

## PORTRAITURE: THE PORTRAIT AS PERFORMANCE

*Portraiture is performance, and like any performance, in the balance of its effects it is good or bad, not natural or unnatural*

Richard Avedon, 2002

Professional performers fascinated Avedon, he studied them and he photographed them throughout his life. However it was not only within the realms of celebrity that he identified performance. His understanding of the sitter as projecting a vision of them selves, of life as performance, is also apparent in his fashion photography or his portraits of unknown personalities from *In The American West*. As Twyla Tharp a choreographer and dancer often photographed by Avedon commented, "Avedon was a theatrical director and his photograph was the performance."



Judy Garland, actor,  
New York, 1956



Suzy Parker, Paris, 1956



Petra Alvarado, factory worker,  
Texas, 1982



Marilyn Monroe, actor,  
New York, 1957

## POINTS OF DEPARTURE:

1. The top two images show two performers within the different spheres of fashion and theatre. Both images are from early on within Avedon's career when he was first starting to experiment with the neutral background. In what way does the removal of the sitter's context enhance the idea of the photograph as performance?
2. John Lahr who was photographed by Avedon compared the neutral backdrop of Avedon's studio to the stage. How do you think as a sitter it would affect you differently to be photographed against white as opposed to within an environment specific to you?
3. Now look at the image of Marilyn Monroe. This image was taken at the end of a very long photography session when she was exhausted. Avedon recalls her seeing him with the camera and allowing him to take the photograph. In what way can this image also be described as performance and how does it reveal an entirely different aspect of what it means to perform?
4. "...The work process is the work process. There's no difference between making a portrait of, say, Henry Kissinger or portrait of Marilyn Monroe and talking the portrait of any of the truckers in this work." So said Avedon when being interviewed about *In The American West* in 1986. The image of Petra Alvarado is also taken from this series. Although she is not a professional performer as with the other three women here do you think it would also be possible to describe her presentation of herself as performance?
5. "A picture of Marilyn Monroe is not Marilyn Monroe—it's a photograph of her. In fact, it might not be about Marilyn Monroe at all. It might be about a certain kind of woman, or a certain kind of pressure. If you saw a painting by Van Gogh, you would never say, this is a postman. You would say this is a Van Gogh." If we consider all of Avedon's photography as performance, how does his recognition of life as performance elevate the imagery from the personal to the universal? What do the images all together say about the human predicament?