

REPORTAGE: CROSSOVER AMONG GENRE

You cannot take a photograph of a person without that person's presence and that very person's presence implies truth. 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. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.

Richard Avedon, 1986

Avedon is renowned for breaking down the conventions that hold distinct the separate areas of Fashion, Portraiture and Reportage. During his lifetime he published books and designed exhibitions that intermingled all three areas of his photography and as such it is important to see Reportage as part of his larger body of work. Not only comparable with his other work but also reflecting the same sensibilities that influenced his Fashion and Portraiture.



New York Life # 13, New York , 1949



Dorian Leigh, Paris, 1949

POINTS OF DEPARTURE:

1. The two images above Avedon placed on consecutive pages in his book *An Autobiography*.
 - a. Looking at the pictures what similarities can you see in their composition and in the attitude of the women photographed? Do you think these women are aware of being watched? In both images can you envisage a narrative which the women are part of?
 - b. The image on the left is from a series of Reportage photographs taken by Avedon in Harlem, while the image on the right is of

Dorian Leigh, a model Avedon worked with in Paris. Judith Thurman talks of Avedon's portraits as having "A deeply felt, artistically insistent consciousness of fashion - of the relation between an envelope and its contents." Do you think these two images are both about the way in which women portray themselves and perform to the viewer? If so how does Avedon show this?

As Avedon's fame grew it became possible for him to contemplate projects that other photographers simply would not have had the means or visibility to contemplate. He could choose assignments to document vast groups of society, as in 1969 when he conceived of *Hard Times*, which was to record the cultural and political shifts taking place in America at the time. As Jane Livingston described it, such images were "the group portrait as photoreportage, removed from background context - new in the history of the photographic book, and indeed of photography itself."



The Mission Council, South Vietnam, 1971



Richard Hughes, social worker, The Shoeshine Boys Project, with Vietnamese street boys, South Vietnam, 1971

2. By 1970 Avedon had determined to take *Hard Times* to Vietnam. Compare the two images above; the top image Avedon's portrayal of the Mission Council, those men who organized the Vietnam War and the bottom Richard Hughes, an aid worker and the children he worked with in Vietnam.
 - a. What similarities are there in the composition of the subjects?
 - b. How do the way the different groups stand and their stance towards each other differ?
 - c. In both of these images Avedon uses unconventional cropping methods, what is the effect of this on the way the viewer reads the image?
3. Looking at Avedon's reportage photography in Vietnam during this period how does his work compare to other documentary photography taken by photographers in war zones? For example how does it compare with the images of conflict in our papers today?
4. Looking at these two works would you define them as Portraiture or Reportage? What makes these terminologies awkward to apply in relation to Avedon's work?
5. Many reportage photographers attempt "fly on the wall" photography in which one is unaware of the photographer's presence. Avedon instead applies the artificial isolation of his Portraiture to his Reportage. What effect does this decision have upon his photographs from the Vietnam War? What questions does he raise about reportage photography as a genre?