Working up a sweat is no longer in style. That is to say, labor is not in style; the deindustrialization of our economy is said to be at hand. Here is a new age—postindustrial, postalienation, posteconomic despair. We have discovered the magic and play of the office; our days are filled with enchanting encounters with microcoordinated friends. We have discovered economic salvation in computer software, artificial intelligence, corporate takeovers, investment planning, and the spectacles of advertising and entertainment. From this day forward, capital will be generated through the production and distribution of signs, or more purely, by the reconfiguration of money itself. We will concentrate on floppy disks, fiber optics, credit cards, and advertising copy while ignoring the social implications of these products. For these implications have been lost in the rhetoric of the information economy and in the abstraction of the signs themselves. Our well-dressed data blind us to larger concerns.

Many American cities, facing the decline of heavy industry, found a cure in postindustrial magic, and the rest of the United States now strives to mirror this success. But this new economy is an imaginary one, constructed by rhetoric; the basic political realities of this economy go unacknowledged. First of all, no matter how complete the revolution seems, hard labor has not been eliminated. It merely has been shifted out of sight, to Mexico, Taiwan, and other countries where wages are low and unions nonexistent. Secondly, heavy industry still plays an important role in many regions of the United States, even if such industry is treated as an embarrassment. Further, it must be pointed out that much of the growth in the information economy is the result of increased Defense Department spending. And most importantly, it should be recognized that a pernicious class structure accompanies this new economy, a structure that privileges the managerial class and the elite at the expense of the hourly wage-earner, the poor, and the less educated. In fact, the new economy has been accompanied by a general resurgence of authority across the board in business and government. Upon close examination, we find that the power base of America’s postindustrial society is precisely the conservative business class currently in power.
Examine, for example, how citizens of lesser means have been treated in this new economy. Armed with “laws” of economics that justify higher unemployment as the natural cost of economic recovery, the Reagan administration and the American business community have attempted to establish a permanent class of unemployed and underemployed Americans. The original alibi for this action, the famous “trickle-down” theory, claimed that the lower class would eventually benefit from the increased wealth of the upper class. Currently, the difficulties of the lower class are alleviated through statistical manipulation, or by ignoring the issue entirely. But as political theorist Göran Therborn has pointed out, economic stability did not require the creation of this marginalized class.

As Therborn shows, statistical comparisons of the economic conditions of all developed countries over the last twenty years demonstrate no inevitable connections between inflation, recovery, and unemployment. Therborn, however, did notice that countries with strong policy commitments to full employment in place prior to the most recent world recession found ways to keep unemployment low throughout and after this recession. It seems that each government’s commitment to employment made all the difference.

Obviously, no commitment of this nature exists in the United States. Instead, we are offered the fantasy of high tech, a fantasy that obscures the real social consequences of postindustrial production. Capitalism seems more heroic than ever—information commodities seem to generate spontaneously from deep within the system, bodied forth as evidence of the utopia to come. We are surrounded by the corporate sublime, by the promise of a new age of pure information and pure capital. Communication seems boundless, and we count on its speed and abundance to bring about a better world. But in spite of this plenitude, we have only a narrow understanding of the world. For behind this information economy, and behind our information itself, can be found the same viewpoint, the same class, the same owners. Competing opinions and conflicting realities have been excluded from the postindustrial revolution.

The present condition of art can tell us much about the nature of communication in our “new” society. Artists have always been the “entrepreneurs” of sign production; throughout this century they have contended with competition from the mass media. Strategies for survival have usually counted on art to function as a critical space, a place where temporary, strategic autonomy can be found. It is this critical space that we are in danger of losing entirely. For in the information economy, a monopoly on sign production has been encouraged—a monopoly on human communication. Corporations affect more and more information; this includes not only newspapers and television, but art exhibitions as well. This corporate influence is reflected not only in direct ownership of information, but also in the very form communication takes. Communication has become infused with the powerful and fascinating effects of advertising. These effects not only sell products, they also threaten to overwhelm substantive discourse entirely, affecting the content of everything from news broadcasts to presidential elections. Advertising (and within advertising, fashion) is now the master discourse, its logic unites and governs all forms of sign production in present-day capitalism. Art, which has long contested the media’s ambition to be the sole voice of authority, is engaged in a fight for its life, in a fight for its relevance as a means of communication. But the media seem more powerful, and art has begun to serve as the research and development department for the information industries. Discoveries in art are quickly put to use in public relations, sales, and entertainment. As a result, art, fashion, and advertising have become impossibly interwoven; careers like Richard Avedon’s (and Irving Penn’s and Bruce Weber’s and Robert Mapplethorpe’s) appear to be the rule rather than the exceptions.
The problem of labor in the new information economy, and the conflict between art and mass media, are both apparent in Richard Avedon's most recent work, "In the American West." In 1979, Avedon began what would become a five-year project photographing the marginal and dispossessed citizens of the West, the "men and women who work at hard uncelebrated jobs, the people who are often ignored and overlooked." In this project, economic obsolescence is photographed by someone who well understands the logic of obsolescence in our society; the marginalized class of postindustrialism is transformed by postindustrial sign production. In the first section below, I will examine how Avedon incorporates and refashions this marginalized class, and how he rewrites our concept of labor in the process. In the second section, I will analyze the way these pictures have been used by museums and corporations; this will reveal how art is utilized in the information economy for public relations purposes.

**Fashioning Labor**

Avedon's photographs owe their effectiveness to his style, to an approach established through years of photographic encounters with the beautiful and the well known. Avedon eliminated evidence of specific locations in the West by placing his subjects in front of a seamless studio backdrop; he diminished the sculpturing effects of light by photographing his subjects in shadow. Three-dimensionality was also reduced through the use of a narrow depth of field, while the surface of the subject was emphasized through the use of an 8 × 10 camera. The subject was exaggerated further through elaborate printing, and the negatives were even opaqued (with red lipstick, of all materials!) to remove even the slightest tones from the white backgrounds. The final prints are large, and some are gigantic, calling still more attention to the photographic effects.
Avedon has gone to this trouble because he wants us to find meaning in the photographs solely through clues in the subjects' appearance. He has emphasized the ugliness and sleaziness we'd least expect to see; Avedon's "realism" is achieved by depicting the awkwardness and bad taste suppressed in more glamorous photographs. But we can learn little else about the subjects. By decontextualizing these idiosyncrasies, and by blowing them out of proportion, Avedon renders the subject mute. The subjects—detailed, delineated, floating before emptiness—become hieroglyphs, crypts. The photograph seems like a message without a purpose, a supercharged fragment of reality lost in space.

Avedon seems to expect his subject to be communicated to the audience sheeplike through photographic fidelity and visceral impact, the image to transform the exhibition space with spellbinding, absolute presence. Such an approach might be considered part of contemporary neorealism, but the more obvious source of pictures like these is tabloid photography, as practiced by Weegee years ago and by many television news programs today. In the tabloid approach, disaster is best communicated through a striking and horrible image: it is thought that communication is facilitated by this intense, simulated version of the original. But this visual horror goes hand in hand with voyeurism and fascination, and so seldom leads to understanding. In fact, the end result of the fantasy of the media is complete falsification, a passive state full of sensation without content. Reality becomes but a series of phantasms, formed through the intensity and univocality of the media.

Avedon, of course, would say this differently. "The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface." "A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph, it is no longer a fact but an opinion... All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth." "This is a fictionalized West. I don't think the West of these portraits is any more conclusive than the West of John Wayne or Edward Curtis."

These remarks would seem to make any consideration of the work as documentary impossible. But Avedon also wants to hold on to the truth and transparency of the image, no matter how manipulated it may be. He wants us to feel "that everything embodied in the photograph simply happened, that the person in the photograph was always there..."

And judging from press releases and news articles, many other people think of this work as a documentary record of the western United States. Avedon sets up the clash between objective and subjective—between description and self-expression—that haunts much documentary. This conflict is often a part of what we now consider to be the bad faith of much documentary; claims about the value of self-expression obscure the manner in which relations of power inform representation, the way the privileged represent the reality of another class. Avedon's approach appears to fit the description of such bad faith; he seems to exploit members of a lower class for the edification of his own, rationalizing this as a form of fiction.

But perhaps it is not this simple. Another argument that has been made for this work tries to clear up the problem of motive and responsibility. It has been said that these pictures work archetypally, eschewing specific analysis so that fundamental truths about human experience can be revealed. This perspective on Avedon's work was offered by Adam Gopnik in a recent seminar with Avedon. Gopnik explained Avedon's entire lifetime of work as a search for "fundamental human types, fundamental creatures of the psyche." Much as "Chaplin and Shakespeare" composed stock companies, Avedon has
constructed “a pantheon of mythical types.” These types can be recognized in Avedon’s editorial fashion photography, his advertising work, his celebrity portraits, and his “portraits of ordinary people”; the original circumstances and use of each image do not appear to matter. Gopnik gave the following examples of “Avedon types”: the “Botticelli maiden” (a “plaintive oval-faced beauty”), the “androgynous gentleman” (who is “elegantly stump[ing]” and “heavy lidded”), the “high-strung matron” (“full of intelligence and nervous pose, poised on the brink of a crack-up”), and the “Beckett tramp” (a “philosopher-comedian”). One illustrated example will suffice: the “androgyous gentleman” can be seen in Avedon’s famous portrait of Galanos, the fashion designer, and David Hockney, shipping clerk (1981), a picture from “In the American West.”

Gopnik’s analysis seems exactly right, and this is what is exactly wrong with Avedon’s work. Gopnik’s analysis works because Avedon’s portraits have so little specificity: these “fundamental truths” have only to do with how people look. We are asked to ignore the social differences between each subject and picture in favor of “universal” typologies based upon superficial resemblances. Gopnik does not mention that this approach necessarily requires a belief in the neutrality of photographic representation and faith in the physiognomic truths the camera has been said to record. But few still hold these beliefs; most people acknowledge in some way the prejudices of photographic representation. Avedon himself claims to share this skepticism of photographic truth, yet he is willing to use this discredited belief to make his case. In fact, he pushes photographic truth and the logic of physiognomy to hyperbolic extremes, he revels in skepticism by simulating and exaggerating devices he admits are exhausted. We are left with photographs that cannot provide understanding but that still offer a voyeuristic charge.

The logic of typology is carried to the point of absurdity in these western portraits. Everyone looks the same. Avedon has made the work powerful through consistent use of various formal devices, and particularly through the repetition of the subjects’ look, a
look that is direct, uncomfortable, awkward, grim. Through photography Avedon constructs a single type; united by the look of alienation stand drifters and waitresses, factory workers and grave diggers, meat packers and the mentally ill, jail prisoners and the co-presidents of the Loretta Lynn Fan Club. This alienation is made to include individuals not immediately considered marginal: a scientist, a physical therapist, a pastor, a practical nurse, a beekeeper. His approach is reminiscent of police photography—in the police photograph, one cannot help but look like a criminal; the format itself communicates guilt. Avedon has asked, "If I reveal that the portraits of the American West were actors, meticulously cast, would it diminish or enhance them as works of art?" It would do neither. Avedon has treated his subjects as actors anyway; their appearance owes everything to his control.

But Gopnik points out that this is Avedon’s company; these individuals have been filtered through Avedon’s unique personality. But another way, it could be said that Avedon has attempted to construct stereotypes that explain his own experiences. In his recent book Difference and Pathology, Sander Gilman describes how stereotypes are formed by subjective experience. Gilman claims that we construct stereotypes to control our fears of the unknown—the Other. But while all stereotypes originate in this manner, not all work the same way. Healthy stereotypes are those that we use as temporary coping mechanisms; we modify or discard them when confronted by the specifics of experience. Pathological stereotypes, on the other hand, are not open to change. They are imposed upon the unknown; the Other is defined in rigid terms to better control it. We attempt to naturalize the pathological stereotype; we claim that this stereotype is universal. The healthy stereotype, then, respects difference and the complexities of experience, the unhealthy one denies difference, imposing itself upon the world.

From “In the American West,” and from many of his other photographs, we can see that Avedon has the same fears many of us have: fears of pain, disease, corruption, aging, death. Avedon’s work is monumentally elegiac—life erodes before the camera. The subject, however, never challenges these stereotypes, never renders them specific. The great consistency of Avedon’s work is derived from his unwillingness to see human experience as manifested in anything but style. But labor, decay, and death do not exist as generalized types, nor as style; they exist in history and in specific social realities.

What social meaning can we discover in the type Avedon has constructed for the western picture? The consistency of this type leads us to assume the existence of an entire class. However, we are at a loss to determine any consistent economic or social circumstances that unify these subjects; the class is constituted solely through the project itself. In other words, Avedon builds the illusion of a class through the evenhandedness of his approach, the uniformity of his interpretation, and through overarching metaphors (such as the inclusion of photographs of slaughtered animals). We are then asked to accept this class as a truthful version of the lower class that does exist in America. In Avedon’s lower class, however, there are no political causes, only natural ones. Marginalization is just another part of the human condition; alienation knows no history. Labor is never rewarding; it only renders the laborer tired and stupid. Dress and taste are genetically determined. The American West is a primitive place; work is done in the elements with the entire body, rather than with the fingers at a computer console or in a studio with a beautiful model. These messages are not just fiction; they compose a fantasy of the most pernicious kind, a fantasy that smacks of social Darwinism and the Reaganite restructuring of classes. Behind Avedon’s control of the subject can be found the control of an entire class.
Again, Avedon would describe these shortcomings differently, as the inevitable circumstances of portraiture: “A portrait photographer depends upon another person to complete his picture. The subject imagined, which in a sense is me, must be discovered in someone else willing to take part in a fiction he cannot possibly know about. My concerns are not his. We have separate ambitions for the image. His need to plead his case probably goes as deep as my need to plead mine, but the control is with me.” And Avedon would also protest that he made great efforts not to exploit his subjects. He provided a picture and a signed copy of the book to everyone who sat for him, and he invited everyone to the show. Many of the subjects came to the opening and to a public discussion at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas (exhibition dates, September 14, November 17, 1985); during that discussion several of them stated that they did not feel exploited, but instead were honored to be a part of this project. One sister, Billy Mudd, went so far as to say that seeing his portrait was the most profound moment of her life. As Irvin Lippman of the Amon Carter later described it, Mudd “saw this photograph in the museum and said that he has literally been looking for himself for years, and finally found himself in the museum...” (He said) that he had finally felt that God was speaking through his eyes.” Lippman also told the story of Richard Wheatcroft, another of Avedon’s sitters, who stood up at the discussion and said that “he was proud to be American, and this is how America looks.” Lippman described the audience reaction to this remark: “This audience of sophisticates from the Metroplex [Dallas/Fort Worth] began to applaud. I mean, this is the first time that they had applauded truck drivers and coal miners—people were in tears by the end of that.” Those heroic tales are meant to convince us of the classless, transcendent nature of art: The uncultured can experience the epiphany of the museum, the cultured can learn about the dignity of all people.

But did Avedon's subjects really understand his project and the system within which it exists? This is not to question the intelligence of the subjects, but it must be recognized that the understanding of art and the art system is not universal, even within a single culture (even among artists themselves). In fact, art appreciation is closely tied to class identity, and it is very unlikely that Avedon’s subjects had much experience with art prior to their encounter with him. Certainly, for these people to be recognized by members of a more powerful class, by the class that controls history, would be considered an honor; Avedon, after all, deliberately chose the unsung and the uncelebrated. But this happiness at being recognized should not be mistaken for an understanding of the exploitation that occurs in the production of history and culture. Was it clearly explained to these people that the art system and the economic system would place more value upon their images than upon their lives? Was it clearly explained to each of them that their image would sell for more than some of them earn in a year, or in two? Were they told that, had they been less dirty, or less debilitated, or had they better taste, or better posture, they might not have been chosen to be photographed? Do Avedon's subjects truly understand that the project has given them new occupations in a new economy, employing them as signs of the dispossessed?

Avedon points out that there is no truth in photographs, that his work is fiction, but this does not alleviate social responsibility. For there is truth in life, there are real social conditions and real oppressions. The exercise of power creates such truth. The artist can either confront art’s inability to address the realities of power, or the artist can work to institutionalize solipsism. Avedon, and the institutions that support him, have chosen the latter path.
Yet Avedon would argue that his work as an artist places him in a world above the subject. At a public lecture held in conjunction with the exhibition in Boston, Massachusetts (February 19—April 26, 1987), Avedon answered a question about the exploitation of his subjects in the following way: "To say it in the toughest way possible, and the most unpleasant way, what right do Cézanne's apples have to tell Cézanne how to paint them?" For Avedon, it is just this simple. (Never mind that he is comparing his subjects to inanimate objects.) We are just to accept the romantic ideal of the artist, the narrative of genius, the cult of the celebrity. Meaning will flow from this enlightened consciousness, through earthy materials to the waiting audience. The artist's development per se is to be of central interest; the other subjects of the work are nominal, present only to assist the autonomous development of the artist's consciousness. We are taught to see the art object as a thing unto itself, as a powerful historical expression of human consciousness. But as we shall see, it is this very lack of historical meaning that allows art to be easily appropriated by the ruling class.

The art press has been only too willing to assist Avedon in the construction of this myth of authorship. These pictures are usually discussed only as art—prolific art—historical references located these pictures firmly within the (hands-off?) arena of culture. Certain references you might expect: August Sander, Diane Arbus, Sam Shepard, western painters and photographers like Edward Curtis and George Catlin, documentary photographers like Walker Evans and Robert Frank. But who would have expected writers to refer to Picasso, Goya, Botticelli, and Michaelangelo? Or to Dostoevsky, Beckett, Faulkner, Orwell, Trollope, Proust, Balzac, Zola, de Jaucqueville, Yeats, Raymond Carver, and Studs Terkel? One writer thought of Julia Margaret Cameron. Another noticed a resemblance between one of the minor portraits and one of E. Holland Day's self-portraits as Christ. Alice in Wonderland, Gulliver's Travels, and Claude Levi-Strauss's Tristes Tropiques have also been suggested as inspirations. These references are never discussed at length; they exist only to legitimate Avedon's project to the audience. These references give the impression that art comes from art, that the value of these pictures lies solely in their existence as images—images with a place within an important history of works of art. In short, Avedon's pictures are said to range far and wide across the vast space of western culture, but it seems unnecessary for them to have any direct relationship to the social crises and conditions of our own time.

As a final attempt to elevate these pictures, Avedon insists that we must separate them completely from his fashion work; some of his supporters would go further, claiming that his art offers a realist critique of the relentless denial of defect that characterizes the fashion image. Certainly the work offers some kind of negation, but this negation is one that supports the logic of fashion. Rather than holding his art apart, we must see his work as the underside of the fantasy of eternity in the rest of his production. For nothing really has changed—the same value system prevails. Avedon's western subjects appear to have problems that fashion can solve: bad taste, unattractive faces, lack of grace. And fashion by definition must have an opposite; one cannot have the fashionable without the unfashionable, as the well-to-do audience for this work surely understands. Through documentary "honesty" Avedon constructs the great unwashed; their existence validates the connoisseurship of his class. Through caricature Avedon provides the "before" to fashion's "after"; a comparison is established between Peta Alvarez, factory worker (1982) on one side, and the models of Vogue and Self on the other.
“In the American West” is informed by the logic of fashion in a deeper, more disturbing way. Fashion moderates disruptions in the status quo, working as a kind of social control. It is true, as subculture theorist Dick Hebdige has pointed out, that fashion can work critically.1 Subcultures sometimes articulate dissent by borrowing and then subverting the visual codes of the dominant class. But it is also true that the dominant class is energized by this display of dissent. Difference is articulated as style and then consumed; the dissenting subculture has done the work of the dominant class, recoding disagreement into a more easily assimilated form.

Put another way, fashion and advertising perform public relations work for the dominant class, encouraging the citizenry to participate in the economic system that the dominant class controls. But for this encouragement to be effective, the real social problems of the audience must be addressed in some way—by being referred to directly, as in the realistic ad, or by being flatteringly dismissed, as in the utopian ad. In either case, the purpose is to transform doubts about authority into questions of self-image. Once dissent becomes a question of image, it can be magically resolved by purchasing commodities, by getting into style.

Avedon himself explained this process, and in relationship of “In the American West” to it, in an interview with the trade journal Adv Week. He claimed that advertising would be more effective if it reflected the real conditions of workers’ lives rather than romanticizing their experiences. He thought that his work in the American West would make him a
more effective advertising photographer in this regard. "I'd like to merge my portraits of Americans with my knowledge of television advertising to bring a reminder of humanity to computers, oil companies, Detroit. It could be explosive." This would require the use of realistic images to create

a deeper approach to advertising, showing that there are problems that exist in the world, and that advertisers should not . . . ignore that these problems exist . . . . For instance, in a beer advertisement, if a photographer or director would focus on the difficulties facing the American worker instead of them sitting around guzzling beers and just hanging around, I strongly believe that the workers would respond to this approach and the ads would be very successful . . . . As an advertiser, one should try to make the statement that "I respect your life and I think my product can make a difference and help you." The upbeat approach is creatively used up, no longer effective. It's bad advertising because it's not believable. 16

It would not be oversimplifying these remarks to say that Avedon is advocating using workers' alienation to sell them products that come from the very system that caused this alienation. In a very real way, Avedon's project in the American West was a trial run for a new advertising approach. It should not surprise us, then, that these pictures became fashionable. As the Boston exhibition of the work reveals, there are ways to put this alienation to work for the economic system.

The (Cash) Registers of Representation

Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work . . . . It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. And it is this field we must study, not photography as such.

John Tagg, "The Burden of Representation: Photography and the Growth of the State." 17

The ICA Council and Filene's
invite you to a
straight shootin' showdown hoe-down
The Wild Cactus Ball
Saturday, April 25
9:30 p.m. to 2:00 a.m.

Are you ready for the West? Are you set for the wide open spaces? It's all here at The Wild Cactus Ball. So dust off your ten-gallon hat and swing to the tunes of the Joel Peters Orchestra or sway to the western rhythms of Secrets. Set a spell in the Shotgun Saloon and sing along with our player piano. Join in the square dancing at The ICA Corral and chow down at our hot and spicy chuckwagon.

So come on down, get to feelin', get the feeling . . . slip under the wonder of The Wild Cactus Ball.

Special Guest of Honor: Richard Avedon

From a publicity poster announcing a fund-raiser for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, held on the occasion of Avedon's "In the American West."

Art has become a growth industry, artworks are among the most elegant products of the entertainment system. Even critical works can be transformed by this system, becoming mere choices in a parade of upper-class commodities. The government has encouraged this situation by emphasizing "private sector" funding for the arts. Corporations have responded not only by funding art for others, but also by funding art for themselves; corporations have become important collectors, influencing the kind of work made and seen. Such is the condition of corporate culture: art as distraction, art as investment. But
patronage alone does not build a corporate culture. As we have already discussed, through the diminished distance between art and advertising, art has become a subsidiary of the information monopoly. Art, fashion, and advertising have come to share the same logic, and often the same signs. Avedon's studio is a case in point. As a company known as "Richard Avedon Incorporated," it produces both art and fashion, as well as the public relations services required by Avedon's work.

We have seen how "In the American West" fashions labor; now we will see how the work becomes a part of fashion. It would be an understatement to say that this work has been popular. The show has been a full-blown media spectacle—a public relations director's dream. It makes sense that Avedon would attract such attention; he is, after all, a major force in the media, helping to shape the public's opinion of companies, products, and magazines. Avedon is "media-savvy"; he understands how to get the public's attention, and so it is no surprise that magazines and television stations fell all over one another to cover the show. All the Condé Nast publications "fell in line," with enthusiastic coverage, and most other publications treated the show as a "cultural event," declining critical analysis. The contents of press releases were repeated ad infinitum across newsstands and airwaves, and the pictures were reproduced everywhere. Almost every large circulation magazine in the United States covered the show at the Amnon Carter. Articles or reviews appeared in the New York Times, Newsweek, Time, New York, Atlantic, Popular Photography, Arts, Art in America, Artsweek, Artforum, Aperature, Vanity Fair, Vogue, GQ, Rolling Stone, and Travel and Leisure; opinions were offered by such well-known writers as Douglas Davis, Vicki Goldberg, Dore Ashton, Thomas McGuane, and Larry McMurtry. Hirsh photographed Avedon for Vanity Fair, and Irving Penn photographed him for Vogue. Gene Shalit interviewed him on Today, and television coverage was extensive at every stop on the exhibition's tour. Even Spirit (the magazine of Southwest Airlines) and the Dallas-Fort Worth Home and Garden got into the act; Texas Monthly devoted twenty-two pages and its front cover to the show. In short, Avedon is a star of the media, and the media did not let him down. And as the media waxed prolix, the crowds poured in. The show set attendance records at the Amnon Carter (fifty thousand saw the show there) and at other stops on the tour.

Publicity was coordinated and controlled by Avedon, the Amnon Carter, and Abrams, Avedon's publisher. Irving Lippman, publications and public affairs officer for the Amnon Carter, spoke revealingly of their work, on a panel called "Tailor-Made PR." He noted that "the press bought the whole package," in fact, their public relations work was so successful that the show did not receive substantial criticism until the exhibition left the Amnon Carter. Lippman attributed this subsequent criticism to a loss of control over publicity. "When Avedon, and I think the museum, was in control of the PR, there was generally a very positive response by the press. When the press went into the exhibition unattended, as they did at the Corcoran [Gallery, in Washington, D.C., December 7, 1985—February 16, 1986], there was sometimes not as positive a comment made." Lippman was not very specific about all the ways the media were controlled; certainly, standard efforts were made to find favorable reviewers, supply them with easily digested information, and so forth. Less typical approaches included press conferences at each stop of the tour (these conferences no doubt short-circuited critical reviews, encouraging reporters to write instead about Avedon's journey and the show as events); Avedon even reviewed many stories prior to publication, to correct "misquotes." At times, this control
seems to have bordered on the obsessive. In Boston, for instance, Avedon even insisted on determining the way his work was portrayed in the museum’s newsletter. The exhibition was described using a text copywritten by Avedon, with a layout and typefaces he approved.

Yet for all of this attention to public relations, “In the American West” is in no way an anomaly. It is merely a clever twist to the blockbuster approach, now a basic part of museum strategy. The blockbuster must be packaged in a way that maximizes media attention but minimizes criticism. This approach usually requires emphasizing the artist as a heroic figure. As museums take up marketing strategies, the product they promote is further joined to the logic of the market; and so the commodification of the work is inevitable. But unlike some museums, the Amon Carter had a very specific reason to mount this campaign. The museum actually commissioned “In the American West,” supporting Avedon and his assistants for five years while this work was produced. In exchange for their support, the museum received a full set of prints—124 in all. The museum thus had an economic stake in the success of the show; negative reviews could affect the value of their Avedon holdings. As things went, the museum did very well. These pictures currently sell for $14,000 each; besides obtaining a reputation as a museum willing to take risks, the Amon Carter gained an Avedon collection worth about $1.7 million.

How did the work fare in Boston? First, some remarks about the city itself: Boston, like many other coastal cities, has accepted completely the rhetoric of the new economy and has worked for years to become a model postindustrial city. Once plagued by empty factories and a shrinking work force, the city is now in the midst of a booming recovery. Here is the city of the future, filled with computer firms, publishers, advertising agencies, and services; the town even has become an attractive site for prime-time television shows. Boston has faced this transition better than some cities, the state tries to keep unemployment low and provides unemployment compensation and job training. But Boston remains a city divided; poor neighborhoods south of Boston recently attempted to secede from the city, hoping to gain control over their real estate and their destinies. Even in Massachusetts, the recovery has not been extended to everyone; the marginalized class central to the conservative agenda still exists.

“In the American West” was exhibited in Boston at the Institute of Contemporary Art, a museum with a low-key public profile, known for sponsoring progressive, often political, sometimes difficult work. The ICA has undertaken many significant projects in the past, even offering the public a critique of the museum’s own institutional effects.2 This curatorial approach was not accepted easily in Boston, and the museum has sustained years of criticism to achieve the prominence it now enjoys. The exhibition at the ICA was sponsored by Filene’s, an established, fashionable Boston department store that is a part of the Federated chain. This collaboration between progressive institution and status quo corporation was successful, revealing, and as we shall see, troubling. Specifically, we shall see how easily Avedon’s pictures can be positioned in the landscape of the new economy; through this example, we will see how art and art institutions in general can be incorporated into this economy.
As in other cities, media attention was extraordinary, thrusting Avedon, as well as the ICA, into the spotlight. Every major television station, newspaper, and magazine in the city announced the exhibition, reviewed the show, or interviewed the artist. The town's major paper, the Boston Globe, ran no fewer than seven pieces on the exhibition, including an initial story on the show's corporate sponsor ("Ifene's Underwrites ICA's Avedon Exhibit," February 8, 1987), a society-page report on the opening ("Avedon's West Hits the East," February 23, 1987), a review of the show ("Avedon's 'West': Exploitation or Art?" February 24, 1987), two interviews with the artist, and letters to the editor. Due in large part to this attention, the ICA enjoyed record attendance. Exhibitions at the ICA average five thousand visitors per show, but Avedon brought in twenty-seven thousand. The museum wisely held a membership drive during this time and was able to increase its membership base by one-third. Reports have it that the gallery staff barely found time to wipe away fingerprints on walls, let alone tend to normal business. Such public interest begs to be taken seriously, as no doubt it will be by the ICA Board of Directors—a board in part composed of corporate and media moguls in the Boston area. What kind of pressure will exist to create more blockbusters in the future? Will the ICA become another leisure-time amenity for the citizens and tourists of the "New Boston," sacrificing its hard-won position as a critical institution?
These are not just idle questions. One glance at the way the corporate sponsor of the show appropriated both institution and artwork into its marketing strategy, and so into the information economy of the New Boston, provides sufficient cause for worry. Filene’s was extraordinarily generous; the ICA had never experienced corporate sponsorship of this magnitude before, and, in fact, Filene’s had never before sponsored an art exhibition. When the possibility arose to show “In the American West” at the ICA, David Ross, director of the ICA, approached Filene’s with the hope of receiving their support. (While Ross was a curator at the University of California at Berkeley, he worked on a retrospective of Avedon’s work that enjoyed sponsorship by Macy’s. This gave him the idea to approach Filene’s.) In the final arrangement, the ICA paid for the actual installation of the show, Filene’s paid all remaining expenses, mounted a promotional blitz for the show, and hosted a fund-raiser. (Additional corporate support was received from the Revlon Corporation, and it should be noted that the normally staid Harvard threw its support behind the exhibition as well.)

Filene’s donated $100,000 worth of print advertising to the effort, to publicize both the show and corporation’s sponsorship; Filene’s also mentioned the show in advertisements not directly related to the promotion. The company mailed an announcement of the show to 250,000 Filene’s credit card holders in their monthly bills, offering reduced admission and membership rates. The exhibition’s informational brochure was written by an ICA curator, edited by Avedon, and printed by Filene’s; the brochure was distributed both in the store and in the museum. Such a promotional onslaught was unusual for the ICA, to say the least. The museum does almost no advertising, for it cannot afford it—advertisements usually appear in space donated in the city’s weekly arts and leisure newspaper; design work on these ads is donated as well. The store’s extensive campaign penetrated major Boston magazines and newspapers that the ICA never reaches, allowing the museum, in Ross’s words, to “reach a tremendously diverse audience,” so helping the ICA transcend its “forbidden,” difficult reputation.

But Filene’s did not stop there. They used the show as the basis of a sales campaign for western wear. Taking a “destination” approach (to quote their press release), the store combined posters from the show with mannequins in western landscapes throughout the store. Street-level display windows juxtaposed fashionable clothing with different images from “In the American West” and quotes from Avedon. Avedon’s portrait of Sandra Bennett, dressed in Levi coveralls, mixed it up with models wearing Calvin Klein and Guess wear in a catalogue entitled “Feeling ready for the West.” Charlotte Brewer, Filene’s vice president of marketing, explained the promotion in this way: “The American ‘West’ theme is an ideal attitudinal and visual concept to showcase today’s rugged, earthy denims and chambray with the soft sensuality of cotton petticoats and camisoles that reflect a spirit of early pioneering days. . . . This fantasy with the American West is always with us, but surges every so often as a major fashion statement.”

Indeed.

Even these projects did not exhaust Filene’s promotion department. The store commemorated the show yet again with “Features,” an “amateur portrait photography competition in celebration of the art of photography.” Grand prize was—you guessed it—a trip to the American West, to the Sheraton Tucson El Conquistador Golf and Tennis Resort in Tucson, Arizona. Still going strong, Filene’s sponsored a fundraiser for the ICA, “The Wild Cactus Ball.” This benefit, which featured Avedon as guest of honor, served up western food and music to participants wearing black tie or western dress. Events included a celebrity hat auction, a chili cook-off, and (in the words of one reporter) “two
Photograph of In the American West opening, published in the Boston Ledger, February 21–27, 1987 (Photo: Roger Farrington)

Filene's official publicity photograph from the "Wild Cactus Ball" benefit, 1987
gals in black outfits, shouldering leather holsters, slinging Tequila bottles with crossed 'gun belts' of shot glasses... offering guests 'shooters.' Tickets for the fête ranged from $40 to $350; the high contribution offered the donor admission to a Benefactors Dinner and the Ball itself, as well as a limited-edition Gyorgy Kepes photograph (Kepes being one of Boston's own), and "an opportunity to sponsor a Boston artist to attend the Ball."

Installation view of In the American West, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. View shows Sandra Bennett, twelve year old, Rocky Ford, Colorado, 8/23/80, among other images.
Cover of the book in the
American West (New York:
Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985)

Poster, Amon Carter Museum,
1985

IN THE AMERICAN WEST
THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD AVEDON

Advertisement for the Boston
run of the exhibition In the
American West
One thing that is immediately apparent when reviewing various materials from this project is the use of Avedon's *Sandra Bennett, 12 years old* (1980). This image recurs so frequently that it has become the logo for the project. It can be found on the cover of Avedon's book, in many articles about the work, and in most of the publicity material associated with the show. This picture is an obvious choice for the promotional needs of all concerned, since it is the least confrontational picture in the project. A more controversial picture might have ruptured a carefully built, expensive media image by contradicting the institutions' own advertising, or by creating embarrassing juxtapositions in situ with other advertising or editorial information. The moral issue of the promotion—the use of images of the dispossessed to create public images for the artist, the company, and the museum—would become obvious. "Advertising is advertising is advertising," as Ross noted in my conversation with him. The museum wanted only to bring the audience into the museum; they wanted confrontation to take place in the gallery rather than in the media. And Filene's, of course, wanted to bring people into the store. *Sandra Bennett* was a particularly appropriate image for their purposes. First of all, none of the other pictures in the show could be joined as easily to the department store's carefree slogan "Feeling Filene's." Secondly, *Sandra Bennett* speaks to one of the store's target audiences. Given Avedon's approach, the young girl can be used to symbolize the unfashionable young
woman, waiting to be transformed by the store. Here is a first result of Avedon's advice to use more realistic images for a "deeper approach to advertising." (It is interesting to note that the picture can form this identification with the target audience and also enunciate the distance and superiority of the remaining eastern audience.) Finally, there is a margin of safety gained through the use of this picture. The appearance of this image in so many different places assures audience familiarity; because of this repetition, the audience is less likely to examine each specific context of presentation. This, too, is to everyone's benefit should an unfavorable juxtaposition occur.

It is also interesting to note how the "logo" effect is carried into the exhibition. The show, designed by Elizabeth Avedon, the photographer's daughter-in-law, capitalized on the recognizability of Sandra Bennett built through media exposure. The image was placed in the center of the first gallery seen upon entering the building; for emphasis, the image was printed larger than the others in that gallery. The other main entrance to the show was marked by Juan Patricio Lobato, cornet (1980), another picture used (although less frequently) to publicize the show. And since there is no clear separation between the sales area and the exhibition spaces of the ICA, viewers were treated to the duplication of these images on books and posters available for sale. The work thus assisted in its own promotion. Even in the museum, Avedon's work was accompanied by its duplication in the media.
Here we see all the components of a public relations strategy working together. The work of art is treated as an empty vessel, used alternately to promote the artist, the museum, and the corporate sponsor. The work, from its inception, is produced according to a logic that makes this appropriation possible. The aesthetic approach of art history and the criticism-entertainment of the art journalist also work to support and encourage this appropriation. The audience, well versed in the logic of information, respond as they will to the affirmation of the class structure in which they live. The potentially critical space of art, and the museum itself, provide public relations support for the dominant class, and assist in the naturalization of circumstances and beliefs that empower this class.

During our interview, Ross claimed that it was courageous of Filene’s to support the Avedon exhibition. Most corporations would prefer to contribute to nonspecific operating expenses, thus establishing a general identification with the institution. In this way they gain from the prestige of the institution without risking the failure of a specific show. Ross noted that the message of Avedon’s “In the American West” might be anticonsumerist; the corporation thus ran a risk. But as we have seen, the artist, the museum, and the corporation did everything possible to eliminate readings of this work that would directly criticize the American system.
Roland Barthes argued famously that the photograph is polysemic, that it has no single independent meaning, but many possible meanings depending upon context and use. But Barthes also understood that, just as a social context makes certain readings possible, it can make other readings impossible. Institutions authorize certain meanings and dismiss, even silence, others. Thus there is a politics of interpretation that one contends with immediately, whether one knows it or not. To interpret a photograph, or any cultural object, is to negotiate a sea of choices already made.

I have described how this work provides control over the dispossessed, and how institutions have managed the work to prevent possible critical interruption. We have seen how the artist rewrites alienation into a form acceptable to the status quo, and how institutions have rewritten the work still further, turning the subjects of the work into entertainment and consumerist frisson. Ross mentioned that there may indeed be an irony here between audience, client, and subject, but for him this was not a great irony, a “Chukovskian” irony. “The disparities are not pronounced enough to be of great ironic value.” This is to say that the subject has been rewritten so many times that no irony, not even aesthetic irony, remains. The subject has been incorporated into the reality of the dominant class. Yet this very fact introduces enormous political irony that we must not allow ourselves to appreciate from a distance, as connoisseurs of despair.
NOTES


6 Avedon, quoted in press release, “In the American West,” Amos Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX, June 1, 1985.

7 Avedon, “Foreword,” In the American West.

8 Here, for example, is how Avedon’s book of western portraits was described in the publisher’s catalogue copy: “Here is western America down and dirty, gritty, tough, brave, sad—real people in real places. Avedon’s courage in facing these men and women, in confronting their plight and evoking their terrifying beauty, marks a new dimension in his art. These are no pretty pictures here, no Seinan-Marcus tailoring—not an easy book, this is a profoundly important one.”

9 Gepnick, “In the American West” seminar, “Learning from Performers Program.”

10 Avedon, “West” seminar, “Learning from Performers Program.”


12 Avedon, “Foreword,” In the American West.


14 Avedon, “West” seminar, “Learning from Performers Program.”


18 Lippman, “Tailor-Made PR.”


20 Lippman, “Tailor-Made PR.”

21 See the exhibition catalogue Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985).

22 “West” seminar, “Learning from Performers Program.”

23 David Ross, interview with author, June 1, 1987. All remaining remarks by Ross are derived from this conversation.
