

fig. 1
Evergreen Review, Issue #81, August 1970, cover photograph by Richard Avedon

Bob Rubin

Landsmen Lensmen: Richard Avedon and Allen Ginsberg

*I sometimes think
That little Jew bastard
That queer ugly kike
Is the bravest man
In America*

Norman Mailer, "Ode to Allen Ginsberg"¹

In 1956 a chronically broke, pansexual (but mostly gay) Buddhist poet named Allen Ginsberg published his Beat epic poem "Howl." His eight-month confinement at Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute seven years earlier was the source for many of the poem's resonant images of "the best minds of [his] generation ... destroyed by madness."² Ginsberg had been committed in lieu of a jail sentence he would have received for allowing Herbert Huncke—aka Huncke the Junkie—to hide stolen merchandise in his apartment.

A year after "Howl" was published, Paramount Pictures released Stanley Donen's *Funny Face*. It made a photographer named Richard Avedon famous beyond the fashion-industry circles he already dominated. On-screen, Avedon became Dick Avery, played and danced by Fred Astaire. (Ginsberg would play himself, Allen the vagabond poet, in Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's 1959 film *Pull My Daisy*.) Avedon was already rich by this time. According to a profile in the *The New Yorker*, he lived on Park Avenue and his "visual poetry of sophisticated urban life" earned him \$250,000 a year—real money in the 1950s.³ Now he was also famous. Meanwhile Ginsberg and his "starving hysterical naked" mates lived in hovels and were "burning their money in wastebaskets."⁴ Whatever he earned from poetry books and readings Ginsberg donated to "poets and artists whose work has not been properly rewarded otherwise."⁵

And yet the paths of these two men would cross in symbiotic and sometimes surprising ways over the next three decades. Their relationship traced an arc through the Movement (as both men referred to the stirrings of the 1960s) via the gay subculture of early identity politics (remember Gay Liberation?), as well as the trial of the Chicago Seven. But the culmination of their relationship was a two-panel group portrait by Avedon, *Allen Ginsberg's Family, Paterson, New Jersey, May 3, 1970* (pp. 109–12), a meditation on generational conflict and enduring family ties in a changing world. Avedon once described the portrait to Ginsberg as "you and your family's marvelous gift to me."⁶ In it, a "doubled" Allen

stands at the center of his family. To the left he is flanked by four of his young nieces and nephews, to the right by his father, Louis, and brother, Eugene, both of whom are "doubled" as well, appearing in the right panel as well as the left—a reference, perhaps, to their elevated status as poets in what Ginsberg often referred to as the "family business" (of which he was clearly the godfather). But where Allen is grouped with the kids, his brother and father are grouped with the elders as part of the panorama's familial in-fill: a sister-in-law, two aunts, two uncles, and Allen's stepmother—a total of thirteen people, yielding sixteen figures. By contrast, Avedon had one sibling, a sister, who was institutionalized in her twenties, and one son, John. Although he had many uncles and aunts (eight on his father's side alone), he had few relations with whom he kept in touch. According to Ginsberg, Avedon was "interested in my relationship to my family, which was a big European-Jewish New Jersey family."⁷ From a personal as well as a visual perspective, Avedon was clearly fascinated by the intactness of the Ginsberg clan in the face of mental illness (Allen's mother, Naomi—the subject of his other major poem, "Kaddish"—died in a mental institution in 1956), financial cataclysm, and generational strife of various kinds.

A Sort of Pinup

Ginsberg recalled meeting Avedon: "Avedon photographed me when I first went over to his studio. ... He got interested in photographing me and Peter Orlovsky naked, among some other pictures (pp. 117–21 and 123). Marvin Israel, who designed some albums for Atlantic Records at the time, used one of the Avedon pictures for the cover of a recording of *Kaddish* that Jerry Wexler put out."⁸ The album he refers to, *Allen Ginsberg Reads Kaddish: A 20th Century American Ecstatic Narrative Poem* (1966), features an Avedon close-up of the poet's face (fig. 2). In 1960 Ginsberg sat for Avedon with the manly Irish playwright Brendan Behan

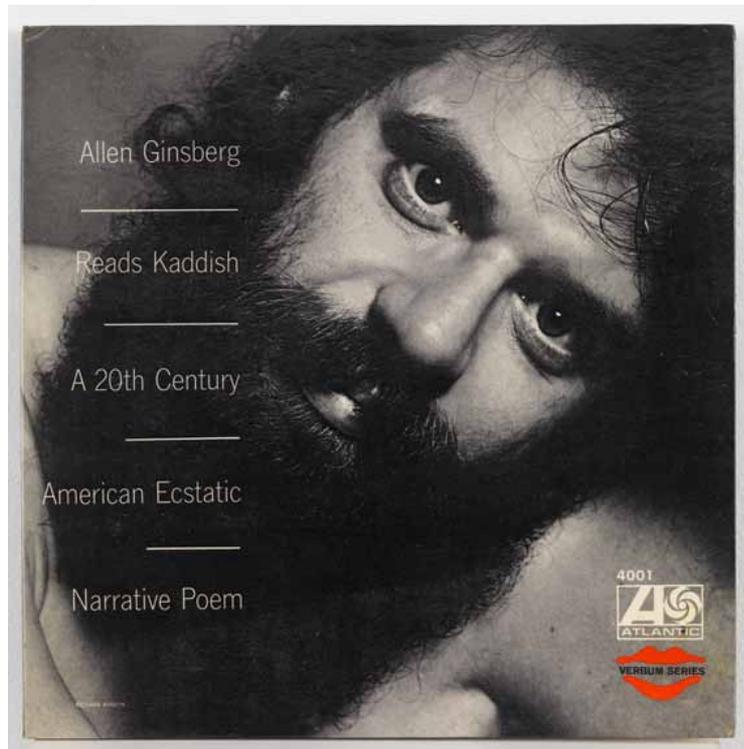


fig. 2

Allen Ginsberg Reads Kaddish: A 20th Century American Ecstatic Narrative Poem, 1966, album cover photograph by Richard Avedon

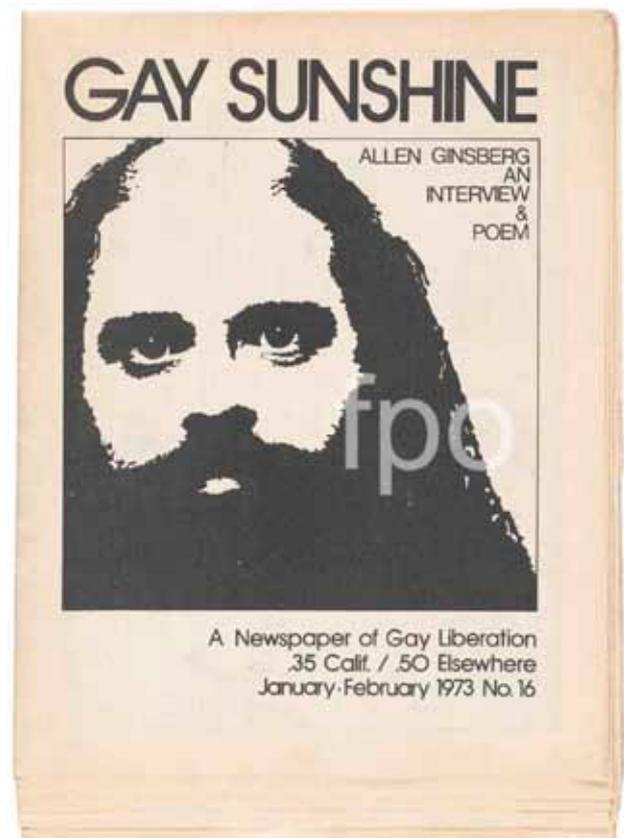


fig. 3

Gay Sunshine Collective, Issue #16, January–February 1973, cover photograph by Richard Avedon

(pp. 98–99). A photograph of Ginsberg naked, his left hand covering his groin and arranged in a Buddhist gesture signifying contemplation, his right hand raised palm out in the abhaya mudra, a gesture of reassurance, was published in *Nothing Personal*, a collaboration between Avedon and James Baldwin, in 1964, opposite an image of a George Lincoln Rockwell “stormtrooper” youth in Nazi salute (p. 12). Another photograph of Ginsberg by Avedon—one of Ginsberg and Orlovsky, his life partner, in naked embrace—was the cover of the August 1970 issue of *Evergreen Review* (fig. 1).

To the extent possible in that pre-Internet age, these images—particularly the one of Ginsberg and Orlovsky—were circulated virally within the Movement, especially within the gay underground. Ginsberg would later refer to the *Evergreen* image as having “wide use as a sort of a pinup.”⁹ Avedon gave him several copies of the photograph, which he distributed with missionary zeal—though he was careful always to ask the photographer’s permission for any formal publication.

In 1971 Ginsberg asked Avedon if he could to use the *Evergreen* image to accompany an interview to be published in *Gay Sunshine Collective*, and requested a new print “without the genitals darkened out.”¹⁰ (Whether or not Avedon ever saw the cropped version of his photo from *Nothing Personal* on the cover of *Gay Sunshine* is not known.) A year later Ginsberg asked Avedon for images again, for possible publication “in other papers affiliated with Gay Liberation movement.”¹¹ In 1980 Ginsberg asked Avedon’s permission to use the photo of him and Orlovsky as the frontispiece of his forthcoming book *Straight Heart’s Delight*, an anthology of letters and poems between the two men: “Your photo is straight that’s why it’s good. It has aura of 1890’s Tennysonian and Whitman photos, so it would be appropriate as old fashioned frontispiece to such literary memoir book, [which is] both anthology of our sexual poetries and compilation of unselfconscious letters of 50’s and early 60’s about love and literature.”¹² He also told Avedon he felt that the photo had been defaced

on the *Evergreen* cover, the “dark shadowed at bottom obliterating some portions of body clearer in your prints.”¹³ Ginsberg’s modesty is evident, as always, when he asks for permission to use the photo for his own purposes: “I realize you’ve been very generous to us over the decades and I don’t want to cause you anxiety of decision. If you have very clear plans for an exclusive single shape for your picture don’t let my explanation dissuade you.”¹⁴ Avedon agreed to Ginsberg’s request, and the poet sent him a touching bread-and-butter note in the form of a picture postcard of himself and Orlovsky with a handwritten message, also scribbled on by Orlovsky: “Hi Richard: Hope yr in good health & Have you heard of 1 tea spoon of Bee Pollen, a day, chewed well, has all 22 elements in the Human Bodey—known as supper Health Food—Happy apple juice to you & I’ll send you my book of poems. Tickles. Peter Orlovsky.”¹⁵

Avedon was happily complicit in Ginsberg’s shit stirring. In May 1967 the image of Ginsberg from *Nothing Personal* figured prominently in a flap over a planned poetry reading by Ginsberg at Portland State College. Just before the event, the student newspaper published an article claiming that “the school requested and [Ginsberg] complied with a request to behave . . . with some especial ‘propriety.’”¹⁶ The article was accompanied by Avedon’s photograph (fig. 4), which so outraged the college president that he seized the day’s run of the paper and suspended the editor. Ginsberg defended the image to the editor of the Portland *Oregonian*: “There is nothing in the picture to offend, unless one is offended by the sight of a not-quite-naked person; in which case any slick magazine or local newspaper carrying bathing suit or shower soap advertisement might be found offensive, but they are not. . . . I am not one to be insulted by my own physical image, especially photographed in the act of making religious hand signs.”¹⁷ He denied that his appearance at the school was “an un-American attempt to subvert our tender youth who should be in training to die in Vietnam rather than listening to filthy poetry readings.”¹⁸

The following August Dick Bakken, editor of the magazine *Salted*

... price hike is scheduled to go into effect June 19 and continue 70 cents more next year. A formal two-cent increase will hit French



the Vanguard

Friday, May 19, 1967 Portland State College, Portland, Oregon Volume 22, Number 24

Ginsberg Vows 'Propriety'

By LARRY SMITH
Entertainment Editor

Beat poet and psychedelic prophet Allen Ginsberg will appear at Portland State Monday at 3 p.m. before 730 PSC students and faculty in the Old Main Auditorium.

The PSC box office reported most of the tickets were gone at press time Wednesday. For those who miss the afternoon poetry reading, the Division of Continuing Education has scheduled an appearance in 75 Old Main at 7:30

p.m. the same day. Cost is \$1 for students and \$2.50 for outsiders. The appearance is a feature of a regularly scheduled class on drugs.

Ginsberg's appearance follows a stormy controversy here. PSC President Bradford P. Millar held up the scheduling of Ginsberg until he was sure there would be adequate crowd control for his appearance.

Ginsberg was the leader of the beat poets in the fifties. He became famous and controversial with publication of his "Howl and other Poems." The poem "Howl" featured drugs, homosexuality, madness, mysticism and four letter words.

Ginsberg also co-authored and starred in the beatnik underground movie, "Pull My Daisy." Release of the film was the occasion for a Life magazine article which thrust Ginsberg still further into the public eye.

Since the demise of the beats, Ginsberg has been active in the psychedelic movement. His aimed philosophy of love, peace and legalization of drugs has made him one of the movements chief spokesmen.

Ginsberg made a pilgrimage to India in 1964 to study mysticism first hand and has begun a less noisy poetic career. His appearances at universities and colleges have received nationwide publicity.

Famous for taking off his clothes at climactic points in his readings, Ginsberg was asked to comply with several "propriety" demands before coming to PSC. The letter of confirmation arrived Wednesday with eight cents postage due.



Allen Ginsberg will appear in Old Main auditorium 3 p.m. Monday.



Ed Andrick

Service in the Portland Room on the second floor will cost about ten per cent more. Andrick said he plans to charge 15 cents for coffee there.

Andrick expects the new prices to bring in \$70,000 in additional income next year. Most of that will be consumed by a 13-16 per cent increase in labor costs, he said.

Andrick said the price hike was the only foreseeable method of meeting increasing costs and reducing the current deficit. "If our volume drops by, say, five per cent because of it, we'll be in real trouble," he said.

At the beginning of spring term

severe cutbacks in service were implemented to help reduce the deficit. China and silverware were replaced with paper plates and plastic utensils, and the Viking Bar was closed.

The use of throw-away dishes and utensils is intended to be permanent, but the Viking Bar will be reopened in the fall, Andrick said.

Food service is budgeted for 43.4 civil service employees. Next year most of them will receive a rate of about \$45 a month. Andrick estimated he has ten student employees.

Choir Concert—Chamber Music Final Trust Fund Performance

"Dial M-for-Music" will be the theme at Portland State next week with six a cappella choir concert Wednesday, a chamber music concert Thursday, and the Columbia Trio Friday.

Under direction of Janet Howland, the PSC Music department will present the a cappella choir Wednesday, at 8 p.m. in Old Main auditorium.

The program features contemporary sacred works with brass ensemble. The Singing Vikings under Marjorie Albertson, and selections from Brahms, Camé, and Umesco. Show times will highlight the second half of the program. Admission

is 25 cents.

The Chamber Music Concert Thursday at 8 p.m. in 75 Old Main, will feature the PSC Woodwind Ensemble, Gordon Soltz, conductor, and the PSC Brass Ensemble, John Trudeau, conductor, with other members of the PSC Symphonic Band. Admission: Adults \$1; students 50 cents.

The Columbia Trio will perform Friday, at 8:30 p.m., in Old Main Auditorium.

This is the final concert in the series sponsored by the Music Performance Trust Fund of the Musicians Union and the PSC Music Committee.

Miss Oregon Viewed Tomorrow

Maureen Bassett, PSC sophomore, will enter final competition for the title of Miss U.S.A., Saturday night in Miami, Fla.

Named Miss Oregon Universe April 1, Miss Bassett has been participating in many different events all week.

The finalists were chosen Thurs-

day night but the decision will not be revealed until the Saturday telecast.

If she wins, Miss Bassett will compete for the title of Miss Universe.

Miss Bassett, 20, will return to Portland from her 10-day visit Monday.

Eligibility, Disapproval Narrow List . . .

Faculty Rate Mosser Money Competition Unappealing

By BOB MEYER
Acting News Editor

Most of the faculty won't be in the running next week when evaluations are planned for \$1000 Mosser bonuses. Out of more than 600 faculty only 154 will vie for awards. The remaining majority either said they were ineligible (45), said they wanted to be evaluated but wouldn't compete for the money (23), or said they didn't want any part of it (22).

The tally was taken on a brief questionnaire distributed by the dean of faculty's office.

Mrs. Ree Ellis, secretary to the dean of faculty, said that almost all of the faculty completed the questionnaire, and that those that did not were mostly part-time teachers.

To be eligible for an award a faculty member must have taught in at least two or three quarters an average of six credit or contact hours in at least two sections of 400 or lower level courses in each term as well as being on a full time appointment.

Mrs. Ellis said 35,000 Mosser questionnaires are being ordered and if they arrive early enough the Portland State faculty will be rated late next week, May 22-24.

The questionnaires will be in sealed envelopes until they are distributed to the class by a student. After the students rate their professor, the sheets will be returned to a sealed envelope.

At Vanguard press time Wednesday it was not yet decided whether

the envelopes would be deposited in hallway ballot boxes or taken to the departmental office.

Mrs. Ellis emphasized that students must use No. 2 pencils on the forms if they are to register on the counting machine, which is located at Eugene.

Criteria on which students will rate their professors are:

His class presentation, lecture, discussion or instructions are clearly audible.

His class presentation is logical.

His presentation is in language which I can understand.

His presentation holds my attention.

His instructions concerning assignments are clear.

His assignments are meaningful.

His assignments are of reasonable length.

He clarifies unfamiliar ideas or techniques.

He clearly explains the significance of ideas or techniques.

He stimulates my interest in the subject.

He conducts his classes in such a manner that I feel I want to attend regularly.

He has a helpful attitude toward students.

His exams or tests are fair.

His grading is fair.

Compared with all my instructors, I would rate him as follows: Students will then respond to a five-point scale for the instructor's

saying: "Among the best," "very good, but not quite among the best," "better than average," "among the acceptable," and "definitely deficient."

The faculty member must be rated by at least 30 of his students in two classes. To be included a class must have at least five students.

In the event of ties, the faculty member with the lowest academic rank will receive the monetary award. If a tie occurs between two professors of the same rank, the one teaching the greatest number of students will receive the award. The others will receive honorary awards.

Winners will be announced when the scores return from Eugene.



fig. 5

Jacob Israel Avedon, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1974, installation view, photograph Richard Avedon Studio
previous page: fig. 4 *The Vanguard*, Vol. 22, #34, May 19, 1967, cover photograph by Richard Avedon



fig. 6

Sassetta, *Saint Francis before Pope Honorius III; The Stigmatisation of Saint Francis; The Wolf of Gubbio*; from the San Sepolcro Altarpiece, 1437–44

Feathers, wrote to Avedon, asking for permission to use the *Nothing Personal* photo as well as images from the Ginsberg/Orlovsky photo shoot. A far cry from *Harper's Bazaar*, *Salted Feathers* was one of those mimeoed “little” magazines that are midwifed on a shoestring and disappear after a few issues. Bakken decided to go out with a bang by publishing a last issue, *Ginsberg/Portland*, in the form of a book, to include contributions by Ken Kesey (whose bus Ginsberg would shortly board) and to be distributed by poet/publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Press. In his letter Bakken quotes Ginsberg as saying that Robert Frank thought it one of Avedon's best photos—an encomium Ginsberg himself would repeat on many later occasions. Bakken also mentioned a radio talk show on which Ginsberg and “several old ladies” had discussed the Portland incident.¹⁹

Avedon replied enthusiastically in the affirmative to Bakken, and asked him for a copy of the tape or transcript of the radio show he had mentioned in his letter for an upcoming exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where he wished to use “documents relating to my photos.”²⁰ The MoMA show would be a major focus of Avedon's exchanges with Ginsberg over the next several years. In one letter he suggested that Ginsberg round up William Burroughs and Jean Genet (pp. 58–59) for a sequel to his Brendan Behan sitting of 1960.²¹ He even raised the possibility that Ginsberg write the catalogue text for the show.²² Clearly the exhibition was meant to be Avedon's crowning artistic achievement to date, and its panoramic possibilities preoccupied him. Scheduled quite precisely for March 1972, according to Avedon in a 1970 conversation, it would never, in the end, come to fruition, though a small *kabine*t of Avedon's images of his father were exhibited at MoMA in 1974 (fig. 5).²³

Battles of the Bards (Fathers and Sons)

The first mention of a possible sitting by Ginsberg and his father, the

poet/schoolteacher Louis Ginsberg, for Avedon appears to have occurred in October 1968.²⁴ It would take two years for the sitting to take place, at which point it would include the entire Ginsberg tribe of aunts, uncles, siblings, nieces, and nephews. Compared to other group portraits Avedon had taken—of Andy Warhol and members of the Factory (pp. 217–21), the Mission Council (pp. 162–67), and the Chicago Seven, Chicago, Illinois, November 5, 1969 (pp. 49–52)—which had required considerable effort to assemble the participants, the Ginsberg family portrait took little to arrange. Ginsberg and his father were scheduled to do a joint poetry reading at the Alexander Hamilton Hotel in Paterson, New Jersey, on May 3, 1970, in connection with the publication of Louis's new book of poems, *Morning in Spring*. Allen had promoted the book to the publisher, William Morrow, and had contributed a deep and moving introduction.²⁵ The family would gather in Paterson for the reading, and this is when the sitting would take place.

Two months earlier, in March 1970, Ginsberg had come to Avedon's studio and recorded a conversation with Avedon and writer Doon Arbus in which the photographer enthusiastically sketched out the format of his planned MoMA show. The trio looked at and talked about many of the pictures Avedon had already taken for the exhibition. In addition to elaborating Avedon's vision for the show, the conversation sheds a great deal of light on the complex dynamics of generational relationships within both Avedon's and Ginsberg's families.

A particularly pregnant moment occurs when Avedon shows Ginsberg the contacts from the Warhol sitting. The poet evokes Sassetta's panorama of St. Francis in Borgo San Sepolcro, Italy (fig. 6),²⁶ and Avedon is fascinated by the reference: “I didn't realize that . . . that's terrific,” he says. “I feel that's very much what I'd like to do with you.” Apart from demonstrating Ginsberg's remarkable art historical erudition, his allusion to Sassetta highlights the deep roots of Avedon's device of repeating a key figure in a visual narrative in different poses. Ginsberg also tosses



Robert and Pablo Frank visiting from Bronx State Hospital, my living room on East 12th Street New York, October 1984. Same Model. ARBUS/Steinberg

fig. 7

Robert and Pablo Frank, 1984, photograph and annotations by Allen Ginsberg

out Arthur Schnitzler's 1897 play *La Ronde* as a literary precedent. As they continue to talk about the Warhol proofs and contacts, Ginsberg asks about Candy Darling, then says: "It's nice to have them all naked like that."

Discussing his plans for the MoMA show, Avedon describes an exhibition that will include three hundred to four hundred portraits, all the same size so no one person is more important than the other, but "deeper, more autobiographical, not just a list of everybody in the Movement."²⁷ They talk about a contact-printing machine in the studio that prints from 8 x 10 negatives in ten seconds. Ginsberg is fascinated by the possibilities. Avedon suggests they could have several such machines at the show and make "twenty exhibitions in two nights" to "quickly get this out to the kids," a radical departure from mainstream photography shows, which travel serially and are, Arbus says, "all very precious." "It needs a museum for a kind of establishment view of it and then to the high schools," Avedon explains. Arbus comments that making the prints "on demand" would be like getting a ham sandwich at the Automat. Ginsberg is intrigued that the printer does not permit "artifing" or even cropping of the negative. Avedon is particularly focused on the timing of the show relative to the 1972 presidential election.

In addition to discussing the exhibition itself, Avedon, Arbus, and Ginsberg talk about the proposed catalogue, a hefty publication evocative of a phone book, with an image on one side of each page and text on the other. The texts were to be transcriptions of brief interviews with the portrait subjects by Arbus, during which each sitter would be given fifteen minutes to say whatever was on their mind. Arbus and Avedon felt there was something more authentic about this format than giving the sitter license to ponder, edit, and submit what they wanted to say about themselves. In the case of Avedon's father, the result is certainly raw. Jacob Avedon rambles on nervously about real estate deals he is involved in with his son, who interjects intermittently, "Of course ... I'm sure you're right, Dad. ... You sound very good. Do you feel good?" while Jacob talks

about getting deals closed and making sure that Richard and his family, rather than his second wife, Eleanor (Jacob had left Avedon's mother), are the beneficiaries of all this activity if he passes away.²⁸ It is unsettling to read; one feels the uneasiness in the spaces between the transcribed comments. Avedon describes these real estate dealings to Ginsberg and Arbus as "sort of a made-up thing that I do with him," mentioning that relations between them hadn't been good for many years and that at one point he had thought his father was senile, "but now his mind is infinitely sharper." Ginsberg expresses a more acute connection with his own father, after decades of conflict: "I was finally able to help him instead of being too embarrassed ... or unable to confront his work, which is pretty good."²⁹

The joint readings with his father, affectionately promoted as "The Battle of the Bards," were a gracious gesture by Ginsberg. Louis Ginsberg was certainly an established and respected minor poet in his own right—he was included in Louis Untermeyer's canonical *Modern American Poetry and Modern British Poetry*—but Allen was a rock star poet. This is no oxymoron: he would perform in the Rolling Thunder Revue concert tour in 1975–76 with his acolyte Bob Dylan. At times Louis must have thought himself a latter-day Job, like Larry Gopnik in the Coen Brothers' 2009 film *A Serious Man*. After dealing with Allen's mother Naomi's mental illness, and then Allen's homosexuality, etc, he saw his own reputation as a poet eclipsed by his son's. When William Carlos Williams took Ginsberg *filis* under his wing and helped him shed his early derivative style on the way to the wholly more original cadences of "Howl," to which he wrote the introduction, Ginsberg *père* might have felt slighted; Williams, a lifelong resident of nearby Rutherford, had never given him the time of day. But Louis was above all proud of his son's success in the family business. (Ginsberg's brother, Eugene Brooks, an attorney, was also a privately published poet on the side, with an assist from Allen.)

Notwithstanding all the generational *Sturm und Drang*, Allen and

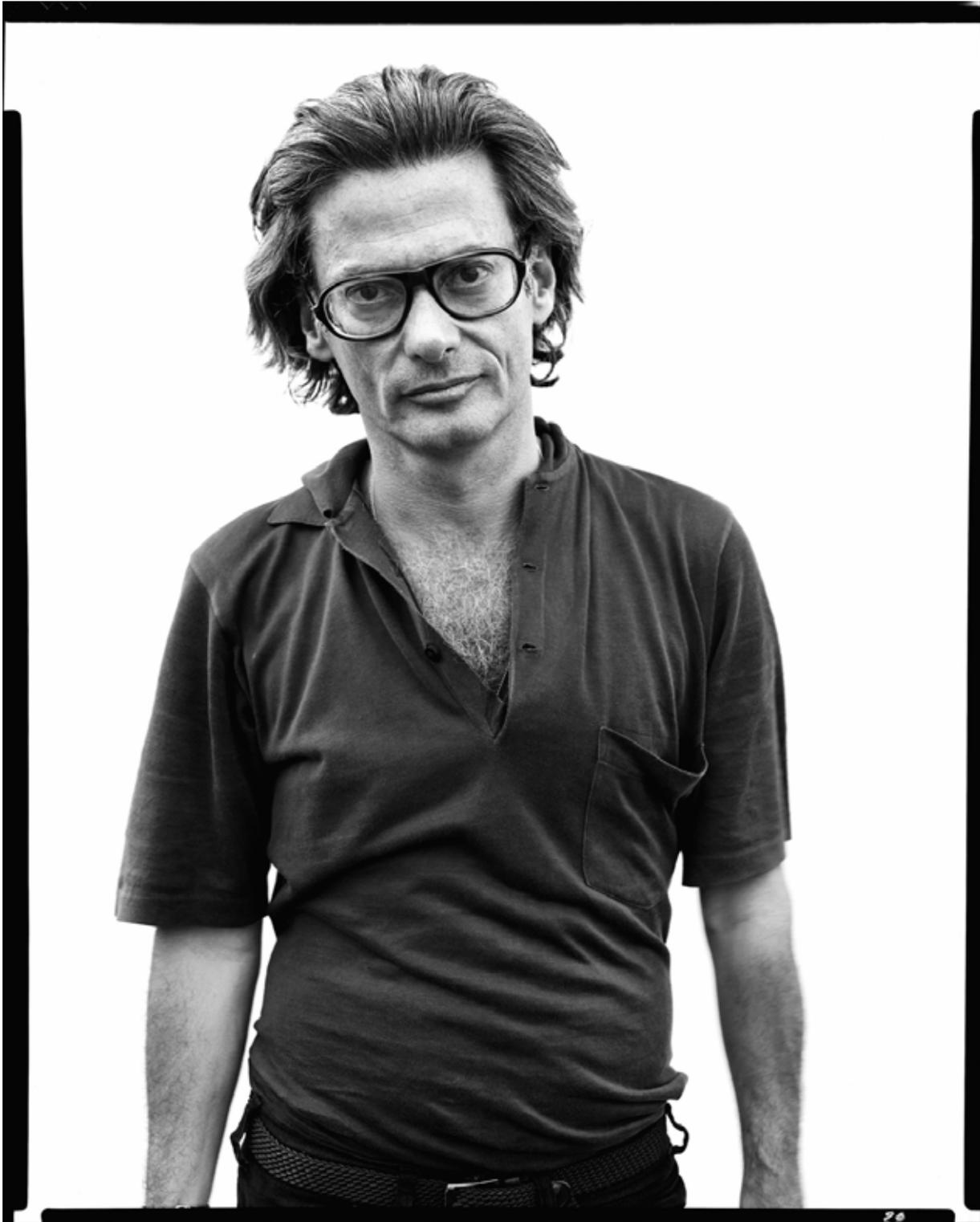


fig. 8
Richard Avedon, self-portrait, Mabou Mines, Nova Scotia, July 17, 1975



fig. 9

Richard Avedon, 1984, photograph and annotations by Allen Ginsberg

Louis were extremely close, and grew closer as time passed. No subject was taboo between them: drugs, religion, the CIA, Vietnam, Israel. *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son*, which collects their correspondence, attests to the enduring power of family ties in a world where, as the old Marxist chestnut goes, everything solid was melting into air. It is a cornerstone of the personal archive Ginsberg left behind, an important map to the territory of his life and work.

The cover of *Family Business* is by Avedon. It is a photograph of Louis and Allen, taken in Paterson on the same occasion as *Allen Ginsberg's Family*. Louis, in a suit, jacket buttoned, tie, pocket square, and white shirt, stands facing the camera, near a flagstand carrying an American flag. He is clean-shaven and functionally bald; his stance, at once soldierly and world-weary, obscures the few remaining wisps of hair he keeps short and combed. Allen, to his right, also wears a light-colored shirt, tie, and jacket, but he is disheveled and stands sideways, slightly stooped, right knee bent, gesticulating with his hands. He too is partly bald, but his hair and beard are pouring out of his skull. The flag is limp and only partly visible. This is Avedon at his finest, an essential photograph on its own and a rich sample of the bigger familyscape that would result from the same session.

Snapshot Poetics: The Eighties and Beyond³⁰

Avedon and Ginsberg had a more intermittent, though equally affectionate, relationship in the decades that followed. In the 1980s Ginsberg focused on his avocation as a photographer. Images by both Ginsberg and Avedon appeared in the winter 1985 issue of the photography magazine *Aperture*, a special issue with the theme "The Human Street." Selections from Avedon's *In the American West*, his landmark exhibition that opened that year at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, appeared along with Ginsberg's annotated snapshots of Jack Kerouac, Neal

Cassady, William Burroughs, Avedon, and the nine-hundred-pound gorilla in the room of fine art photography, Robert Frank (fig 7). (Avedon twice made the pilgrimage to Nova Scotia, in 1972 and 1975, to photograph and be photographed by the reclusive maker of *The Americans* (fig 8), and Ginsberg would write with pride about Frank's having taught him about taking pictures.) In the interview that accompanies these images in *Aperture*, Ginsberg describes an approach to photography that is quite the opposite of Avedon's: "I was always uneasy with the photographic motivation of fixing the so-called decisive moment or attempting to create something monumental out of something fleeting."³¹ Ginsberg's modest picture-taking method was more of an extension of his diary than a separate foray into another medium: "[My photos] are like the journals I keep—30 years of epiphanies and moments that I've noticed. So I notice many things, then notice that I notice, and eventually I make a picture of it."³²

Ginsberg's particular contribution to the visual vernacular was to conflate his photo album and his diary by writing captions around his images. Their patient script and ostensible matter-of-factness belie a resonant content. On his photograph of Avedon featured in *Aperture*, Ginsberg wrote: "He took a great picture of me and Peter Orlovsky naked in 1964, and gave us copies (fig 9)." The giving of images to a mystic whose primary economic system was potlatch obviously meant a lot. He would later send the studio a book of his poetry, "Inscribed for Richard Avedon / in thanks for his / eye through decades."³³

A sour note was struck briefly in 1991, in the course of an exchange on how to caption *Allen Ginsberg's Family* for an upcoming retrospective of Avedon's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.³⁴ Avedon took Ginsberg to task for pointing out the repetition of figures in the image, as if the photographer perhaps had not noticed. Avedon was exercised: "I'm stunned at your lack of visual imagination! Do you think I didn't know that I was repeating members of your family? . . . Allen,



fig. 10

John and Richard Avedon, Nova Scotia, October 21, 1973, photograph by Robert Frank

you're the poet. How is this lack of poetry possible?"³⁵

Ironically, it was Ginsberg who had helped validate this visual technique for Avedon, with his citation of the powerful art historical precedent of Sassetta's St. Francis.

By the 1990s as the lifetime achievement awards rolled in, both Avedon and Ginsberg were increasingly focused on their respective posterities. Ginsberg died in 1997. Two years later the collaborative project on the Movement that Avedon and Arbus had planned in conjunction with the proposed MoMA show finally emerged, thirty years late and in book form only, as *The Sixties*. Though not the "phone book" with integrated image and text as originally envisioned, it did record the words of some of the photographs' subjects. Given Avedon's earlier insistence on taxonomic precision and honesty—on pinning down his subjects for fifteen minutes of live, unedited words to accompany his images "to keep the truth of what they're about"³⁶—there is something oddly confected about his own biography on the book's endpaper.³⁷ The Whitney retrospective, *In the American West*, the Carnegie International, MoMA, and other art-world moments of Avedon's career are nowhere to be found in the bio—and forget about *Funny Face*, or anything to do with fashion and France, including his very productive stint at *Egoiste*. The seventy-six-year-old Avedon omits his aspirations as a "fine artist" in favor of foregrounding his street cred. The late Allen Ginsberg, featured prominently in the book, was already peacefully ascendant as the patron saint of Beats, hippies, and punks. Our visual memory of him remains bound up in Avedon's photographs.

Without being overly reductive, we might consider Avedon's shift to the Movement from fashion in the context of his own family dynamics. Avedon's son, John, was a draft-age young teen in the mid- to late 1960s, deeply involved in political protest, Eastern religion, and alternative education (fig. 10). For Avedon *père*, Ginsberg may have been an acceptable version of what Avedon *filis* could become. At the same time, Ginsberg was another middle-aged, middle-class Jewish guy just like Avedon, only more comfortable in his own skin than Avedon in reconciling his radical artistic ambitions with his plain origins. At some level I wish that my parents would have found Allen Ginsberg an acceptable role model for *me* in my teenage years, but at the same time I am relieved that they never abandoned the more conventional goal of doctor/lawyer (with dentist/accountant as default setting). After all, one needs constancy to rebel *against*. Louis Ginsberg held his own against his son Allen, and vice versa, and both men lived richer lives having each other.

Because of its more limited exhibition history, the Ginsberg family portrait is less well-known than Avedon's Warhol, Mission Council, and Chicago Seven groupings. It is also the subtlest of the four, because it has only one celebrity to hook the viewer. Rather than a phalanx of powerful or bohemian or charismatic people, its cast of characters is more mundane and therefore less daunting. But it is no less magisterial. One has only to glance at Elsa Dorfman's snapshot of the family standing against Avedon's white paper backdrop in between "takes" (fig. 11) to understand just how transformative Avedon's "artified" image is. Avedon's portrait makes a Jewish poet clan, *fressing* after a mock-Oedipal literary battle (think Sassetta meets Sarah Lee), into a monumental visual meditation on family at an American moment driven by generational conflicts. It is Avedon's gift to us.

- 1 Norman Mailer, "Ode to Allen Ginsberg," *Swank Magazine* 8, no. 2 (May 1961), p. 52.
- 2 Allen Ginsberg, "Howl," in *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956), p. 3.
- 3 Winthrop Sargeant, "A Woman Entering a Taxi in the Rain," *New Yorker*, November 8, 1958.
- 4 Ginsberg, "Howl," p. 3.
- 5 Allen Ginsberg, Letter to the Editor, May 29, 1967, in *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Bill Morgan (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008), p. 330.
- 6 Richard Avedon to Allen Ginsberg, October 21, 1991, Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.
- 7 Mark Holborn, "Allen Ginsberg's Sacramental Snapshots" (interview), *Aperture* 101 (Winter 1985), p. 13.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Allen Ginsberg to Richard Avedon, May 10, 1971, Avedon Archives, The Richard Avedon Foundation, New York (hereafter "Avedon Archives").
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Allen Young to Richard Avedon (cc. Allen Ginsberg), October 18, 1972, Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.
- 12 Allen Ginsberg to Richard Avedon, February 15, 1980, Avedon Archives.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid. Avedon had previously declined to release additional images from the shoot, citing his wish to keep them intact and together for a forthcoming show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Richard Avedon to Dick Bakken, November 22, 1968, Avedon Archives.
- 15 Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky to Patricia McKay and Richard Avedon, March 9, 1980, Avedon Archives.
- 16 Ginsberg, *Letters*, pp. 330–32. This letter is alleged to have turned up in Ginsberg's CIA file, which he eventually obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Dick Bakken to Richard Avedon, August 9, 1968, Avedon Archives. *Ginsberg/Portland* never came to pass. A few issues of *Salted Feathers* were published between 1964 and 1967, and one final issue in 1975 before the magazine expired definitively.
- 20 Richard Avedon to Dick Bakken, November 22, 1968, Avedon Archives.
- 21 Richard Avedon to Allen Ginsberg (telegram), September 9, 1968, Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.
- 22 Richard Avedon to Allen Ginsberg (telegram), September 13, 1968, Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.
- 23 Doon Arbus, Richard Avedon, and Allen Ginsberg in conversation, March 9, 1970, audiocassette recording, Avedon Archives.
- 24 Richard Avedon to Allen Ginsberg, October 24, 1968, Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.
- 25 The introduction, "Confrontation with Louis Ginsberg's Poems," is reprinted in *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001).
- 26 Sassetta (Stefano di Giovanni) was a fifteenth-century painter from Sienna whose masterpiece was the seven-panel, double-sided altarpiece depicting the life of St. Francis that he created for the high altar of San Francesco, in Borgo San Sepolcro, Italy. The panels are now in the collection of the National Gallery, London.
- 27 Arbus, Avedon, and Ginsberg in conversation, 1970.
- 28 Transcript dated December 14, 1969, on verso photo of Jacob Avedon.
- 29 Arbus, Avedon, and Ginsberg in conversation, 1970.
- 30 "Snapshot Poetics" is borrowed from the title of a Ginsberg publication: *Snapshot Poetics: Allen Ginsberg's Photographic Memoir of the Beat Era* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993).
- 31 *Aperture* 101, p. 8.
- 32 Ibid., pp. 10–12.
- 33 *Allen Ginsberg, Poems All Over the Place, Mostly 'Seventies* (Wheaton, MD: Cherry Valley Editions, 1978), with a holograph inscription by Ginsberg to Avedon, Avedon Archives.
- 34 *Richard Avedon: Evidence 1944–1994*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1994.
- 35 Richard Avedon to Allen Ginsberg, October 28, 1991, Avedon Archives. How Ginsberg responded to Avedon's remonstrations is unknown; all we have is a holograph notation by Ginsberg on the letter: "Avedon! — I've answered. File it."
- 36 Arbus, Avedon, and Ginsberg in conversation, 1970.
- 37 The bio reads in full: "Richard Avedon (b. 1923) was the editor, with his classmate James Baldwin, of *The Magpie*, the literary magazine at De Witt Clinton High School in the Bronx. In 1942 he joined the photography department of the U.S. merchant marine. He was a staff photographer at *Harper's Bazaar* (1951–1965) and *Vogue* (1966–1988), and he collaborated with James Baldwin on *Nothing Personal* (1964), a book about the civil rights movement. In 1992 he became the first staff photographer at *The New Yorker*."



fig. 11
The Ginsberg family being photographed by Richard Avedon, photograph by Elsa Dorfman