitive and visually problematic. Taking the 35mm frame and filming it yielded grainy and imperfect

results, and Donen was a perfectionist. He made, in effect, an 8 x 10 fashion photograph freeze frame by linking Avedon's 8 x 10 camera to the monstrous VistaVision camera by a set of mirrors, so that whenever Avedon clicked the shutter, he shot the exact picture that was being filmed, perfectly in frame with the running film. Donen may have been inspired by 3-D movies (still something of a gimmick in the fifties), where two cameras with the same angle are used, one looking into a mirror and one looking through, so that the nodal point of the two cameras is exactly the same. Essentially what Donen did was substitute Avedon's still camera for a second movie camera. Now you understand Guerrin's question.

Donen held his ground when Paramount executives balked at the soft focus, particularly the flaring lights in the Paris café scene (shot, by the way, on a Hollywood set). The look both Donen and Avedon wanted ran exactly counter to the studio's obsession with VistaVision-induced clarity. (VistaVision was Paramount's multi-million dollar bet that they could one-up CinemaScope in terms of image sharpness, which studios felt was their best offensive weapon against the incursions of television into their viewing audience.)

In Donen's authorized biography, Avedon recounts that he was barred from setting or adjusting the lights (this being a union job), or even talking to Donen on set, so the two evolved a set of signals based on Avedon fiddling with his necktie:

They banned me from setting the lights, because I wasn't the lighting director, and I was told I could no

longer speak to Stanley . . . [We] worked out a system using my necktie. First I'd swing it over to the direction of the light in question. I'd look at Stanley, Stanley'd look at me. Then, if I opened the knot in my tie, it meant that he should widen the aperture of the light. If I tightened my tie, it meant to narrow the spotlight and move it to the left, so it would flare, but not too much . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Avedon's outlaw status on the set was evident in some of the commentary on the budget sheets: "NOTE: no money allowed this budget [*sic*] for any special Avedon photographs" is typed on the set construction budget under Action Props on the thirty-fourth and last day of shooting. It's repeated on the Special Effects page: "No allowance for freeze frames for fashion montage . . . or tableau portion of THINK PINK Number."<sup>19</sup>

The studio bosses wanted Avedon reined in. In their view, he was ruining the bankable Stanley Donen's movie. In our digital age of manipulated images, it is hard to imagine how provocative, even polemical, the mise-en-scene of this bit of filmic fluff was in postwar Hollywood. But according to cameraman Stanley Cortez, whose credits include *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) and *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), this is how it went back then:

We had to follow the studio's specific styles . . . Louis B. Mayer saw one of Zanuck's pictures in the early days and decided to change all his pictures from soft to hard color as a result . . . the other studios followed suit, so as a result we got "Christmas package"



colors in Hollywood films of the forties and after. . . . Sometimes people here try to experiment but when the top brass see the first day's work . . . they say, "What the hell happened here?"<sup>20</sup>

*Funny Face* was considered lightly in the mainstream press when it came out. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* weighed in with a cursory review which did not mention Avedon.<sup>21</sup> (Avedon rectified this omission a few weeks later by generating a piece in the *Times* about his involvement.) Magazines such as *Films in Review* went a bit deeper: critic Edward Jablonski noted that the color in Hepburn's dance sequence in the "murky Existentialist boîte" was "masterfully handled." Moreover, he wrote, "the title and credits of *Funny Face* have a visual snap that makes one eager to see the picture itself," and:

. . . the specific visual elements that adorn and enliven them derive from the typographic and art layouts of the fashion periodicals for which . . . Avedon has worked . . . *Funny Face* is replete with diffusions, distortions, color separations and other photographic hi-jinx before, during and after the developing and printing of the negative.

June, for his part, modestly averred that his job was "the practical realization of suggestions from Donen and Avedon." And Donen "generously" attributed the look of the film to Avedon.<sup>22</sup>

In *Dance* magazine, film critic Arthur Knight explored "the photographic problems of applying slick magazine techniques to a big studio musical," and how

the film imparts "a choreographic quality to the fashion sequences" of the film. By far the most detailed period accounting of Avedon's work on the film, Knight's review discusses the freeze frames and the lighting complexities (both exterior and on set), and characterizes Avedon's photographic style as "frozen dance." According to Knight, Donen conceived the idea of shooting the darkroom scene, in which Astaire sings the title song to Hepburn, in a red light (though in reality such lights are yellow), but Avedon "proposed adding the bright beam of the enlarging camera, literally transfixing Miss Hepburn to the wall as Astaire danced around her."<sup>23</sup> Donen later said that "if Avedon had made no other suggestion on the entire show, that single shot idea was worth his entire salary."<sup>24</sup>

Knight singled out the dance scene in the basement café as an example of "a lighting style that knowingly breaks all the rules — at least, the rules by which most films are made today." Those rules meant that "art" films were made in black and white, and commercial films were shot in orthodox color. For Hollywood musicals, orthodox meant what Cortez had termed "the Christmas package." It would be years before Antonioni's first color film *Red Desert* (1964) and other foreign art films would introduce expressionistic color into the mix. Is it a stretch to consider *Funny Face* a necessary precursor to Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966)?

Directors and lighting cameramen found the VistaVision/CinemaScope format stultifying. The great cinematographer Leon Shamroy recalled the "terrible days" of CinemaScope, which "wrecked

the art of film for a decade," though he also acknowledged that "wide screen saved the picture business."<sup>25</sup> *Funny Face* was seen by some as reaction against the inherent gigantism of widescreen. Although shot in VistaVision, it managed to recover the lost intimacy of Hollywood movies. British critic David Vaughan, writing for *Sight and Sound*, had previously written an obituary for what he termed American Lyric Cinema:

a pure form of musical comedy that was essentially a cinematic form . . . a freer and easier use of song and dance that had existed before . . . rather than the usual state of affairs in which everything stopped while somebody sang or danced.<sup>26</sup>

Epitomized by *On the Town* (1949), it was already in decline in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952, also directed by Donen). "The true and touching qualities of the [original stage productions] are dissipated in the acres of screen space and aeons of screen time," continued Vaughan.<sup>27</sup> Donen instinctively understood he needed to temper and even reinvent the screen musical to save it from regressing to colorized Depression-era *tableaux vivants*. Avedon was the person to help him do it.

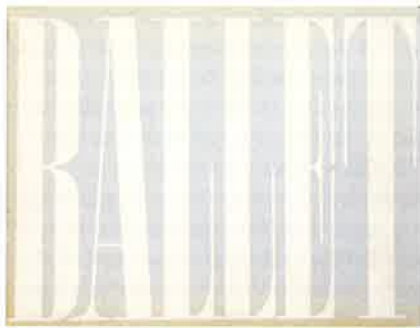
Vaughan perked up when, less than a year later, he reviewed *Funny Face*, writing, "it gives hope that the American Lyric Cinema can survive in spite of CinemaScope."<sup>28</sup> Its "notable visual distinction given by the collaboration of Avedon" is a critical part of the new look to Donen's picture, despite its rather conventional story line and recycled Jazz Age stage music.

*Cahiers du Cinéma* found the film

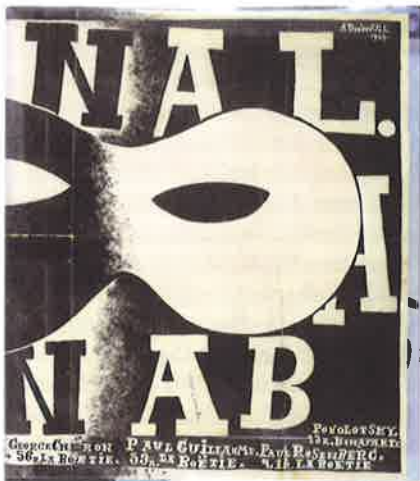
"extremely seductive," as Jean Domarchi wrote.<sup>29</sup> Though Avedon was not cited, the film was described as being shot in the style of *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. Hepburn ended up on the cover of the magazine.

The New Wave also weighed in. Alain Resnais, perhaps signaling his future intention to branch out from Holocaust documentaries to musical comedy, included *Funny Face* in his list of top ten films of 1957.<sup>30</sup> *Cahiers's* editor, Eric Rohmer, heralded the film's bold use of color.

Like his British colleagues, Domarchi wrote effusively about Donen's redemption of the musical comedy genre. The film's "deliberate intrusion of photographic technique into the cinema" is a huge success, Domarchi noted, contributing a "fairy tale feeling" to Hepburn's subterranean dance scene. That the "look" of the film was a contentious subject is evident in Domarchi's invocation of Robert Burks and Joseph LaShelle as examples of cinematographers who would be threatened by Donen and Avedon's bold visuals. (Burks shot twelve films for Alfred Hitchcock. LaShelle, one of the great craftsmen of the *film noir* era, was prone to harshly lit close-ups and classical pictorial compositions. It was said he could make even a color film look black and white.<sup>31</sup>) Obviously neither was on Donen's short list for *Funny Face*. Perhaps Donen settled on the veteran June to provide protective coloration for the project — a Hollywood workhorse, a familiar face to studio bosses, versed in the visual orthodoxy of the Hollywood musical. Who could be a better choice to subvert it?



Alexey Brodovitch's *Ballet* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1945) was a cinematic chronicle in still photographs of the 1930s Ballets Russes.



In 2002, Avedon gave his gallerist, Jeffrey Fraenkel, a copy of *Alexey Brodovitch*, the biography by Kerry William Purcell (London: Phaidon, 2002). Avedon used a scan of Brodovitch's 1924 *Bal Banal* poster to make a custom dust jacket (see pages 244–45).

## The Book that Misses You

Wherever you draw the *auteurist* line between the director's and the visual consultant's respective roles in *Funny Face*, Avedon's contribution was a major factor. But his presence in the film was something else entirely: as already noted, though it bears repeating, he was also the source of the film's story. He had married Dorcas Nowell, a bank teller, whom he transformed into a fashion model despite her alleged resistance to the proposition. Producer Leonard Gershe, who knew Dick and Doe, as they were called, thought it was a great idea for a musical comedy. Later, he would say that he was going for Avedon's "aura," not his life story, in the Fred Astaire character, and Hollywood-type liberties were indeed taken.<sup>32</sup>

By the time *Funny Face* began filming, Avedon was divorced from Doe and had remarried. Doe had left him for Hollywood and a brief acting career, marrying tough guy movie director Don Siegel along the way. So much for the reluctant Galatea.

Nonetheless, the film's narrative was drawn from Avedon's time in Paris with Doe. And the France of *Funny Face* is Avedon's France, close to the movie in his head, even if it is Gershe's screenplay and Donen's mise en scene. Dorian Leigh's description of her first modeling trip to Paris, five decades after the fact, is actually so close to the script of *Funny Face* that she seems to be confusing the movie with real life (see pages 73–74).

Avedon's own memories of his days with Doe in Paris grew more intense with time. In 2001, Avedon's gallerist (and friend) Jeffrey Fraenkel published *Made in France*, a slim, elegant volume of

reproductions of early *Harper's Bazaar* engraver's prints. In it, Avedon recalled a visit with Doe to la Boule Blanche, a storied, long-shuttered Parisian nightclub. For more than fifty years after she left him, Avedon dutifully continued to send her inscribed copies of every book he published. In her copy of *Made in France*, he wrote: "This is the book that misses you."<sup>33</sup>

## Carmel and Mary Louise: Les Girls

Avedon's France — the France of his imagination, nurtured by magazines — began to take shape in 1934, when Carmel Snow joined *Harper's Bazaar* and rose to become its editor. Once Snow took the magazine in hand, it became the principal conduit to America of French culture as it informed fashion. Snow had a broad view of what went into the mix. Selling clothes for advertisers was a pretext to dive into French culture and revel in its worldly pleasures.

After World War II, Snow enlisted Marie-Louise Bousquet as the magazine's Paris editor. Bousquet presided over one of Paris' most vibrant salons. She and Snow schooled the twentysomething Avedon in the basic elements of *la French touch*. He discovered Proust, who would be a foundational reference for Avedon in his framing of Lartigue's work, and, later, the Volpi Ball, which he photographed for *Egoïste*. Avedon's personal library contains three complete editions of *In Search of Lost Time*. The earliest of these has the old-fashioned Galignani label on the endpapers, indicating that Avedon bought it just after the war, in Paris, on one of his first assignments for *Harper's Bazaar*. One can imagine Bousquet and

Snow sweeping into the venerable Rue de Rivoli bookstore, their young innocent abroad in tow, loading him up with the necessary tomes for his "*education sentimentale*." The books in Avedon's library are rarely annotated in his hand, but on the inside front cover of his copy of *Swann's Way*, he wrote the word "asparagus" and the page number corresponding to Proust's oft-quoted description of the vegetable.<sup>34</sup>

After the war Snow went on a mission to resuscitate the French fashion industry. The magazine's wartime coverage had been sober and serious: she had dispatched Henri Cartier-Bresson to London in 1944 to document the ravages of war. With its end, she knew what she had to do. Her efforts earned her a Légion d'honneur, which she wore proudly on her bathrobe. Snow died in 1961, out of power and out of favor, the wear and tear of her alcoholic lifestyle evident in Avedon's portrait of her, taken in 1959. Her reputation as field marshal of the fashion army was quickly eclipsed by the ascendancy of her more mediagenic lieutenant Diana Vreeland.

## My Teacher

Even more than Carmel Snow, Alexey Brodovitch was Avedon's professional mentor. He was also something of a surrogate father. It is not hard to see why. Avedon had a troubled relationship with his own father, Jacob Israel Avedon, who would leave Avedon's adored mother when the photographer was not yet thirty.

Jacob's forebears were immigrant Russian Jews. Brodovitch was a White Russian aristocrat. Jacob's father deserted

his family after they landed on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Jacob was sent to a Jewish Child Care Association Orphanage with his two brothers. Before the Revolution, Alexey lived in St. Petersburg and journeyed often with his family to the South of France. He spoke French fluently; Jacob spoke Yiddish. Jacob clawed his way through the New York City Public School system, became a substitute teacher, and eventually started Avedon's Fifth Avenue, a women's specialty shop where young Richard got his first taste of fashion. The business went bankrupt in the Great Depression. After fighting for the Tsar in World War I (lying about his age to enlist against the wishes of his father, who was a General), Alexey served in the White Russian Army and was wounded in battle. He fled to Constantinople and then Paris when Odessa fell to the Bolsheviks. He found himself penniless in Paris and gravitated toward the avant gardes, who were remaking modern culture in the wake of the First World War.<sup>35</sup>

Brodovitch's journey through the first half of the twentieth century must have seemed impossibly glamorous to young Avedon. Here was an aristocratic Francophile who beat out Picasso in the 1924 Bal Banal poster competition. (The Bal Banal was organized by the Union of Russian Artists as a benefit for needy emigré artists. Picasso came in second; both designs were printed and pasted about Paris.) Here was someone who, through the Ballets Russes, collaborated with Picasso, André Derain and Christian Bérard<sup>36</sup> — someone conversant with all the *-isms* in the air: Cubism, Constructivism, Futurism, Purism and Surrealism.

Brodovitch's adoptive paternity allowed Avedon to draw a historical line back in time from postwar New York to 1924 Paris, melting pot of multiple modernisms, and thus to situate himself in the broad historical trajectory of twentieth-century visual culture. As an added bonus, Avedon's chosen métier of photography, the "second child of the arts,"<sup>37</sup> was already in that pot — along with industrial design, graphic design, advertising, posters, billboards and everything else taking Modernism to the less contested terrain of "the street." As Andy Grundberg noted in *Brodovitch* (1989), in addition to the obvious themes behind the Bal Banal poster's mask, its "graphic light-to-dark inversion of its mask shape, type, and background . . . suggests the positive-negative process of photography."<sup>38</sup> Brodovitch's own photographic work, especially his remarkable, largely forgotten photobook *Ballet* (1945), a collection of photographs of the Ballets Russes, was an important influence on Avedon.

In a telling, private gesture, Avedon drew this line from Picasso/Brodovitch to himself quite clearly. When Kerry William Purcell's monograph *Alexey Brodovitch* was published in 2002, Avedon was unimpressed with the dust jacket design (and perhaps miffed that another photographer's work graced the cover). He made a scan of Brodovitch's *Bal Banal* poster and covered the book with it, as if to say: This book is worthy of a more emblematic image of the man than a Lillian Bassman photograph from the pages of *Harper's Bazaar*. After all, this man out-designed Picasso! He sent the re-jacketed book to Fraenkel, and

gave another copy to his son John for John's fiftieth birthday. In that copy, next to the designer's name, Avedon simply but eloquently wrote, "My teacher."

### Observations and Photobooks

Avedon and Brodovitch's collaboration reached its peak with *Observations* in 1959. Avedon's first book gathered up his "art portraits" with brief texts by Truman Capote, in a stunning Brodovitch design.<sup>39</sup> Removed from the layouts of *Harper's Bazaar*, these pictures — many of which had been used in support of the magazine's cultural reporting — take on an entirely different aspect. For example, Bernard Buffet is made to peer enviously sideways at the bigger, older and more relaxed painter Georges Braque. Connecting unrelated photos by this kind of impish, Eisensteinian montage was one of Brodovitch's signature design moves. Picasso — declared simply "The Winner" by Capote — is followed by a diptych of Coco Chanel and a picture of Marie-Louise Bousquet in bed with her stuffed monkey. Then come *New Yorker* Paris correspondent Janet Flanner (pen name "Genet"), and Marcel Duchamp. Capote dwells for several pages on Jean Cocteau (who, according to the writer, "more than anyone formed French taste in the present century,"), recounting a rather fatuous anecdote about Gide and Cocteau while Marcel Achard, Marcel Jouhandeau, and Jacques-Yves Cousteau pass by. In another chapter, we have Brigitte Bardot, then Martita Hunt and Estelle Winwood in the New York production of *The Madwoman of Chaillot*.<sup>40</sup> (That production, following the play's unprecedented run

in Paris, also featured Bérard's sets and costumes.)

If *Harper's Bazaar* was a weather report on Paris fashion and its cultural sources, *Observations* is a more planetary discourse. Avedon's collection of French icons is only one element among several samplings of the great, the good, and the unsung. With respect to France, *Observations* presents a postwar avant garde. The war in question, however, is World War I. All of Avedon's French subjects are a generation or more older than he is: the interwar avant garde, recycled for the postwar reconstruction of the Fashion Capital of the World. Like the Beat poets who made pilgrimages to Paris around the same time, Avedon was looking for a Paris that, to its emerging avant gardes, was already passé.

In an early mockup of the book he had prepared for Truman Capote, Avedon implores the writer not to show it prematurely to fashion photographer Cecil Beaton.<sup>41</sup> His intended audience was not yet "real" critics — art world gatekeepers like, say, Clement Greenberg. Although no longer at the service of a magazine selling dresses and cosmetics, the images of the book still exist in a middlebrow no-man's land somewhere between fine art and fashion reportage. (Many of the images in *Observations* would later be edited by Avedon, but the concept of limited edition prints had not yet come into practice.<sup>42</sup>) Soon he would seek the approbation of the "serious" art world, but for now he operated comfortably and unselfconsciously in the grey zone where, at the apogee of his fame, in 1958, he was profiled in *The New Yorker*.

Avedon understood how important

"A message for both the mind and eye...magnificent...haunting...eloquent"  
—SARAH  
REYNOLDS

# richard avedon and james baldwin

# nothing personal

*Nothing Personal* (New York: Atheneum / Lucerne: C.J. Bucher, 1964) was Avedon's second photobook, a collaboration with his friend from high school, the writer James Baldwin. Pictured: the first paperback edition (New York: Dell, 1965).



James Baldwin and Richard Avedon, writer and photographer, Finland, June 1, 1964 (contact print)

the photobook would become as the photography market evolved, as important as — and perhaps even more important than — a museum exhibition. The fifties saw an emergent interest in photobooks that mimicked coffee table art books. Audiences could more easily buy a book than travel to the few major cities where photography was exhibited in galleries and museums. As publishing evolved, photobooks would become better printed, easier to produce, and, eventually, collectibles in their own right.<sup>43</sup> Even in its title, *Observations* responds to Henri Cartier-Bresson's earlier *The Decisive Moment* (1952). With its multiple images from the same portrait sitting, laid out on the page with brio by Brodovitch, the book is something of a riposte to Cartier-Bresson's idea that a photograph captures a single, decisive image. Later Avedon would use the phrase, "the constructed moment," to describe his own photographic modus operandi.

One may wonder when Avedon and Brodovitch first became aware of Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959). No doubt by the middle of the next decade, it (and Frank) loomed large in Avedon's thinking. The parallel histories of the two books speak to the evolution of the photobook. Frank's seminal work first appeared in France in 1958 under the title *Les Américains*. (The *Observations* project was already well under way.) The French edition was published with borrowed texts by Simone de Beauvoir, Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, Henry Miller and John Steinbeck, along with a bizarre cover drawing by Saul Steinberg of a New York high-rise apartment building that is difficult to connect

with Frank's images. Frank himself was not happy. He recalled the similar disconnect between James Agee's text and Walker Evans' photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), but he was not in a position to win any arguments with French publisher Robert Delpire. Frank wanted no text, and only one photograph per spread. Unlike Brodovitch, whose visual language depended on the juxtaposition and movement of multiple images, Frank was opposed to any montage effects in the layout. Although the individual images in *The Americans* build an overall mood in four discrete chapters, the images are meant to be absorbed one at a time.

A year later, the American edition would jettison all the texts, leaving only the brief, descriptive captions, and add a brief introduction by Jack Kerouac — someone much more in synch with Frank than, say, Simone de Beauvoir. There would be only one photograph per spread. This was exactly how Walker Evans had laid out his photobook, *American Photographs*, to accompany his 1938 exhibition at MoMA — the first monographic exhibition allotted to a photographer in the history of that institution, and a landmark in the history of photography. Frank had financed *The Americans* with a Guggenheim grant. Avedon used to make bitter jokes that his commercial practice was his own Guggenheim. (Diane Arbus also had a Guggenheim grant, and John Szarkowski had two.) Like Kerouac with *On the Road* (finished in 1951 but not published until 1957), Frank had struggled for years to find a publisher.

Kerouac's agreement to write an

introduction for the American edition is probably what obtained American publication for the project so quickly after the French edition came out, but the book is hardly a collaboration between Kerouac and Frank in the way that their film *Pull My Daisy* (1959) would be.<sup>44</sup> And even with an assist from Kerouac, it wasn't until a decade later, with the Aperture edition of 1969, that Frank was able to publish exactly the book he envisioned.<sup>45</sup> *Observations*, on the other hand, was an active three-way collaboration between writer, designer and photographer, and Avedon had the means to produce the book he wanted.

### Highbrow Smackdown

By 1962, Avedon was well positioned for posterity. On the foundations of his commercial success, he had laid the twin cornerstones of his artistic career: his first photobook and his first monographic museum exhibition at the Smithsonian. He would soon find out that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich, glamorous fashion photographer to achieve validation as an artist. His fluency in the gray zones of the culture industry — which today seems quite modern — was taken as a treasonous embrace of Mammon. For the gatekeepers of culture, money was, quite simply, a liability.

In 1964, it was Brustein's *New York Review of Books* assessment of his second photobook that derailed the Avedon express. While a competent theatre critic, Brustein had no real credentials in art or photography, and he eviscerated Avedon and Baldwin. Though many would agree



the photographs of JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE  
the museum of modern art, new york

*The Photographs of Jacques Henri Lartigue*, MoMA Bulletin XXX, no. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963). MoMA's exhibition presented Lartigue as a naïf with a camera.

that *Nothing Personal* is among Avedon's weaker published efforts (and Baldwin's text has not aged as well as Avedon's photographs), Brustein's animus, which oozes from his sentences, is brutal. Avedon, he wrote, is a "show biz moralist" with a "hideously jaundiced eye" caring "less for truth than sensation." He asserted that the book demonstrated "an honorable tradition of revolt gone sour, given over to fame and ambition, discredited by shadowy motives, twisted by questionable ideals, turned into a theatrical game by café society performers."<sup>46</sup> Brustein was even disgusted by the book's high production values.

Truman Capote leapt to Avedon's defense. In a published letter to the editor, he questioned why Brustein would attack the book simply because it is a handsome piece of bookmaking. "Would he rather it was printed on paper-toweling?" Capote archly asked. He pointed out that even if the entire print run sold out, neither Avedon, Baldwin nor the publisher would make "twenty cents."<sup>47</sup> (To be fair, Brustein doesn't really criticize it as a moneymaking operation. He objects to the *expenditure* of money in principle on such a project.) For three years following Brustein's diatribe, Avedon made no art portraits.

### Proust, with a Camera, to the Rescue

Fortunately, in 1963, Avedon had been shown the work of a French photographer whose images were, to his eye, the visual equivalent of Proust. By 1968 he was deeply involved in the editing and publishing of his third photobook — one that would, over time, have an impact

on photography greater than his first. However, his next project, *Diary of a Century* (1970) contained none of his own photographs, but those of Lartigue.

The extent of Avedon's role in crafting the Lartigue of today has been little understood up until now. Marianne Le Galliard's essay makes clear, finally, the extent to which Avedon is the principal *metteur en scene* of the Lartigue of the twenty-first century, despite Lartigue's reputation being more identified with John Szarkowski. Kevin Moore, who first tackled the subject of Lartigue's successive identities as an artist in *The Invention of Lartigue*, was primarily focused on the ways in which Szarkowski appropriated Lartigue's childhood photos to buttress prevailing theories of "fine art" photography. Moore's deconstruction of the seminal 1963 Lartigue exhibition at MoMA is a critical contribution to Lartigue scholarship. Unfortunately, Moore stops there. He refers only generally to the next phase of Lartigue's appropriation by fashion photography. *Diary of a Century* is referred to only a handful of times. Avedon is barely mentioned.

Moore is simply wrong when he lumps *Diary of a Century* together with *Boyhood: Photographs of J. H. Lartigue*, the facsimile family album published in Switzerland in 1966. He writes: "They reinforced and extended Szarkowski's characterization of Lartigue as a photographic naïf."<sup>48</sup> On the contrary, *Diary's* conception of Lartigue is diametrically opposed to the MoMA notion of Lartigue as naïf. Avedon is quite clear that Lartigue is constructing his photographic moments. How else to explain the endpapers of the book, taken

from Lartigue's diaries, which show his meticulous compositions, recalled from memory and committed to paper before he received developed prints back from the lab? Moore's book was published before the Avedon archives were accessible to researchers. He was not aware of the trove of correspondence between the two men about the making of *Diary*. The Lartigue of the twenty-first century is Avedon's, not Szarkowski's.

*Diary of a Century* was the third and final photobook collaboration of Avedon's career. Never again would he link his artistic fate in any meaningful way to a writer, a designer or an artist. *Diary* would eventually achieve Avedon's major objective: to make Lartigue's body of work a legitimate artistic antecedent to his own. Alongside MoMA's trajectory of the history of photography from Eugène Atget to Walker Evans to Robert Frank and Diane Arbus, Avedon invented a parallel universe: Lartigue, Brodovitch, Avedon.

### After the Barricades

Avedon edited *Diary* in Lartigue's Paris apartment while the riots of May 1968 occurred in the streets below. Avedon eventually made it home to New York, via Brussels. Lartigue almost fled to Switzerland, changing his mind only after he had loaded up his car and hit the road. During the next decade, Avedon would be less present in France. Apart from discharging his contractual fashion obligations to *Vogue*, his activity would focus on American politics, especially the war in Vietnam, the death of his father, and, in 1978, a retrospective at

the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. While in France for *Vogue* the following year, he made memorable photographs of Francis Bacon and Samuel Beckett. In New York, he also produced his fourth photobook (with Doon Arbus), *Alice in Wonderland: The Forming of a Company and the Making of Play* (1973). Designed by Ruth Ansel, Bea Feitler's co-art director at *Harper's Bazaar*, this "book about a play" documents avant-garde theatre director André Gregory's transformation of *Alice and Wonderland* by the Manhattan Project, an "off" theatre company, into a raucous, improvised gathering.<sup>49</sup> In terms of subject matter, we are a long way from Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*. It marks a 180-degree turn from *Diary of a Century*. Still, Avedon is taking small steps back toward an all-Avedon photobook. Here he features his own photographs, but puts the spotlight on André Gregory and his troupe. The book feels closest in spirit to Brodovitch's *Ballet* from nearly thirty years earlier.

Avedon's next book, titled, simply, *Portraits* (1976), would align much more closely with the Walker Evans/Robert Frank template: one photograph per spread, very simple captions at the bottom of the white space opposite, each image framed rather than bled. *Portraits* was not a collaboration (except to the extent that one considers all portraits to be collaborations between the shooter and the sitter). Capote and Baldwin had been swapped out for a bona fide art critic, Harold Rosenberg, who contributed a deeply art historical introduction in place of Capote's gossipy belles lettres or Baldwin's searing sermonizing intercut with images. The design is minimal,

if not invisible. It is as if Avedon had decided: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

Besides losing his father and suffering a minor heart ailment shortly thereafter, Avedon experienced a major professional disappointment during this period. For several years, he had been in discussions with Szarkowski for a major show at MoMA, tentatively titled *Hard Times*. The exhibition was intended to instrumentalize Avedon's camera into the realm of politics through a radical exhibition concept. He wanted to time the exhibition with the 1972 Presidential elections. It was to open at MoMA, in order to "validate" it,<sup>50</sup> but then reopen simultaneously in the following days at several high schools around the country. Avedon's studio was using contact printing machines at the time that made serviceable prints from 8 x 10 contact negatives in ten seconds. His idea was to have several such machines at the show, manned by students (performance meets exhibition!), making the prints for "twenty exhibitions in two nights, to quickly get this out to the kids."

This would have been a radical departure from mainstream photography shows, which travel through serial venues and, as Doon Arbus said, "are very precious." Avedon and Arbus envisioned a phone-book-sized catalog of 300–400 images with an image on one side of each spread and a text on the other. That text would be a transcription of an interview with the sitter that was made simultaneously with the sitting. Each would be given fifteen minutes to say whatever was on his or her mind. This was thought to be more authentic than giving the sitter an opportunity to submit

something, or even edit what was said spontaneously. The concept of the exhibition and the catalog are more audacious even than the Smithsonian show of 1962 — in any event, too audacious for the cultural establishment of New York. Perhaps if Avedon hadn't insisted on the imprimatur of a major museum, he could have made it happen: he had the connections in the Movement to get it done. But he wanted to have his cake and eat it too. Too bad. Such an exhibition would have been a high water mark in the annals of exhibition design: relational esthetics *avant la lettre*.

Avedon gave us an alternative vision of *Hard Times* with *The Family*, his project with Renata Adler for *Rolling Stone*. In August 1976, Avedon was given the bulk of the magazine for an ambitious photoessay. Although one had to wade through fifty pages of rock & roll news and advertising to get to it, the effort was well worth it: Avedon and Adler were able to connect with the magazine's readership of five hundred thousand.

This time, the subject matter went beyond the counterculture, elaborating an inclusive vision of American power in the year of the American Bicentennial. In a highly original move suggested by Adler, the seventy-three frontal portraits were accompanied by an appropriated reference text — the *Who's Who* listings of the sitters, printed in the same format and typeface as the annual directory.

By comparison, *Portraits* is a generic photobook. It was published to accompany an exhibition at Marlborough Gallery in 1975 that followed Avedon's rupture with Szarkowski. *The Family* was subsequently editioned, and remains

among Avedon's most sought-after works. But its notable impact was outside the art marketplace, in its magazine form.

### Egoïste

In the late 1970s, Avedon began to take pictures for what would eventually become *In the American West*, a travelling exhibition that originated at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth and was accompanied by an eponymous photobook. Those pictures would first appear in a French magazine, *Egoïste*. Begun in 1977 by Nicole Wisniak, it has published irregularly — seventeen times in thirty-five years—with recent print runs of around twenty-five thousand copies.

For Avedon, after enduring the corporate court of *Vogue* and its parent company, Condé Nast, *Egoïste* was a breath of fresh air. Wisniak gave Avedon artistic freedom but pushed him outside his comfort zone in both subject matter and technique. She was not only his editor and collaborator, but also his sherpa, guiding him through the new landscape of the France of Mitterand at a time when Reagan/Thatcherism ruled the Anglo-Saxon roost. Avedon was back in his element: French intellectuals still went to fashion shows.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Berlin Wall fell, Wisniak dispatched him to photograph Berlin on New Year's Eve, 1989. The Wall was open on both sides for the first time since the end of World War II. For the first time as well, Avedon was photographing history in the making. Previously he had made portraits of sitters during political field trips, photographing members of the



Leonard Bernstein gives a music lesson to John Avedon (right) and Fred Iseman, Round Hill, Jamaica, 1962



Avedon in *Paris-Match*, October 27, 1994; photograph by Irving Penn

civil rights movement in the American South in the sixties, and those involved in the Vietnam war in the seventies.

The publication of those remarkable photos in *Egoïste* led to an invitation to exhibit them in the 1991 Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. The highly theatrical Carnegie installation was Avedon's bold remix of his *Egoïste* images, a successful transposition from magazine page to museum wall. He reprinted his images in large format and hung them unframed, arranging them along three intersecting planes so that they could be read simultaneously as independent photographs, or as one long historical painting. He enhanced this effect by programming lighting that shifted throughout the day, evoking the Wall's well-known crossing point, Checkpoint Charlie, just as he had used strobe lights on the crowd to take the pictures in the first place.<sup>51</sup>

The Carnegie installation demonstrated how easily Avedon's work — or at least the kind of work he was doing for *Egoïste* — could coexist with the conceptual vanguard of the early nineties. In Pittsburgh his work presented comfortably with neighboring installations by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Louise Lawler, Thomas Struth and Christopher Williams, artists a generation or two younger than him. They are all considered conceptual artists who happen to work in photography, as opposed to, say, Irving Penn, who was and always will be a “fine art photographer.” Avedon should have mixed it up more with the contemporary art scene and let his work speak for itself alongside other voices, as he did at the Carnegie.

Unfortunately, Avedon's Whitney show would subsequently present his legacy in an overly controlling monographic vacuum.

Wisniak also accompanied Avedon to the Volpi Ball in Venice. He collaged the photographs he took on that assignment into hyperimages of high society in decline, which he described as “collages that appear to be photojournalism.”<sup>52</sup> (The ball was once an elegant fixture of the Venice Film Festival.) Published in *Egoïste*, the Volpi Ball pictures were introduced with a favorite Avedon quote from Proust. And Wisniak made a canny editorial insertion of two unspoiled young women amidst all the melting flesh and gaunt, frightened stares of the ball's older attendees. Avedon's photographs would be a highlight of his exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in 2002.

Another first for Avedon under Wisniak's aegis: he photographed architecture, including a Moscow cemetery and Franco's tomb in Madrid, and punctuated his photonarratives with images devoid of people. Haunting images of Belle Isle (“Isabelle Adjani”) and Drancy (“Kate's Story”) provide unusual but effective counterpoint to Avedon's primacy of portraiture.

Avedon signed on as *The New Yorker's* first ever and sole staff photographer in December 1992, the result of an editorial shakeup in the wake of the magazine's acquisition by Condé Nast. The idea of being crowned sole monarch of photography at *The New Yorker* meant a lot to him, but he reverted to a comfort zone which seemed to shrink as he aged. He grew increasingly out of touch. It is

strange, for example, that he would have called his 1994 Whitney show *Evidence*, given that the same title had already been used by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel for their 1977 book of found corporate and government archive photos. Sultan and Mandel's *Evidence* was quickly and firmly established as a basic text of the Pictures Generation — photographers who agreed with Avedon that “All photographs are accurate. None of them are the truth,”<sup>53</sup> but worked in a deadpan register that was alien to him.

Wisniak recognized that Avedon's greatness lay in his ambitious, if not always successful, experimentation — his openness, his eagerness to collaborate with people whose eye and judgment he respected. At the beginning of their collaboration, after *Egoïste* published those first images from *In the American West*, Avedon wrote to her:

You must understand and accept the fact that when it concerns my work, I do nothing out of blind enthusiasm or because I'm a nice fellow . . . [I chose] *Egoïste* for the first viewing of the photographs . . . because I could see what uncompromising care and quality you brought to your work. I was right. The issue is exquisite and the engravings are the equal if not better than my own book.”<sup>54</sup>

*New Yorker* editor Tina Brown, on the other hand, was trading on Avedon's existing star power. Wisniak and Avedon took risks together: from “fashion” shoots of Isabelle Adjani with no clothes other than Avedon's old leather jacket, to naked plus-size girls in exuberantly carnal romps (“Kate's Story”). Not everything

worked, but the risks demanded to be taken, and they would collaborate until his death.

### Avedon after Avedon

My own interview with Wisniak turned out to be an interesting bookend to her *Egoïste* interview with Avedon in 1984, when they had just met. Held in early 2016, it was an opportunity to consider Avedon's legacy a generation after his passing. In my view, if not hers, Avedon's constructed hagiography elides bitter disappointment at the lack of recognition in his lifetime from those places and institutions that mattered most: the New York art world, especially MoMA, and France. Unprepared to accept the outcomes of cultural politics and the bureaucratic machinations of its flagship cultural institutions as random, he took it all very personally.

Sometimes, it was difficult not to. James Baldwin received his Légion d'honneur in 1986, at the same ceremony as Leonard Bernstein, another close friend of Avedon's (the Bernstein and Avedon families sometimes vacationed together). One can only imagine how Avedon must have felt knowing that his two close friends, Jimmy and Lenny, were both getting the Légion d'honneur, but not him. This would have been right around the time that it became clear to him that *In the American West*, despite his best efforts to museify the project, would muster only a private gallery showing in New York.<sup>55</sup> Despite years of advance planning, as well as the imprimatur of the Amon Carter Museum of Fort Worth, which had commissioned

the project, no New York museum could, or would, take it.

At one point in his 1993 interview with Guerrin, Avedon was asked about how he felt about his lack of museum validation in France. His reply: "Maybe it takes a foreigner to discover someone else's national treasure." He went on to invoke Robert Frank's *The Americans*, the "serious genius" of Jerry Lewis, and the fact that "Lartigue had to wait for the Museum of Modern Art . . . and the publication in America of *Diary of a Century*."<sup>56</sup> The Lartigue and Jerry Lewis points are sound, but Robert Frank? Certainly not. The critical acclaim surrounding Lartigue's MoMA show, and Avedon's subsequent book, helped open French eyes to the art of Lartigue's photography. The New Wave's championing of Lewis as an *auteur* beyond his gift for physical comedy brought him to the attention of New Hollywood filmmakers. On the other hand, the French publication of *The Americans* was a non-event. Frank's difficulties in getting it published had more to do with the embryonic state of photobook publishing at the time than his lack of recognition as an artist. In citing these examples, Avedon may have been seeking a subliminal takeaway: "art" by association.

With the further passage of time, and the fading away of self-inflicted curatorial wounds, Avedon's work will increasingly speak for itself. His impact on the visual culture of the late twentieth century will be acknowledged. The proof is in the pudding. When somebody who sat for Avedon dies, it is generally Avedon's photograph of him or her, above all others, that is selected to accompany

the obituary in *The New York Times* or *Le Monde*. Avedon's moments may be constructed, but in these cases they are decisive.

- 1 Henri Béhar and Michel Guerrin, "Avedon" (an interview with Richard Avedon), *Le Monde* (July 1, 1993). The interview took place during the XXIV<sup>e</sup> Festival des Rencontres de la Photographie in Arles.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Original transcript of the interview in English, Michel Guerrin archives.
- 4 Béhar and Guerrin. Avedon said, "J'avais appris à être moi en prétendant être lui et là je devais lui apprendre à prétendre être moi..." (I had learned to be me by pretending to be him and then I had to teach him to pretend to be me ...)
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Winthrop Sargeant, "A Woman Entering a Taxi in the Rain," *The New Yorker* (November 8, 1958): 49. Avedon was quoted as saying, "Why, you know, I sometimes get almost as much as Picasso for a picture."
- 7 Apart from a brief mention in *The Rangefinder*, a professional photography magazine, and a gossip column item in *The Washington Star*, I can find no mention of it anywhere.
- 8 John Durmiak, "Avedon Show," *Popular Photography* (May 1965): 52.
- 9 Robert Brustein, "The Pop Liberalism of Avedon and Baldwin," *The New York Review of Books* (December 17, 1964): 10–12.
- 10 In 1949 Avedon was commissioned by *LIFE* to shoot street scenes. When he saw the results, he returned his advance, and filed the negatives and contacts away. Although curator Jane Livingston would make an elaborate case in the Whitney Museum exhibition catalog and in her subsequent book,



- The New York School: Photographs 1936–1963* (New York: Stewart Tabori & Chang, 1992) for these pictures, arguing that they situated Avedon in the New York tradition of “street photography” that included Diane Arbus and Weegee, Avedon’s first instinct was the right one. For the Whitney show, see, for example, Michael Kimmelman, “Farewell Fashion, Hello Art,” *The New York Times* (March 25, 1994).
- 11 Szarkowski granted Avedon a small but important show of photographs of his dying father in 1974. Shortly before that, he wrote a less than flattering appraisal of Avedon’s place in photographic history to accompany Avedon’s portrait of Isak Dinesen in *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973). In 1978, Szarkowski omitted Avedon entirely from his canonization of the eighty most important photographers of the sixties and seventies in *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978).
- 12 Avedon would also be reimbursed for “model fees and other out-of-pocket expense in connection with such photographs.” From the “Contract between Paramount Pictures and Avedon, Richard – Visual Consultant” (February 17, 1956), Paramount Collection, archives of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AAMPAS), Los Angeles, California.
- 13 Stephen M. Silverman, *Dancing on the Ceiling: Stanley*

- Donen and his Movies* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 230–31.
- 14 Author’s collection. The bookmarks in Kazan’s copy of *Naked City* are torn strips of paper that appear to be from a discarded draft of the screenplay for *On the Waterfront*.
- 15 Silverman, 231.
- 16 Joseph Kaselow, “He Can’t Dance,” *The New York Herald Tribune* (May 12, 1957).
- 17 Silverman, 232.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 233–34.
- 19 \$5500 was in fact allocated elsewhere for the freeze frames of the Audrey Hepburn fashion shoots and the “Think Pink” dance number, 1956, AAMPAD archives.
- 20 Charles Higham, *Hollywood Cameramen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970): 98–9.
- 21 Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times* (March 29, 1957).
- 22 Edward Jablonski, “Funny Face,” *Films in Review* (April 1957): 170–74.
- 23 Arthur Knight, the regular film critic of *Saturday Review*, was also assistant curator in the film department of the Museum of Modern Art, and the author of the popular textbook, *The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies* (New York: Scribner, 1957).
- 24 Knight, *Dance Magazine* (May 1957): 16, 22.
- 25 Charles Higham, 30–31.
- 26 David Vaughan, “After the Ball,” *Hollywood Cameraman* vol. 26 no. 2 (Autumn 1956).
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 David Vaughan, “Funny Face,” *Sight and Sound* vol. 27 no. 1 (Summer 1957).
- 29 Jean Domarchi, “La Métamorphose (*Funny Face*),” *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 79 (January 1958): 47–49.

- 30 Alain Resnais, list for “Top Ten Films of 1957,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 79: 4.
- 31 For more on LaShelle, see: <http://www.cinematographers.nl/GreatDoPh/lashelle.htm>
- 32 Silverman.
- 33 Inscribed presentation copy from Richard Avedon to Doe Avedon, author’s collection.
- 34 Collection of John Avedon.
- 35 For a fuller discussion on Brodovitch, see Kerry William Purcell, *Alexey Brodovitch* (London: Phaidon, 2002).
- 36 For a biography of Christian Bérard, who owned and embellished the Countess of Castiglione photo album that Avedon would acquire (see pp. 450–53), see: Boris Kochno, *Christian Bérard* (Paris: Herscher, 1987). Kochno was Sergei Diaghilev’s personal secretary. Avedon photographed Bérard in 1947.
- 37 Richard Avedon, “Afterword,” *Diary of a Century* (New York: Viking Press, 1970).
- 38 Andy Grundberg, *Brodovitch (Masters of American Design)* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989). As quoted in Purcell: 26.
- 39 For a useful discussion of *Observations*, see Jane Livingston’s essay in *Evidence 1944–94* (New York: Random House, 1994): 24–34. For a detailed analysis of Brodovitch’s work on *Observations* see Purcell.
- 40 The American production of *La folle de Chaillot* opened in New York in 1948 and ran for more than a year.
- 41 Capote’s mockup is in the author’s collection. (See pp. 386–87 for the full text of Avedon’s previously unpublished letter.)

- 42 For example, Avedon wrote Szarkowski about an idea that David Pittman (who would later produce films such as *Chariots of Fire*, but was then a photographer’s agent representing David Bailey, among others) was floating about, of creating limited editions of photographs. Avedon letter to Szarkowski (July 5, 1967), Szarkowski archives, Museum of Modern Art.
- 43 See the multi-volume series by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History* (London: Phaidon, 2001 and later) on the evolving collectability of photobooks.
- 44 See Luc Sante, “Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac,” in Sara Greenough, ed., *Looking In: Robert Frank’s The Americans* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art/ Göttingen: Steidl, 2009): 202–09.
- 45 Greenough is a thorough, scholarly account of the making of the various iterations of *The Americans*.
- 46 Brustein: 10–12.
- 47 Truman Capote, “Avedon’s Reality” (letter to the editor), *The New York Review of Books* (January 28, 1965).
- 48 Kevin Moore, *Jacques Henri Lartigue: The Invention of an Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 199.
- 49 For further discussion of Avedon’s studio photographs of *Alice*, see “André Gregory Sees the Light,” Theatre Communications Group: <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/mar05/gregory.cfm/>
- 50 “It needs a museum for a kind of establishment view of it and then to the high schools,” Avedon explained to Alan Ginsberg in an interview. For a detailed discussion of

- the project and additional citations from the interview tapes, see author’s essay, “Landsmen Lensmen,” in *Avedon: Portraits and Murals* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2012): 86–128.
- 51 See Triennial Co-Curator Lynne Cooke’s note on Avedon’s installation in Cooke and Mark Francis, eds, *Carnegie International 1991*, (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1991): 52.
- 52 Béhar and Guerrin.
- 53 Nicole Wisniak, “A Portrait is an Opinion” (interview with Richard Avedon), *Egoïste* N° 9, (January, 1985): 48–53.
- 54 Richard Avedon letter to Nicole Wisniak, June 11, 1985. Nicole Wisniak archives.
- 55 *In the American West* travelled to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; The Art Institute of Chicago; the Phoenix Art Museum; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; and the Madison Art Center in Wisconsin. It was exhibited at Pace/MacGill Gallery, and later at the Richard Gray Gallery, both in New York City.
- 56 Béhar and Guerrin.