

# 1959<sub>a</sub>

Richard Avedon's *Observations* and Robert Frank's *The Americans* establish the dialectical parameters of New York School photography.

In the twentieth century, photography's emergence as a major force in cultural representation usually marked a shift in power relations between the avant-garde and everyday industrial mass culture. This is well known in relation to Soviet and Weimar avant-garde photography around 1928, but less known and understood in relation to photography in New York after World War II, a cultural context considered mostly in terms of the "Triumph of American Painting."

## Two families of photography

Edward Steichen's (1879–1973) blockbuster exhibition of postwar photographic ideology, "The Family of Man," at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, included a large number of both American social documentary photographers, such as Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), Russell Lee (1903–86), Ben Shahn (1898–1969), and Margaret Bourke White (1904–71), and photographers who would subsequently emerge as the key figures of New York School photography, such as Lisette Model (1901–83), Helen Levitt (born 1913), Sid Grossman (1913–55), Roy DeCarava (born 1919), Richard Avedon (1923–2004), Diane Arbus (1923–71), Robert Frank (born 1924), and Louis Faurer (1916–2001). The exhibition signaled in many ways the intensity with which the relations between photographic avant-gardes and the mass public, and between two generations of American photographers, had to be reorganized.

The first group of New York School photographers emerged from the Film and Photo League (founded in 1928), and its offshoot from 1936, the Photo League, initially hoping to forge a union between progressive sociopolitical forces and photographic practice. Most postwar photography in New York served capitalist consumer culture, almost entirely subject to fashion and advertising. Throughout the thirties, books and magazines had disseminated American social documentary via the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Farm Security Administration (FSA), for example Margaret Bourke White and writer Erskine Caldwell's (born 1903) *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937); Berenice Abbott's (1898–1991) *Changing New York* (1939); Dorothea Lange and economist Paul Schuster Taylor's *An American Exodus* (1939) and Walker Evans (1903–75) and James Agee's (1909–55) *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). In contrast, postwar photographic books and illustrated magazines

such as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Life* magazine, in the paradox of their simultaneous climax and irreversible decline, struggled to survive the growing dominance of the cinema and television.

Alexey Brodovitch (1898–1971) became a key figure in the formation of New York School photography after his appointment as a director at *Harper's Bazaar* in 1934. A White Russian officer who had left the Soviet Union for Paris when the Bolsheviks came to power, Brodovitch came to the United States in 1930, bringing nostalgia for the lost culture of the Czarist empire, and a desire to preserve the *haut goût* of its last cultural flowerings, such as Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. He used this almost pathological longing for a revival of aristocratic elegance and style to mask the vulgarity of American consumer culture with the seductive foils of distinction, particularly the deception that fashion could perforate class boundaries: incalculable social envy would release the new middle classes' purchasing power. Brodovitch's second resource was his snobbish embrace of the avant-gardes that he had encountered during the twenties in Paris, recruiting their radicality to service the emerging apparatus of mass-cultural domination. Thus, he wrote as early as 1930:

*The publicity artist of today must be not only a fine craftsman with the faculty of finding new means of presentation ... he must be able to perceive and preconceive the tastes, aspirations and habits of the consumer-spectator and the mob. The modern publicity artist must be a pioneer and a leader, he must fight against routine and the bad taste of the mob.*

Brodovitch's first (and only) photographic book, *Ballet* (1945), published in New York in 1945, with an accompanying essay by the dance critic Edwin Denby, appears to pay a grand and mournful homage to the beautiful remains of the Ballets Russes. His one-time appearance as a photographer, as Christopher Phillips has lucidly stated, "is equally exhilarating and at the same time haunting." Indeed, what these fugitive shapes and unexpected transformations ultimately suggest is the phantasmagoria of memory itself.

*Ballet* is the first New York School book where photography's promise to serve as sociopolitical documentary in the twentieth century is perverted into a melancholic invocation of the vanished elitist bourgeois culture of the nineteenth. Brodovitch knew that this homage was as futile as the images were fugitive: the price that

▲ 1929, 1930a, 1935

● 1947a, 1949a, 1960b

■ 1938

▲ 1919



1 • Alexey Brodovitch, page from *Ballet*, 1945

photography had to pay to deliver the reminiscences of elitist culture was to succumb to the demands of an ever-intensifying culture of spectacle (evident in the book's cinematic layout as much as in its shift in focus, from the dancers' bodies to the effects of photographic technologies). Thereafter, Brodovitch refrained from taking photographs, but he became the teacher and art director for a generation of photographers, masterminding the medium's transformation from social documentary into product propaganda.

### From *USSR* to *Harper's Bazaar*

When in 1949 Brodovitch conceived what would soon be called "the archetypal graphic design magazine of the twentieth century," he reconfigured many avant-garde strategies (from Picasso to Pollock) to acquire a sophisticated industrial arsenal of advertising. His characteristic layouts for *Portfolio Magazine* and *Harper's Bazaar*, with their extreme variations of image size and cinematic shifts from close-up to long shot, were montaged on double-page spreads that expanded even the panoramic vision of *Ballet*. Ironically, Brodovitch (just like his fellow Russian émigré, Alexander Liberman, art director of *Vogue*) derived his most successful graphic and photographic strategies from work that Russian artists including El Lissitzky and Aleksandr Rodchenko had produced for Stalin's Ministry of Propaganda in publications such as *USSR in Construction*. Thus Brodovitch accomplished for American magazine design what Edward Steichen had achieved slightly earlier for the new genre of exhibition design. In his famous exhibition "The Road to Victory in 1942" (in collaboration with Herbert Bayer), Steichen had resuscitated Soviet photographic (exhibition) design from the late twenties, bringing the new genre to a final American climax in "The Family of Man" (in collaboration with the architect Paul Rudolph).

Brodovitch's legacy is best embodied by his students Richard Avedon and Irving Penn (born 1917), who were enrolled at the legendary Design Laboratory he taught from 1933 at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Arts and from 1941 at New York's New

School for Social Research (the home of the Film and Photo League from 1928 until its abolition under McCarthyism in the fifties). Other Design Laboratory students included Arbus, Eve Arnold (born 1913), Ted Croner (born 1922), Saul Leiter (born 1923), Model, Hans Namuth, Ben Rose (born 1916), and Garry Winogrand (1928–84). Penn and Avedon received their first commissions from Brodovitch at *Harper's Bazaar*, Penn later becoming associated with Brodovitch's archrival, Alexander Liberman at *Vogue*, who defined the parameters of New York School photography:

*There was a thirst for new visual sensations to feed those growing modern monsters, magazines.... Penn and the key editors at Vogue were conscious of the very special and historic time in which they were living.... The early forties was a period of violent change, with war and the Holocaust as staggering tragedies. During the war, there was a sense of a new beginning in cultural New York, a tabula rasa of the past and even the dreadful present.... At the same time, there was a curious convergence between Penn's new vision and the great American ready to wear revolution. With war in Europe and the Pacific and USA Fashion on its own, Vogue proclaimed a new era.*

More than any of their peers in the New York School (especially those emerging from the Film and Photo League) who remained involved with the sociopolitical legacies of the American documentary tradition, Avedon and Penn embodied the photographic agenda of the postwar generation. Walker Evans, although revered and supportive of the younger photographers, became the target of generational animus. For example, in an astonishingly erroneous description and historical combination of two utterly unrelated photographers, Richard Avedon stated:

*I didn't like Walker Evans, that is until now. I thought his work was boring, precious, empty, without emotion, a system. I used to do sort of jokes about Walker Evans and his camera and Ansel Adams and his. I didn't see the sort of social part of it, spending the day in front of a picket fence or a redwood tree waiting for the light to be right.*

Avedon's closest friend, and in many ways his photographic opponent, Diane Arbus, seems to have echoed that attitude on the occasion of the Walker Evans retrospective at MoMA in 1971:

*First I was totally whammied by it. Like there is a photographer, it was so endless and pristine. Then by the third time I saw it, I realized how it really bores me. Can't bear most of what he photographs.*

### From weapon to style

Richard Avedon's first book, *Observations* (1959), a collection of portraits seemingly selected according to the proto-Warholian principle of their subjects' media fame, with "comments" by writer Truman Capote (1924–84), was designed by Brodovitch using his idiomatic, stylized neoclassical Bodoni typeface, the oversized slipcase decorated in the red, white, and blue of a newly affirmed American identity. *Observations* gives a better sense of the new tasks of photography than most publications of that time, firstly by

announcing, just as all concerns for the social collective had disappeared from the political agenda, that photography would have to completely detach itself from mass culture and the sociopolitical subjects of the thirties and forties. Secondly, rather than representing the mass subject's everyday life within industrial capitalism, American photography would now depict the spectacularized star subject of the culture industries. Functioning as a conduit between the mirage of the subject and the commodity object, photography would compel the mass subject to acquire the substitutions that compensate for the loss of subjective experience. One of Avedon's most celebrated devices is to stage his figures in front of white surfaces, and to print the images with the frame and numbers of the contact sheet, which—in spite of its modernist semblance of self-referentiality—foregrounds the branded identity of the photographer and the production of photography as the actual *subjects* of all photographs. More importantly, it physically dislocates the subject from the actual spaces of social relations and production (urban or rural, work or leisure, public or private) in order to invest it with the scopic magnitude necessary for the idolatry of the star subject.

Irving Penn published his first photographic book, *Moments Preserved*, in 1960. He designed it in Brodovitch style and, just like Avedon, made the portrait his primary “artistic” genre outside of his fashion work, following similar principles of spectacularization. However, Penn's resuscitation of still-life photography for advertising was his lasting hallmark, coaxing even fruits and flowers into the service of the commodity aesthetic. Taking his cues from the magic realism of thirties photography (a fusion of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Surrealism), Penn mobilized the austerity and sobriety of latent neoclassicism to ennoble something as banal as a cosmetics pot with the radiance of a spiritual object.

Another strand of New York School photography draws more emphatically on those earlier practices where photography was intertwined with social and political realities. Two important figures attempted to maintain this engagement after World War II: Helen Levitt and Lisette Model, who had emigrated from Paris in 1938 to escape Nazi prosecution. Both women had been active in cultural politics, Levitt joining the Film and Photo League, which—following the Soviet models of the late twenties—attempted to conceive of film and photography as publicly accessible, politicized cultural practices. Nevertheless, Levitt's photographs at first seemed suspended between the anecdotal surrealism of Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004) and the documentary realism of Walker Evans. While Cartier-Bresson's theory of the “decisive moment” implied that chance encounters and surreal constellations were compelling evidence of the subject's access to unique forms of independence and self-affirmation, Walker Evans's documentary realism took its confidence from a deep-seated belief that the bonds of social communication and political responsibility would not be abandoned. However, once it had become clear that neither position could be sustained, Levitt's photographs started to expose the disappearance of photography's documentary abilities. She retreated into the theatrical world of children [2], seeing in them the last dimension of authentic subjectivity, acting in spaces of

exemption and enacting their utopian versions of a future community in the face of a manifest disappearance of social relations.

Roy DeCarava's work is indebted to Levitt, and similarly emerges from the dual influences of Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans. It shifts social documentary from universal principles of political and social change to the representation of a particular social group, notably in his extraordinary collaboration with Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), which focuses on the life of an African-American family in Harlem, presented as an autobiographical report from the perspective of its oldest member, the grandmother. The first-person narrative emphasizes not only the singular specificity of the speaker's culture, but also the differences of race and class that the subject represents, both as imposed by the regulations and regimes of its racist oppressors and as voluntarily embraced in a gesture of counteridentification. The introduction of the various family members and the sequencing of the images, alternating between close-ups, medium shots and long shots, simulate the cinematic flow of a documentary film, while the oppositional photographic traditions of narrative and document are equally pronounced.

It sometimes seems that DeCarava's in-depth account of the family narrative with its emphasis on the “normalcy” of social life in Harlem set out to distinguish itself from the anonymous, random documentation of the black population in James Agee and Walker Evans's accounts of the rural South. DeCarava's anchoring of the photographs in a first-person narrative account and his focusing the documentary images on one family invest the subjects and their community with spatial and social groundedness and a sense of agency, redefining the abstract universalizing of earlier documentary photographers. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* can, therefore, be read either backward—in terms of its differences from the political universality of thirties and forties social documentary photography—or forward—as open opposition to the anomic universality that came to govern books such as *Observations* four years later. The sense of social groundedness, in a space exempt from universal anonymity, is conveyed not only through DeCarava's careful depictions of his



2 • Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1940  
Silver gelatin print

▲ *Robert Rauschenberg, 1969* ● *Helen Levitt, 1940*

subjects, but also in the photographs' very tonality. Hardly anyone else in twentieth-century photography succeeded in investing the extreme tonality of black-and-white photography with the metaphoric intensity of a refuge of identity, in which the color of racial segregation is turned into the ground of social solidarity.

### From caricatures to counterportraits

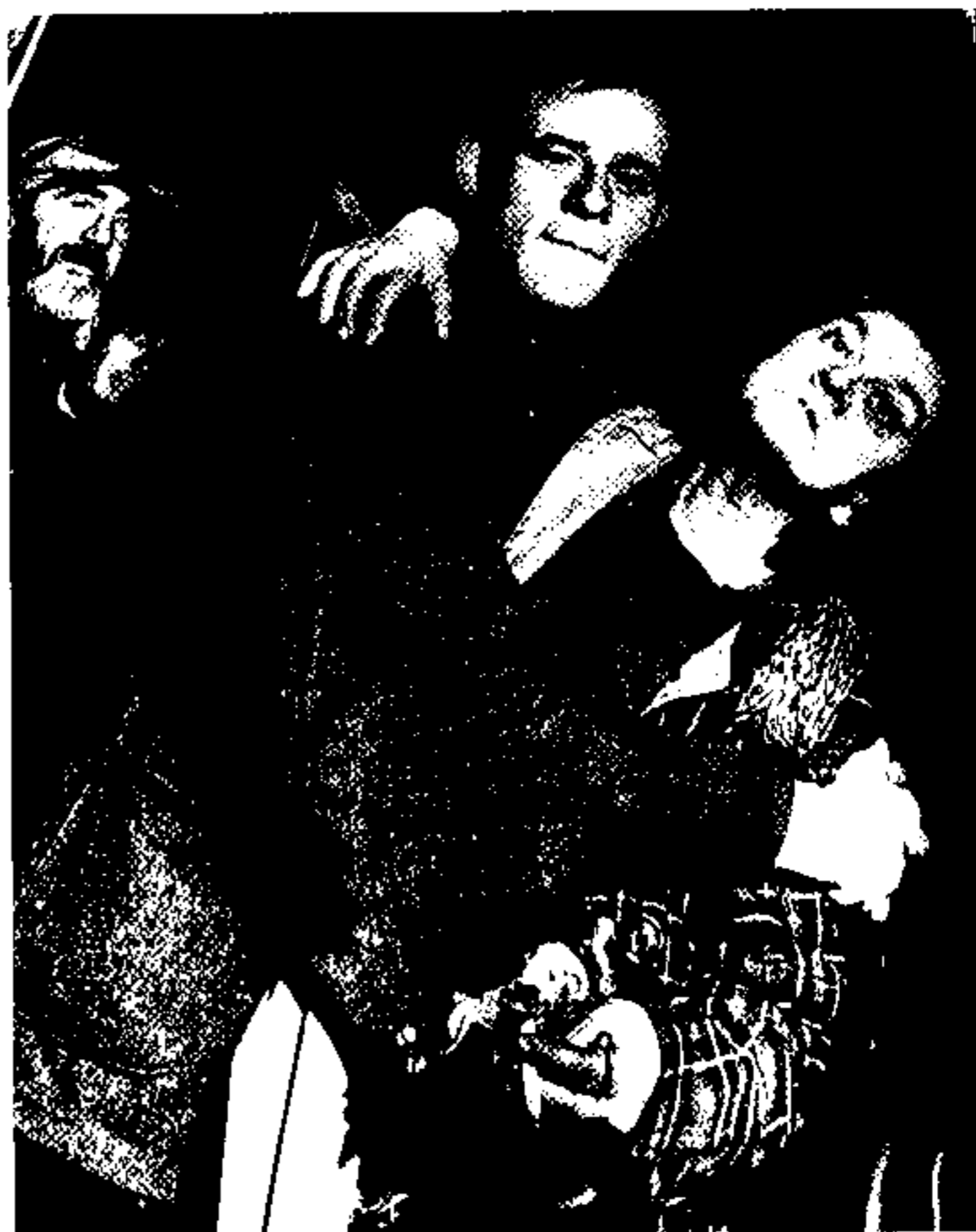
Lisette Model published her first images in 1932 in *Regards*, the magazine of the French Communist Party (comparable to Willi Münzenberg's *AIZ* in Weimar Germany). She framed and captioned her images of bourgeois idlers at the Promenade des Anglais with a venomous irony to match the most aggressive caricatures of Honoré Daumier in the nineteenth century or George Grosz in the twentieth. It would be plausible to situate photography within the tradition of satirical illustration and caricature, reassigning social critique and revelatory travesty to the photograph, especially since progressive artists and writers in Europe during the twenties and thirties had explored communicative aspects of popular culture that had been increasingly obscured by modernism. Before them, caricaturists such as Daumier, Paul Gavarni, and Jean-Jacques Grandville had already addressed the problems of the distribution form as well as the need to engage with a different mass public.

Model did not seek her sitters from glamorous media representation, but in the street. The grotesque authenticity of her images of Manhattan's lumpenproletariat contrasts sharply with Avedon's and Penn's spectacularized subjectivity, and her counterportraits of social deviancy, transvestites, beggars, or inebriated eccentrics [3] identify with the marginalized and the social outcasts not in order to romanticize their abject lot and elevate it into a photographic picturesque, but by insisting on the subject's innate incommensurability in the face of its increasing assimilation to spectacle and consumption.

Thus the counterportrait as a photographic genre had already emerged by the thirties, and governed the work of the second generation of photographers, such as Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand but particularly Diane Arbus, whose teacher Model became in 1956. However, the subject of the counterportrait is no longer an emerging proletarian class or the bourgeois subject in the process of disintegration (as in August Sander's [1876–1964] *Antlitz der Zeit* of 1929). Rather, the photograph as caricature now produces images of the grotesque disfigurements of subjectivity under the social policies of neglect and abandonment resulting from increasing class inequality in postwar American history.

Model made some of her most remarkable photographs immediately after her arrival in New York in 1938. Resuscitating Atget's topos of the spatial play of reflections in shop windows, she selected fragments of the body and sutured them into the windows' reflecting surfaces. Like a found montage, these images mapped the bodily fragment and the fetish in a highly compressed photographic representation, seemingly the subject's only accessible space.

Usher Fellig (1899–1968) came to the US aged ten from Zloczew (now in Poland) and took the name Weegee. In many ways Model's



3 • Lisette Model, *Sammy's Bar, New York, 1940*  
Silver-gelatin print

counterpart and rival, he apparently introduced himself to Brodovitch at *Harper's Bazaar*, stating that the magazine had published enough of Model's work and urging him to fire her and publish him. The émigré's blatant competitiveness took its cues from his understanding of the behavioral structures of everyday life in his adopted homeland. *Naked City* (1945), Weegee's first book, programmatically identified the new social relations and spaces of his photographs just as Walter Benjamin had diagnosed the sites of Atget's photographs in 1934: as the scenes of crimes. *Naked City* enforced the insight that from now on the photograph could justify its existence only if its iconography, temporality, and locations operated in the spectacular manner of film (ironically, a 1948 film called *Naked City* was inspired by Weegee's book). From Lewis Hine to the Farm Security Administration, photography had functioned, in part, as social documentary, if not as activist protest and intervention. Now, it recorded crimes and accidents as the primary tropes of the anomic conditions of social life. Weegee's photographs marked the point when documentarian compassion and political responsibility had degenerated to cold voyeurism and a sadistic desire to stare at others' suffering, whether victims of accidents or the defeated enemies of the social order (criminals). Weegee also became the first in a line of early sixties artists—such as Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol—who recognized that the forces of random order and breakdown would have to converge in an aesthetic where social relations figure merely as accident or outright catastrophe.

1950-1959



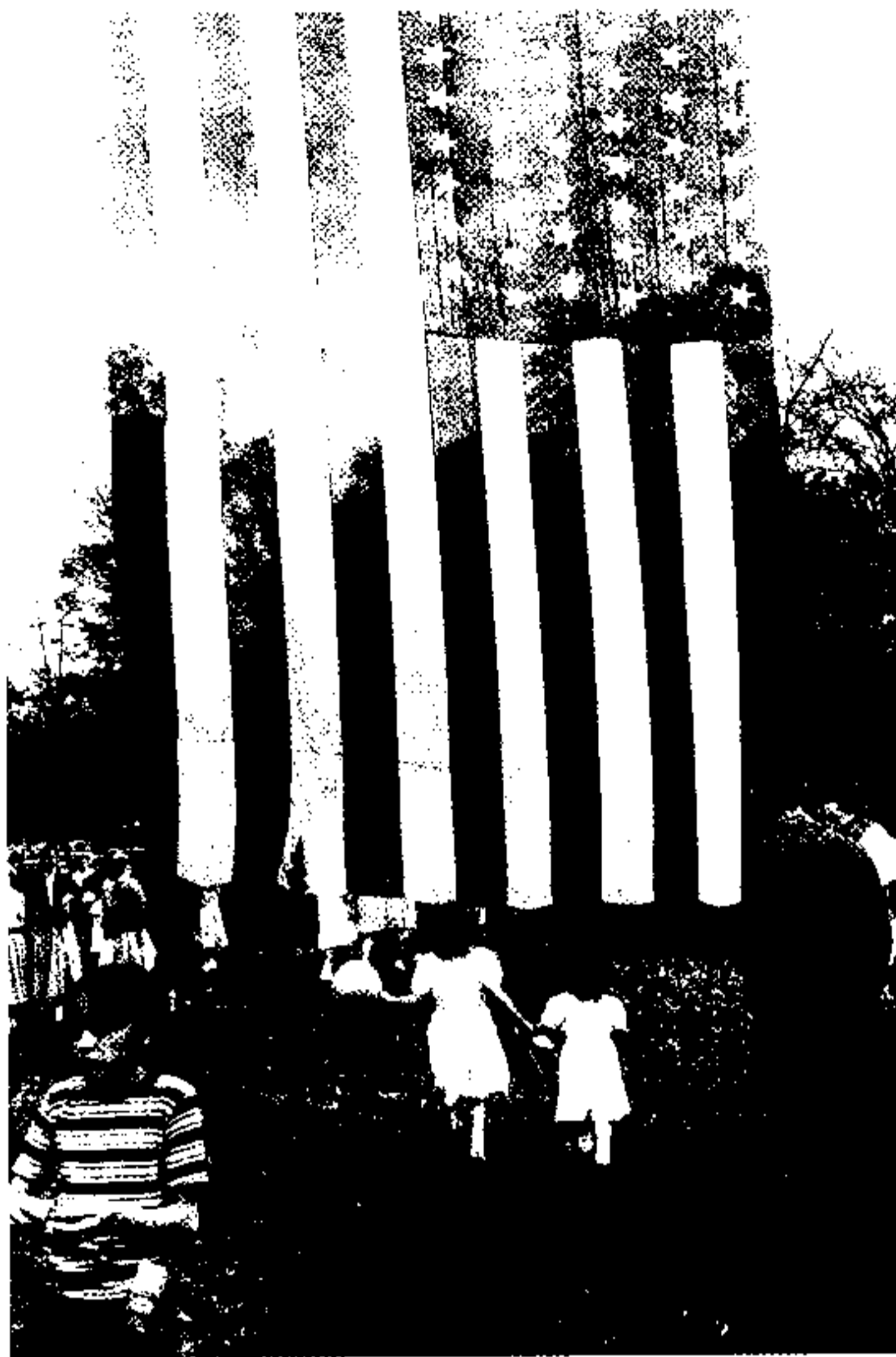
4 • Weegee, *Coney Island Beach, New York, 1940*  
Silver print



5 • Diane Arbus, *Identical Twins, Rozel, New Jersey, 1967*  
S-von-gelatine print

One of the most striking images in *Naked City* is Weegee's double-page spread of Coney Island bathers [4]: collectively remembered images of the politically activated masses of the thirties appear as the first acephalic mass of leisure culture. (These images clearly inspired Steichen's double-page endpapers in his 1955 *The Family of Man*, where Pat English's *Life* magazine photographs of an even more disciplined mass of English spectators emasculate the once radical concepts of the mass public sphere even more convincingly.)

After his move to New York from Paris in 1947, the Swiss Robert Frank contributed a distinctly different project to postwar New York photography. Initially on a similar trajectory to that of his colleagues (with magazine work for Brodovitch's *Harper's Bazaar*, fashion photography for *McCall's*, and early interest from Steichen, who included six of his images in "The Family of Man"), Frank came to situate his work mainly in an explicit dialogue with Walker Evans (who along with Brodovitch supported Frank's successful application for a Guggenheim fellowship in 1954). His contemplation of the methods and subjects of the American documentary legacy during road trips across the United States led to his book *The Americans*, even in its title paying tribute to Walker Evans's famous *American Photographs*. (Frank's book was first published as *Les Américains* in Paris in 1958, and subsequently in New York in 1959).



6 • Robert Frank, *Fourth of July—Jay, New York*, no. 43 from *The Americans*, 1955-6

of Weimar society in his *Antlitz der Zeit*, a work to which she was introduced in the late fifties. By constructing a photographic universe of outsiders [5], she simultaneously inverts Sander's positivist sociological optimism and Avedon's techniques of isolating and spectacularizing the subject. Her universe is ordered not by class or profession, nor by the sitters' seduction as substitutional image, but by the degree to which their abject social isolation gives evidence that universal assimilation to the principles of the consumerist mass subject had not yet taken hold. Her solidarity with her sitters originates not in compassion, but in her more complex understanding of the fragility of the processes of subject formation, and the tragic consequences of their continuing destruction.

#### FURTHER READING

Max Kozloff, *New York: Capital of Photography* (New York: Jewish Museum, and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007)

Jane Livingston, *The New York School: Photography 1930-1963* (New York: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 1992)

Janet Malcolm, *Diane and Nikon: Essays on Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1997)

Elisabeth Sussman, *Diane Arbus: Revelations* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003)

The American road trip became a European compulsion, just as the Grand Tour to Italy had been in the eighteenth century. In Frank's case, it led to an account of social and political tendencies in his new country, of roads not taken, and of roads ahead. In many ways comparable to Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* in 1946 (which also looked at the culture of the United States as a panorama of the future), the book's eighty-three images not only articulate a vision defined by Frank's recent departure from the Europe of the Holocaust and totalitarianism's destruction of subjectivity, but they also probe the future of social relations and subjectivity in the most powerful nation state to emerge in the postwar period. The American edition had an introduction by Jack Kerouac, the beat poet of *On the Road*, and its images, such as the barber shop and the interiors, often pay tribute to Walker Evans, simultaneously recognizing that social relations and their political organization—which documentary photography might, erroneously, have considered as accessible, if not transparent—had been lost for ever, shrouded in the sign systems of automobile locomotion and media consumption. Nevertheless, at least four images are still devoted to the recognition of labor, and while Frank's photographs of workers at the conveyor belt are as blurry as Brodovitch's frames of the Ballets Russes fifteen years before, in Frank's case the haze indicates doubt over photography's access to social relations rather than hallucinatory evocations of the past.

Frank's acute observations of the rigid racial segregation that he came to know in fifties America are probably more important. While contemplative, *The Americans* is still marked by the documentary impulse to make photography a tool of political enlightenment and social change and Frank's leitmotifs signal his diagnostic clarity: the repetition and central placement of images of the American flag [6], the car, and the technologies of media culture (movie theaters, television sets and juke boxes) identify the forces shaping the growing dominance of American consumer culture and anomic society. At every turn of the road, Frank seems to gaze upon the New World not just with the wide-eyed amazement of the European newcomer, but also with shock that this is the model of things to come.

The career of Diane Arbus embodies all the contradictions of the New York School, and, as its most significant photographer, she concludes its history. After brief training with Berenice Abbott and Alexey Brodovitch, she worked as a fashion photographer with her husband Allan Arbus during the early fifties. In 1956, after abandoning fashion, she took classes with Lisette Model, finding "the courage to be herself." As Allan Arbus noted: "That was Lisette. Three sessions and Diane was a photographer." When it comes to the dialectics between the mass subject and the star subject, one could argue that Arbus is the counterpart to both Avedon and Warhol (her junior by five years), the first "*photographe maudit*" of the twentieth century. Typically, Arbus stated her position early on, saying that she would "much rather be a fan of freaks than of movie stars, because movie stars get bored with their fans, and freaks really love for someone to pay them honest attention." Arbus maps Model's photographic realism onto the archival typology of subjectivity that August Sander had famously developed in his systematic portrayal