

John Loengard

AGE OF SILVER

ENCOUNTERS WITH GREAT PHOTOGRAPHERS

AGE OF SILVER: ENCOUNTERS WITH GREAT PHOTOGRAPHERS

By John Loengard
Preface by David Friend

Published by



To be released: **November 2011**

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AGE OF SILVER:
Encounters with Great Photographers

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Published in the United States by powerHouse Books,
a division of powerHouse Cultural Entertainment, Inc.,
37 Main Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201-1021
telephone 212 604 9074, fax 212 366 5247
e-mail: ageofsilver@powerHouseBooks.com
website: www.powerHouseBooks.com

First edition, 2011

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011932345

Hardcover ISBN 978-1-57687-587-2

Printed and bound through Asia Pacific Offset

A complete catalog of powerHouse Books and Limited Editions is available upon request; please call, write, or visit our website.

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Printed and bound in China

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"The press of the press was a picture in itself." — John Loengard, 2011

The King and Queen of Greece visited Boston in 1953 and came face to face with a phalanx of press photographers. The press of the press was a picture in itself. I took it for the college newspaper. I did not photograph photographers again until the 1980s and early 1990s, when photography was finally taken seriously as an art. Then, working for magazines such as *Life*, I took pictures of photographers who were of current interest because of a new book or an exhibition of note or simply because they were at the end of a distinguished career.

There was energy in these encounters. Magazines were widely read, and photographers were eager for a bit of publicity. If possible, I wanted to show each of my colleagues doing something more interesting than posing for their portraits. Jacques Henri Lartigue went back to his childhood home in Paris and tossed automobile inner tubes in the air as if it were a game. Annie Leibovitz took photographs while standing on a gargoyle extending from the 61st floor of New York City's Chrysler Building. Henri Cartier-Bresson flew a kite. He also let me photograph the negative of his famous picture of a portly man trying to leap over a puddle behind a train station in Paris.

An Englishman named Henry Fox Talbot invented the negative in 1833. In the dark, he coated a sheet of paper with silver chloride. Putting a leaf on top, he left the paper in the sun. (Silver and chlorine combine in the dark to form silver chloride and separate when struck by light.) In the sunlight, chlorine gas floated off, as a gas would. Dark particles of silver embedded in the paper's fiber appeared everywhere

except in the leaf's shape. The paper under the leaf stayed white. A wash in saltwater took away the silver chloride that was not touched by light. The negative was born, and for more than 150 years, every black and white print was made from one.

Other types of photographs (daguerreotypes or color transparencies, for example) are formed from silver negatives, but the negatives do not exist separately at the end of the process. Noticing the beauty of the black and white negatives, however, I began to photograph those of well-known pictures, each held in the hand of its creator or a curator who kept it safe.

Today, it is easier than ever to take pictures using digital cameras, and it is a pleasure to do so. Digital photographs are formed electronically and do not use the chemistry of silver. There is no negative. Critic and photographer, William Meyers points out, "The film camera is becoming a harpsichord, a wonderful instrument if you know how to play it, but obsolete."

It is easy to alter the digital image after it is taken, without leaving a trace. I have some fear that this ease of alteration will make the ease of digital photography a Faustian bargain. When we lose faith in a photograph's accuracy, the photograph loses its soul. It is only a picture.

This book is a personal tribute to silver and to a few of those who made fabulous use of it.



▲ 1953 Cambridge, Massachusetts

In 1953, King Paul and Queen Frederika of Greece, winners of a recent Cold War battle, visited Boston escorted by the sirens of 27 motorcycle police. Newspaper photographers cocked their shutters and a white-gloved campus cop began to clear a path as the royal couple ended their visit with Nathan M. Pusey, President of Harvard University.

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

• 1991 New York City

Annie Leibovitz's assistant, Robert Bean, handed her fresh film as she stood on one of eight gargoyles that extend from the 61st floor of the Chrysler Building in Manhattan. I watched from the safety of a terrace, surprised anyone let them get out there. Dancer David Parsons posed for Leibovitz on a second gargoyle.

Leibovitz planned to use her photograph of Parsons a few weeks later in a lecture at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where she would pay tribute to Margaret Bourke-White. (The famous *Life* photographer was photographed crouching on one of the gargoyles in the early 1930s, when her studio was on that floor.)

But it turns out that Leibovitz prefers a picture she took earlier in the afternoon. On the floor of her studio downtown, Parsons balanced oddly on one knee and two elbows. When the photograph came up on the screen in Rochester, Leibovitz told the audience, "He looks like he's struggling with the ground."





◀ 1993 Los Angeles

Leibovitz sat on a set she had had built to honor the work of Colombian painter Fernando Botero.

"I never set anyone at ease," says Leibovitz. "I always thought it was their problem. Either they were at ease or they weren't. That was part of what was interesting about a picture."

Quite sensibly, Leibovitz finds herself perplexed when people say that a photograph has captured someone. "A photograph is just a piece of them in a moment," she says. "It seems presumptuous to think you can get more than that."

▲ 1993 Los Angeles

Comedian Roseanne Arnold waited in Los Angeles, as Leibovitz inspected a Polaroid test print. Today, digital cameras display finished pictures instantly. There is no need to make a test on Polaroid film that develops in a minute. Digital cameras also allow a photographer to photograph one person one day, in one city, and another, in another city, on another day and seamlessly unite the two images into a single picture. Leibovitz has done this skillfully and often.

JAMES VAN DER ZEE



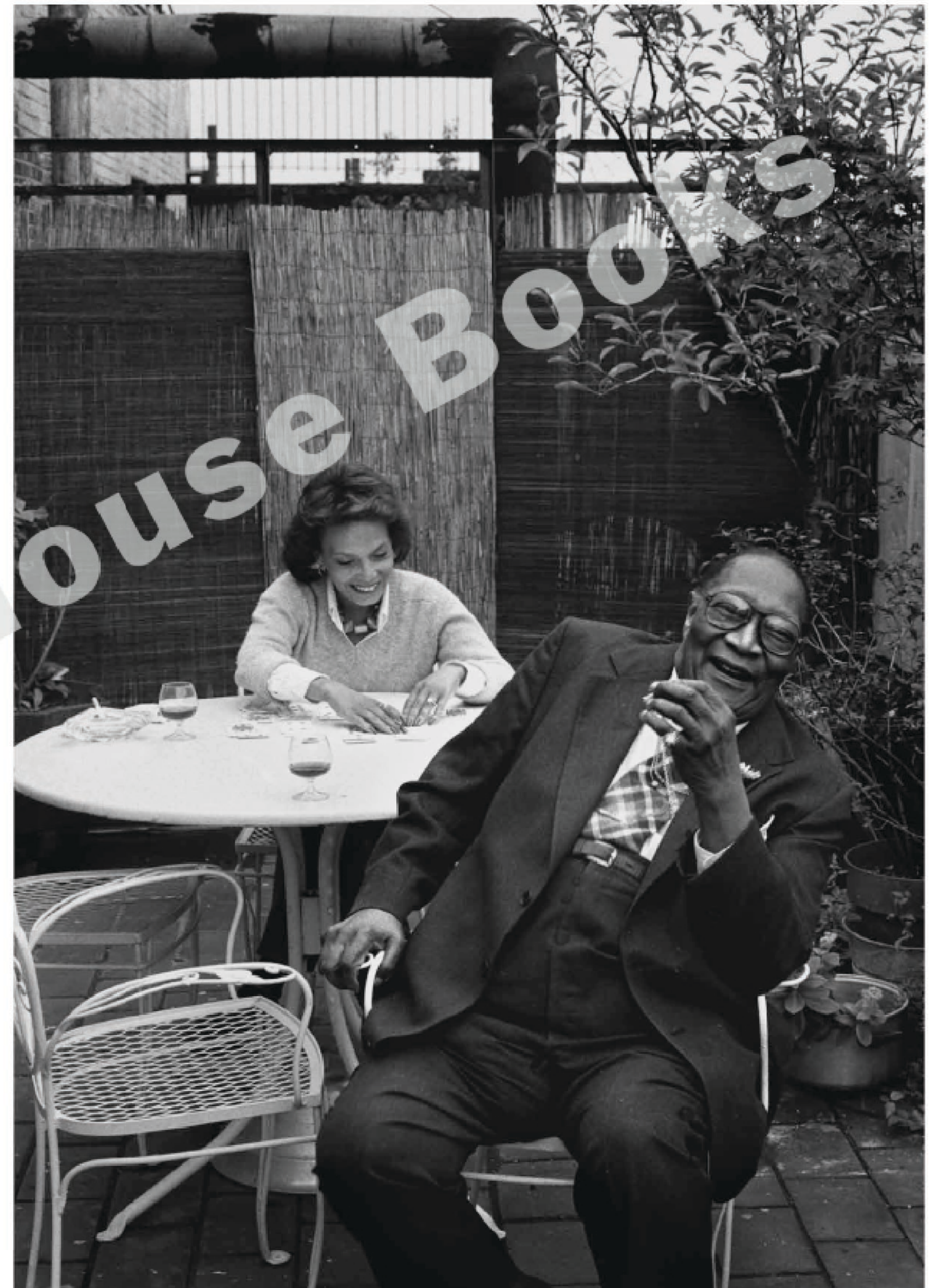
▲ 1981 New York City

Someone arranged for 95-year-old James Van Der Zee to photograph 98-year-old composer Eubie Blake, in an art gallery on Madison Avenue, and invited the press. The two men chatted as photographers buzzed around, taking pictures on the left—*click-click-click*—then running over to the right—*click-click-click*—then around behind—*click-click-click*—then over to the left again. They were taking pictures by the pound. Nothing was happening. Finally, Van Der Zee made his exposure. He used no shutter. He just took his lens cap off for a second and silently put it back as we all went *click-click-click*.

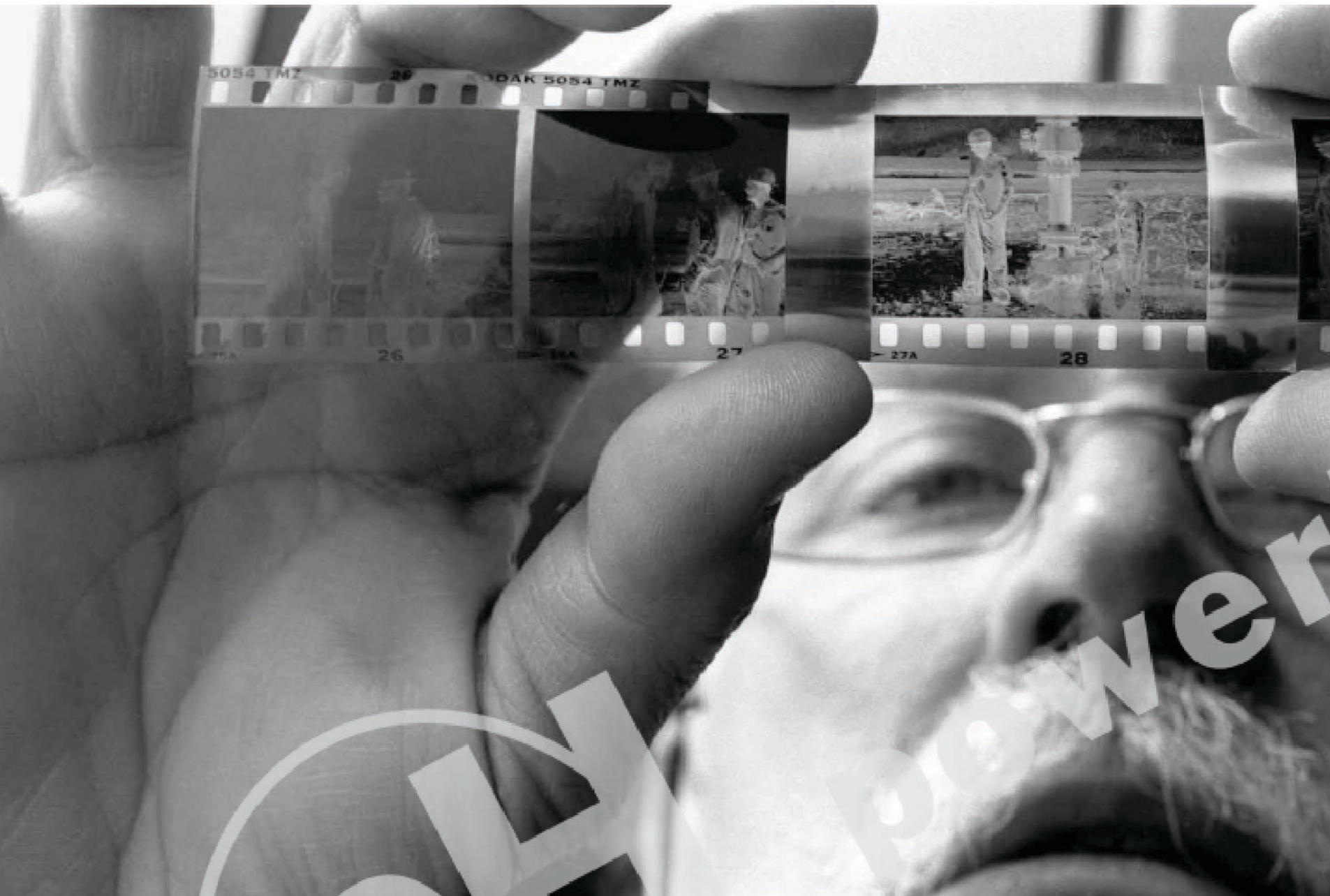
▷ 1981 New York City

Van Der Zee had quietly operated his Harlem portrait studio for 50 years before the Metropolitan Museum of Art put a spotlight on his work with a 1969 exhibition called *Harlem on My Mind*. Even while the show was up, however, Van Der Zee was evicted from his studio and home of 29 years. His wife died in 1976.

Donna Mussenden, a researcher at the National Urban League, found him living on welfare in a cramped apartment. She helped Van Der Zee get back on his feet financially, and, in 1978, they married. They sat on the terrace of their West Side Manhattan penthouse. "She got me going. I get an electrical charge just touching her hand," said Van Der Zee.



SEBASTIÃO SALGADO



▲ 1993 Paris

Matthew L. Wald, in *The New York Times*, described Sebastião Salgado working in Kuwait as, "A stocky man of average height, with thinning hair and a prominent mustache, sporting yellow galoshes and a pink, cotton fisherman's hat."

Salgado, a Brazilian with a graduate degree in economics, had decided to photograph manual labor as it still exists in a mechanized world. "The working class is disappearing forever. I want to pay homage

to it," he said. He began, in 1986, by photographing 50,000 beelike workers searching for gold at the Serra Pelada, open pit mine at Serra Pelada, Brazil. He went on to photograph men harvesting sugarcane, catching tuna, assembling bicycles, refining titanium, slaughtering pigs, and digging a tunnel under the English Channel. He showed me his 1991 negative of men putting out a fire in Kuwait's Greater Burhan Oil Field. "These are the heroes of our time," he said.



▲ 1993 Paris

"I come from a third-world country. I am linked with her people. My vision is a third-world vision," Salgado says. The hammock he had slung across his Paris loft also indicated that you can take the boy out of Brazil, but you can't take Brazil out of the boy.

ANDREAS FEININGER



▲ 1992 New York City

"Color is nothing new. We see it all the time. But in black-and-white you can make the picture interesting without making it unnatural," Andreas Feininger told me. "To photograph something and get a picture that is exactly the way it looked to the eye is for the birds, I think."

I wanted him to hold a seashell, a favorite subject of his, but he looked uncomfortable with the shell close to his face. He suggested using flowers from the centerpiece on his dining room table, instead.

► 1992 Time-Life Lab, New York City

"Intelligently used, the camera can see more than the eye and thereby expand...our intellectual and emotional horizons," said Feininger. For example, in 1949, the navy put lights on the rotor blades of a helicopter flown on night missions. Feininger saw a newspaper picture and wanted to capture the spiral beauty of the craft in motion. Lighting the helicopter on the ground with one exposure, Feininger left the shutter open as the machine rose in the dark. He showed me the negative. "The surprise," he said, "is seeing, in the flight pattern, both a design that is aesthetically pleasing and a graph of motion and time."



RICHARD AVEDON

► 1994 New York City

Richard Avedon wanted to photograph a man covered with bees. He advertised for a subject, and found Ronald Fischer, a Chicago banker and amateur beekeeper. After queen-bee pheromone was applied to his skin to attract drones, the tall, shaven-headed Fischer stood patiently outdoors in Davis, California, while Avedon exposed 121 negatives (Avedon holds his favorite here), in 1981, and they both got stung.



► 1994

New York City

Avedon believed, "A photographic portrait is a picture of someone who knows he is being photographed. What he does with this knowledge is as much a part of the photograph as what he's wearing or how he looks."

A few days after a retrospective of his work opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art to dismissive reviews, I went to Avedon's studio, four blocks east, to take his picture for *People* magazine. He led me straight to this intriguing room.



ALLEN GINSBERG

► 1966

Lawrence, Kansas

Allen Ginsberg was having tea with students on campus at the University of Kansas in 1966. "Once the wild-haired wildman of the beat poets," *Life* magazine noted, "today, Ginsberg travels across the country reading his works to eager, unlikely audiences."

At the time, neither *Life* nor I knew that Ginsberg was a photographer of considerable purpose. "I see more than I have the physical capacity to write about," he wrote in the 1990s. "Forty years' snapshots were like written journals I'd kept—four decades of epiphanous moments that I've noticed."



ROGER THÉRON



▲ 1989 Paris

Editing pictures is a serious business. Roger Théron, editor of *Paris Match* magazine, selected the best from the good and acquired a nickname: *L'Œil* (The Eye).

DAVID & PETER TURNLEY

• 1989 Paris

The Turnley brothers are identical twins. They were born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1955, and graduated from the University of Michigan where each majored in French literature. Both were living in Paris in 1989, and that year each covered rebellion and unrest in Eastern Europe and China. David (right) did so for the *Detroit Free Press*, Peter worked for *Newsweek* magazine. Since David worked for a newspaper, his work was eligible for the Pulitzer Prize. He won it.



HARRY BENSON



▲ 1991 New York City

Outspoken Harry Benson was fed up with spokespersons. "People try to limit what I can photograph all the time," he said. "They'll say, 'You can't go there, or you can't do it in this room, you've got to do it in that room!' We've got to fight this."

"A lot of journalists think this is the way that it's done, with flacks, public relations people, telling us what to do. I'll hear [journalists] on TV saying, 'We've got freedom of the press.' That's bullshit. It's being taken away by little fascists. It's just appalling. Nobody is bothering to say, 'Stop! This isn't how we do things.'"

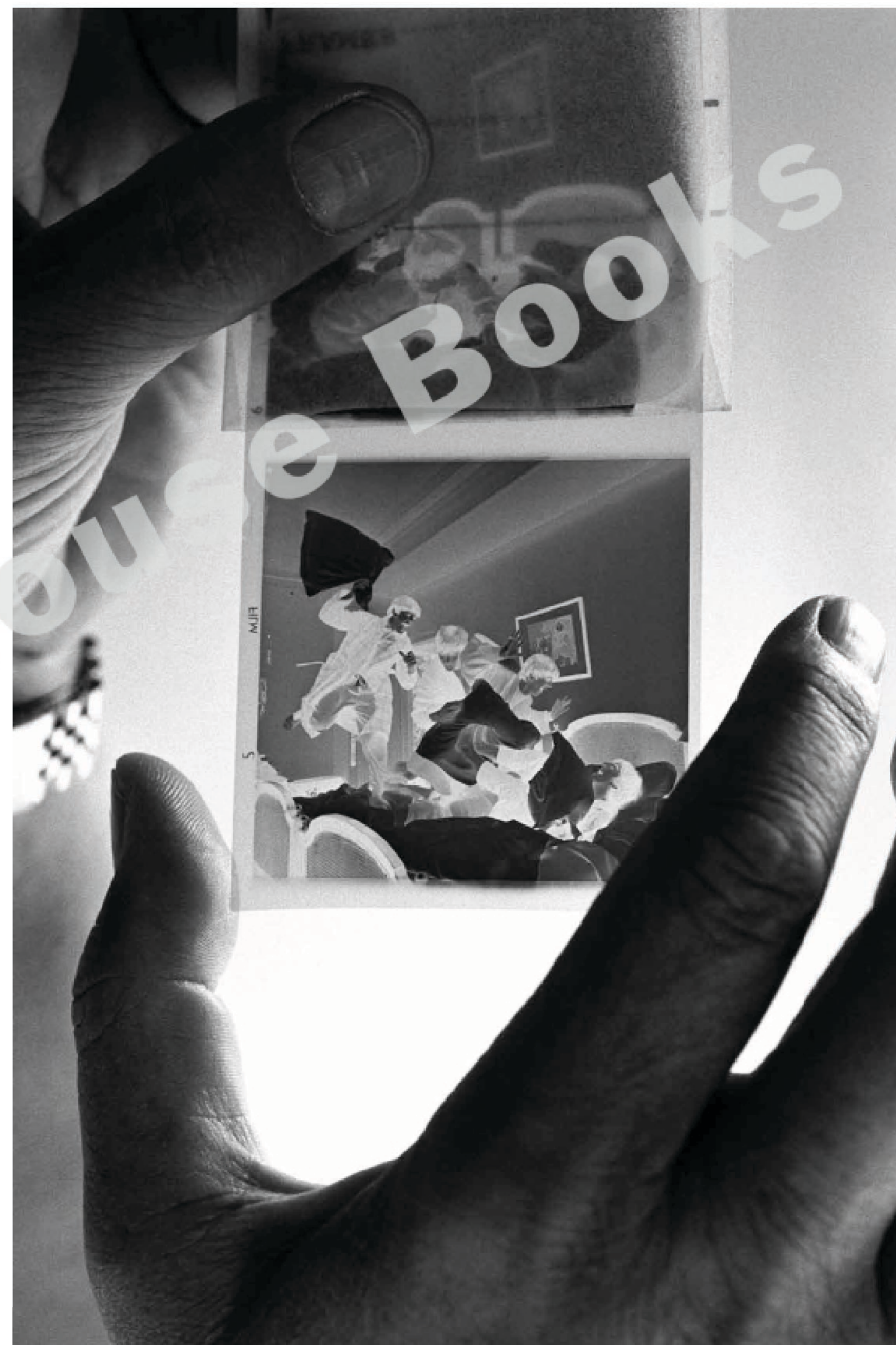
When I arrived at his apartment to take his picture for *People* magazine, I asked Benson what he would be doing if I were not there. "I usually spend the morning in bed on the phone," he said.

"Well, then ..." I replied.

► 1994 New York City

"I took the picture of the Beatles the night they heard 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' had topped the charts in the United States. That meant they would go to New York and appear on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. I waited until their manager left the room and then I said, 'How about a pillow fight?' said Benson. He held the 1963 negatives he took for London's *Daily Express* newspaper at the Hotel George V in Paris.

"Frame #5 is the only really good one on the roll. It changed my way of working," Benson said. "I felt at ease with celebrities for the first time and had confidence to challenge the norm of straight, Fleet Street photography. I wasn't afraid to create a theatrical situation, to set things up to illustrate a point."



HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON



▲ 1987 near Forcalquier, France ► 1987 Paris

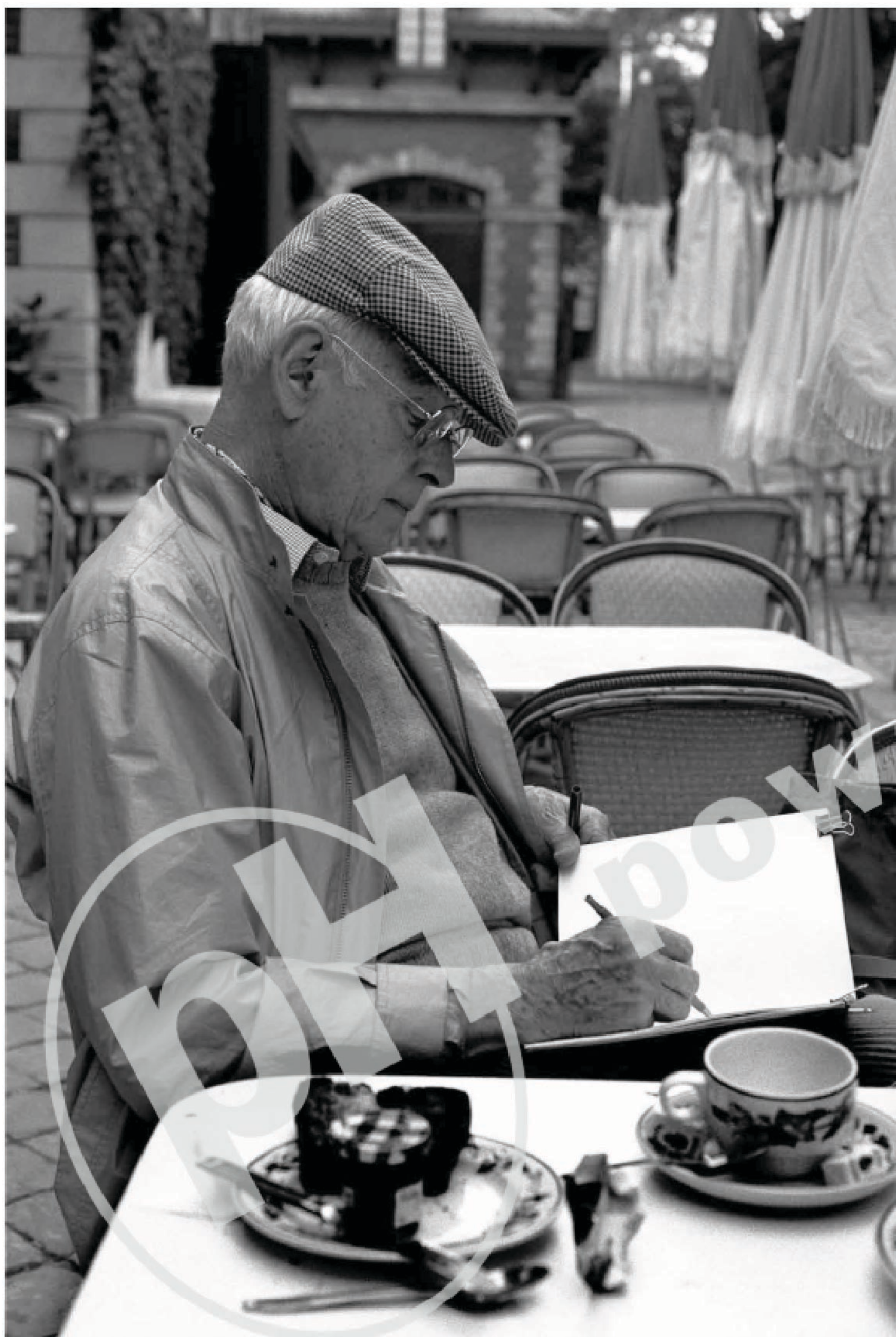
Henri Cartier-Bresson worked on his correspondence at his country house. No photographer has had a more powerful effect on the photographers of his time, but he truly hated to have his picture taken. When I first met him in 1956, he'd tell us tyros hanging out at Magnum Photos in New York City, "I must stay anonymous. I am a street photographer." 31 years later that was still his mantra, but at 79, he rarely took pictures in the street.

Peter Galassi was organizing an exhibit of his earliest photographs for The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. To publicize it, Cartier-Bresson agreed to be the subject of a picture story. Even so, when I arrived at his apartment on the rue de Rivoli in Paris, he asked if all the pictures could be taken from behind.

"Henri, I can't do a story and not show your face," I said. "That would be silly." He glanced at a book I'd sent. The cover had a close-up of another photographer. "Do what you did with Brassat. Just show a part of my face. Please." I said I would try.

He started taking pictures of me, flashing his Leica camera back-and-forth in front of his face with the dexterity of a fan dancer [see pages 2-3]. I shot back, and finally I moved to the side. I put my camera close to his cheek. He cringed. Under his breath, he said, "Oh! How I hate to be photographed," then checked himself and said clearly, "Peter worked so hard on the show and the catalog. I want to help him." For a moment, he appeared resigned to his loss of anonymity.





◀ 1987 Paris

As we had a cup of coffee in a café at the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, Cartier-Bresson took his sketchbook from his knapsack and began to draw. "Photography means nothing to me now," he said, repeating a refrain of the previous two decades. "Oh, I have a camera in the house, and if I see a portrait I might take it. But I don't like photography. I never have. I always wanted to be a painter."

▲ 1987 Paris

George Fèvre, Cartier-Bresson's printer, at Picto labs in Paris, put a 1932 negative on the light table. (As World War II began, Cartier-Bresson had cut each of his favorite 35-millimeter negatives apart from the frames adjacent in order to fit them into a small Huntley & Palmers cookie tin for safekeeping.) *Behind the Gare St. Lazare* may be Cartier-Bresson's best-known picture. "I was peeking through the spaces in a fence," Cartier-Bresson wrote in *The Decisive Moment* (Simon & Schuster, 1952). "The

space between the planks was not entirely wide enough for my lens, which is the reason the picture is cut off on the left." (The blank part of the picture is cropped out when prints are made.)

Oddly enough, sprocket holes on one side of the film are missing. Possibly it was manufactured without them—or possibly someone has cut them off. I asked Cartier-Bresson (he had been standing with us). "I swallowed them," he said.

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