



Duane Michals

Interview and portraits by Caroline Tompkins

Duane Michals wants to capture passion, and he isn't afraid to break the rules to do it. Entirely self-taught, Michals uses his lack of formal training as a tool to rethink the genre. His photography is an act of unlearning, of reconsidering the ways a subject can be captured. *Sequences*, published in 1970, signalled the arrival of a promising new voice in photography. Michals accompanied his photos with handwritten notes, scrawled on the margins of the photo, and presented each scene as a series of photos, marking the first time that photography was considered cinematic. Michals has been hailed as one of the great photographic innovators of the last century, and not without reason. Radically narrative and transgressive, Michals' work eschews considerations of form to put his photographs in conversation with each other, with the world. He draws on negatives, annotates his images, working to capture vision beyond seeing. In Michals' hands, the camera is a challenge to conventional wisdom. The photo is less about the image than in the pleasure of making the image, a pleasure that Michals clearly revels in. He's put out over thirty photobooks, and has produced work on everything from the dreamlike and deserted streets of New York to portraiture of art world luminaries like De Kooning and Warhol. Idiosyncratic and totally individual, there's no better way to describe his artistic practice than in the artist's own words: 'You're either defined by the medium or you redefine the medium in terms of yourself.' Michals does just that.

Caroline Tompkins: What are you curious about right now?

Duane Michals: Everything I do, as I get older. I just turned eighty-seven, so...

CT: 'Happy Birthday'

DM: In my family everybody goes at eighty-five, eighty-six, eighty-seven, so I'm startled to be alive. I am eighty-seven, but I don't know what's going on anymore. I'm enormously curious. You have to have a hunk of time to begin to see how you perform or what your life's about. Everybody admires youth, but youth is something to get through, to get to the meaty stuff. Youth is too distracting. It's all about curiosity. Every single square inch of my life I find to be curious. I don't know what's going on anymore and I tell you, not that I ever did, but I'm always amazed at how people don't seem to notice anything. What's that called? White-washed, white-washed by the culture. They live their lives defined by products and by computers and there's no wiggle room for any original thought or private observation. It would be contradictory to your comfort zone. We always want to stay in our comfort zone.

CT: How did you know when you were through the hunk of youth?

DM: Well you don't, you don't notice. This is a good analogy – it's like when you're swimming, you know you're swimming but you don't really notice how you're swimming. When you're in the flow, you don't notice you're flowing. Sometimes certain events bring you into consciousness to make you pay attention to something. Like having open-heart surgery, it gets your attention, which it did [for me].

CT: When did that happen?

DM: Well when Freddie [Frederick Goree, Duane's partner of fifty-seven years] got sick, I just had such stress because I took care of him 24/7. *Did he poop today? Does he have a rash? Did he eat? How am I going to get him to the doctors?* All those things. I did learn a great lesson – I now know what love is. The definition of love. When the other person's welfare is more important to you than your own. Trump will never love anybody because nobody's welfare could ever be more important to him than his own.

CT: That's something people say about love, but I imagine it doesn't really click until you're in that position.

DM: It's automatic, you don't even notice it. It's very profound. Getting back to curiosity – how can you not be curious about life and the very fundamental act of being in this amazing, terrifying, overwhelming universe of billions of stars? It's crushing if you submit to that thinking. It's considerably overwhelming and there's no solution, there is no God, there's no comfort zone. We are the event.

CT: I usually go through phases of curiosity about one thing intensely, is that similar to your experience?

DM: You can't keep that same intensity up all the time. You're very young and you have a lot of room left for curiosity, you know.

CT: I'm more just asking about your method, like, *I'm really into plants right now.*

DM: You are?

CT: No, no, I'm asking about your curiosity.

DM: Well Fred and I, we were big gardeners. We used to live in this house in the country for forty-four years, and we had a big garden. I'll show you a picture of our garden. [Duane leaves the room and returns with various books and magazines].

I found it. Years ago, *House and Garden* ran photos of our garden and they let me write the text. Hitler would never grow a garden. People who grow gardens are nurturers. You have to take care of your garden, you have to water it, you have to prune it and all that business. I reshot this garden for four seasons. Years later, I got very much involved in Japanese art – in Hokusai and Hiroshige [prints]. I really love it. And so I began to think, 'Why do all photographs have to be squares or rectangles?' So, I did this Japanese fan book.

CT: Is there anything you're doing for the first time now?

DM: I'm making movies. We've been making movies for a little while. When Fred got sick, I got so overwhelmed with being marinated in him that I couldn't. I've never made movies before, but I'm very verbal. I'm naturally a

storyteller. They're wonderful, small movies. I am on no mission to Hollywood. The great joy is the doing. The actual making of the film, the taking of the photographs. I take from absolutely all of my life experience. I write what I know about, and everything else is presumption. Fiction is all presumption.

CT: What are you working on now?

DM: We're doing a movie now inspired by James Joyce. It's called *Ulysses*. This is my favourite magazine, *Du* – it's a Swiss magazine. They did a whole issue on him. These are all his notes and the facsimile of the book, which I just love. I love handwriting. Handwriting is so intimate, and I'm actually wounded that they're not teaching kids cursive writing. I can't believe that. Writing is the foundation of civilisation. You look at a library, every single book is filled with thoughts, every single book. The library is very noisy. There are thousands and thousands and thousands of thoughts. Every sentence is a thought, every moment is a thought, some thoughts are more, but that's such an exciting thing to see your thought being put on paper. I'd love to show you the movies because they're all so demanding. I used to do everything by myself. I was just a real loner, but now I have a wonderful group – my assistant Josiah and a couple of other people. The thing about it is that it opens you up to more and more possibilities of risk, more and more possibilities of expression. That's one of the rewards of being alive, to feel most intensely: paying attention to life, not looking at it. Because when you look at, you tend to see things you've been told to expect to see. Like when I'm looking at you, I would already have certain assumptions about you – young, blonde, attractive and all that.

But on the other hand, the fact you're sitting here in this chair, the fact that I know you're from Greenpoint, there is certain curiosity already. The fact you came here means you're curious.

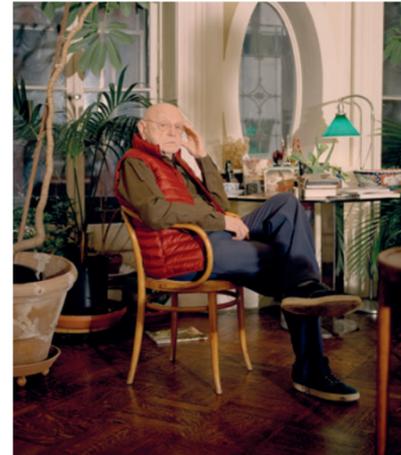
CT: Is there anything you're unlearning?

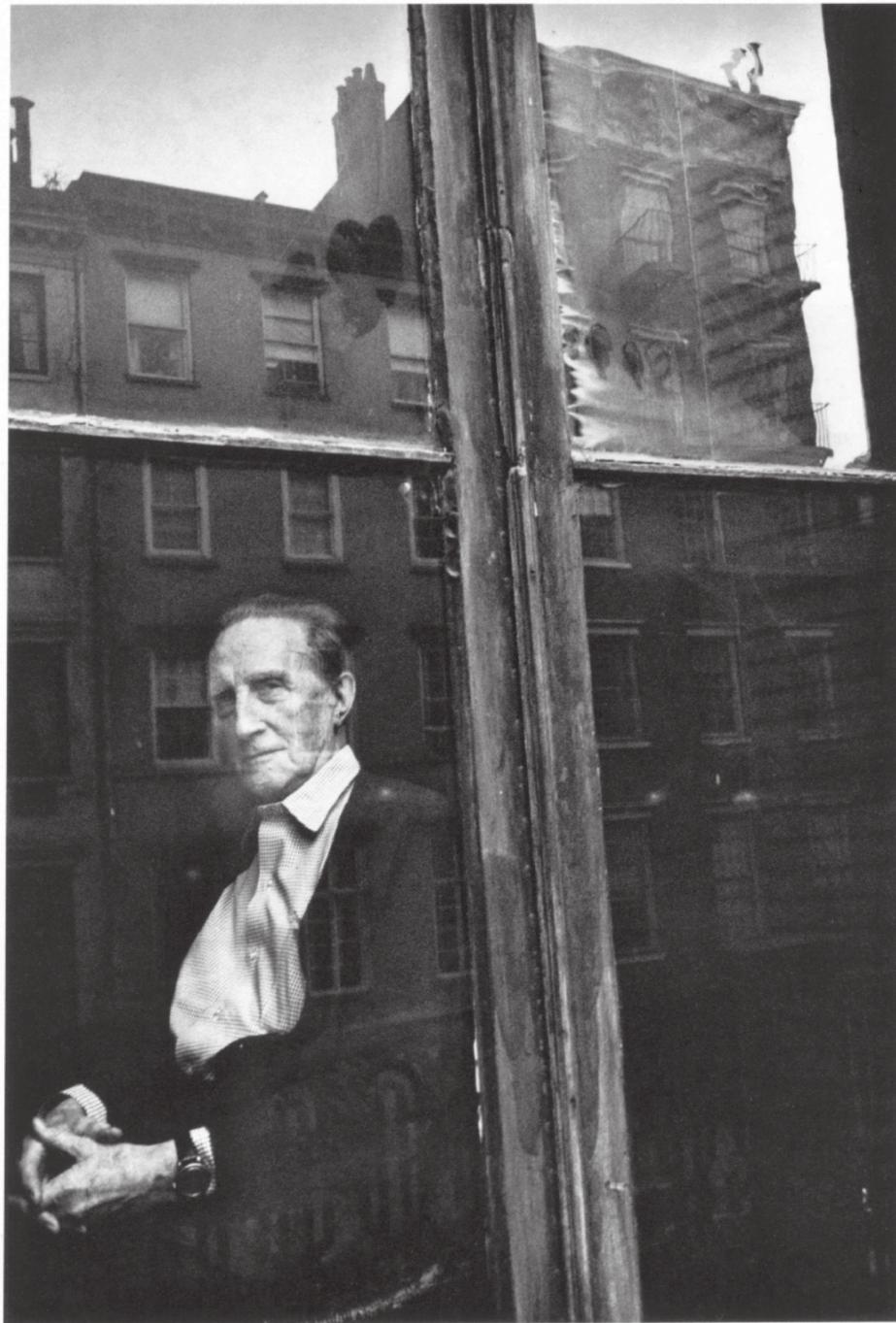
DM: Oh, you spend your whole life unlearning. I had to unlearn my first twenty years. First of all, I had to learn that I wasn't my mother and father. I had to learn that I wasn't Catholic. I had to learn that I wasn't heterosexual. When I was born, my DNA described that I would be 5 foot 8, that I would not be a fat person, that I would





“I’d rather be a grand failure than a great success at a mediocre life. We grow from mistakes. Success makes you too comfortable. You will become comfortable in your own success. Comfort is the death knell of curiosity and creativity.”





Marcel Duchamp lived behind my apartment
on tenth street when I lived on ninth street.
1964

be bald by the time I was thirty. I was also described by my socioeconomic status. My dad was a steel worker in Pittsburgh. We were from Eastern Europe, Slovaks, bottom feeders in that culture. I had to unlearn most of that. When I became a photographer, my mother said, 'How could you be a photographer but you never went to photography school?' which was my saving grace, because photography schools have to teach you something. They teach you rules. Their rules, and then you spend the rest of your life unlearning all that nonsense. It's the unlearning that's most difficult and I'm still doing it. It never comes to an end.

CT: So what does that look like now?

DM: Oh well, life. I've evolved, it's all about evolution. I evolved from being Catholic out of curiosity and then I evolved in my way through Buddhism and most of the religions. I could never belong to any church. But now I'm finally at this point, I have to unlearn life. I have to unlearn what it means. All these things I've taken that I've assumed, I still have to unlearn because eventually it will be nothing. And so at eighty-seven – maybe I make it to ninety, which would be nice – how do I, as intensely as possible, experience every single moment? Really all those rules that have supported me and told me this was right and this is wrong, which one of those rules do I still have to unlearn? I need to unlearn whatever restrictions I have left, in the way I express myself, in the way I view life, in the way it's hard to imagine not being nothing.

I have a wonderful friend named Beau Lotto, who wrote a book on neurology, and he says that our senses define what we call real. There are dogs who can smell better than we can, and birds who can see better than we can, so we only have a version of reality. But if you alter the senses, if you take drugs or you take acid, you see a whole other kind. Did you ever read *The Doors of Perception*?

CT: Mmm, no.

DM: You should, that's your assignment. This is interesting because photography deals with reality: while it can reproduce something very well, it never questions the nature of reality. It only describes. I maintain that the photographer must bring insight into whatever they're photographing. It's one thing for me to photograph you and I can

describe you, geography of your face, your blue eyes. But it's another thing to bring insight – what did she say that caught my ear? I quite like that: *caught my ear*.

[Duane pauses]

I am still enjoying 'caught my ear'.

If I showed you a picture of my mother and my father, they would be standing next to each other smiling, in their sixties, and the picture shows you what they look like – but it's a total lie. They didn't love each other. They didn't even like each other. They haven't fucked in forty years. You couldn't see that he was an alcoholic, and that she cheated on him. So that's why I don't believe in photographs.

I'm very much a contrarian in the sense that I have opinions on everything. I can't stand people who don't have opinions. Again, unless you're so dead, so prepackaged by the culture that you know everything already.

CT: That nothingness at the end that you describe, is that comforting?

DM: No, no, not at all. That's why churches are popular. You know churches are all political institutions designed to perpetuate themselves. They sell products. They sell Heaven and Hell. That's a product, and if you pay your bills and do all the right things, you will get into heaven. What was your question?

CT: I think you've gotten through to it. The nothingness.

DM: We can't experience nothingness because we are something. And it's possible for us – oh we're getting back to Huxley. The title *Doors of Perception* comes from William Blake who said, 'If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite.' So Huxley says that our minds are like chemicals in the sense that our minds contain the universe. Our mind is the universe, everything is the universe. We have a series of filters to live in this environment. The filters prohibit us from experiencing everything that we could totally experience. If you remove a filter or if you take acid, you get more and more of the information that's there. Eventually, if you could remove all the filters, we would do so, because we cannot survive without information. So nature, as we evolve quite cleverly, protects us from ourselves. When people take acid, they see things vibrating or they see energy, so we only know this part of the pie.

As a matter of fact somebody gave me some mushrooms which I'm tempted to try, but I'm so freaky as it is.

CT: Might as well.

DM: I don't think I need any encouragement. Easy for you to say, you have another sixty-five years ahead of you.

CT: How do you grapple with making work for money?

DM: Which work do you mean?

CT: I mean doing a commission for a company.

DM: Yeah. Have you ever worked in a steel mill?

CT: No.

DM: I didn't think so. Have you worked flipping burgers in a hot, sweaty kitchen?

CT: Yes.

DM: Well, then you know what that's like. No, I like making money. We invented poor. I grew up in a dirt street – it's still a dirt street – with a coal stove and no proper bathroom. We were poor, p-o-o-r! I always worked and I have no problem with money. I have a problem with too much money. I want just enough, not too much, not too little, just enough. Back then, I was still living in my little fifty-dollars-a-month apartment on Charles Street, which was appropriate when I was twenty-six. I was making fifty bucks a week, so it worked out. I don't admire wealth. I think it's irrational not to want to have a nice meal, live in a nice apartment. There's nothing wrong with that, and I'm not a total snob. I did commercial work. I love doing commercials. You want to hear my secret of success?

CT: Yes of course.

DM: You find something you love doing and you get somebody to pay you to do it. My idea of work is when you have to go someplace to do something you don't want to do. Those people go to work every day. I worked in a mill briefly and believe me, that's work. That's not like going to a bank every day, working as a teller; that'll make you want

JOSEPH CORNELL



guyton nichols 20

THIS PHOTOGRAPH IS MY PROOF



This photograph is my proof. There was that afternoon, when things were still good between us, and she embraced me, and we were so happy it had happened. She did love me. Look, see for yourself!

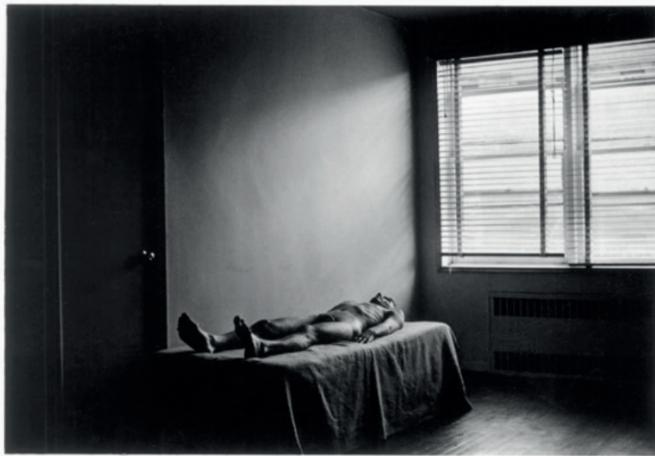


BALTHUS AND SETSUKO



*The unfortunate man could not touch the one he loved.
It had been declared illegal by the law.
Slowly his fingers became toes and his hands gradually became feet.
He began to wear shoes on his hands to disguise his pain.
It never occurred to him to break the law.*
guyton nichols 20

THE SPIRIT LEAVES THE BODY



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5



THE SPIRIT LEAVES THE BODY



to kill yourself probably, no, no, no. I love taking photographs. The fact somebody would pay me to do it, it's even better. So I'm very realistic about money. I've been poor and I'm not poor now, I'm comfortable. I never pursued money. I never had a studio. I learnt everything on the job which is the best way to learn anything. People would always say, 'Would you like to do something?' I said yes. The *New York Times* called up and said 'We want to do a book of libraries. Have you ever photographed interiors?' I said, 'Oh yeah, hmm, sure.' I loved doing what I've never done before. I was once doing a job a long time ago, and a young girl came up to me and said, 'Is it you?' And I said, 'Yes.' She goes, 'What are you doing here?' I said 'Well, I'm making a living.' And then she turned to me and she said, 'Oh, I would never sell out.' And I wanted to say, 'Honey, you have nothing to sell.' All those people who don't want to sell out, they have nothing to sell. I love the idea that I could do a job and make \$10,000 a day. Here's the other side of that coin – I never want my private work to support me. All these kids graduating from photo school, after \$200,000 worth of education, they graduate and a guy has a portfolio of 100 pictures of his girlfriend's ass. He goes to a gallery and doesn't get a job. So he expects that \$200,000 is going to make him Cindy Sherman, with that education. What happens is, nobody wants his girlfriend's ass.

This book, *The Garden*, people ask how many copies were sold. I have no idea of anything. I've done over thirty books. I actually have no idea whether they sold. I couldn't care less. I always did jobs. I did Paris collections. I'd go to Paris, staying in a great hotel, photographing beautiful women all day long. 'Wow that must be awful to sell out like that.' No fuck you, really. There is no merit to being cold. Poverty never got you anywhere, and should not be a destination. But don't expect the pictures of your girlfriend's ass to make you a millionaire – not going to happen. You have the photographs of your girlfriend because you loved her and you loved her ass and want to take a picture of it. But if you take it thinking, 'This would be great in my portfolio, or maybe a porn magazine will buy it, or maybe I'll put it on the Internet.' No, no, no, no. It's about the pleasure of taking it. I have two bodies of work, commercial work and my private work. I never go into my private work thinking, 'Oh, this is going to sell.' I do it out of the pure pleasure of existing, fighting to do it, to make it happen, to experience, to express. The keyword is expression. How well do you express yourself? Express yourself as a writer, express yourself as a photographer, express yourself as a tap dancer, express yourself as a cook. It's the discovery and the expression of expression that counts.

CT: There's an inherent tension between getting hired to make photographs and making photographs for yourself. I feel like many photographers have to work a lot to support their personal careers.

DM: It's always been like that.

CT: Sure.

DM: It goes with the territory. You get a good job working for a bank. You know every week what you're going to do. You get a salary and bore yourself to death. Because you think you can't have it all. If you're going to be a creative person you have to take risks, and risks mean you're not going to get the comfort of the country club.

CT: But I'm wondering, as I'm sure it was then, now there are the

people that chose. They lost sight of their personal work and then they're eighty-seven and they're like, 'Why don't I have the books? Why am I not getting the interviews?'

DM: Fuck you. You didn't do the work, that's why you don't have them. If a guy comes here, he gets out of school, he gets a job in a bank, he's a writer but he's thirty and he's still young, he has a lot of time. But now he's gotten married and he's still at the bank, and then he finds he's forty-five, he's got a kid who's thirteen and he realises he hasn't written anything in the last five years. Well, that train left the station. There are certain times of life that certain behaviours are appropriate, but what's appropriate at twenty is not necessarily appropriate at thirty, and what's appropriate at thirty is not necessarily appropriate at forty, but if you find yourself sixty-five years old and you haven't written anything, don't blame anybody but yourself.

CT: Right. I'm wondering if those types of working were always so obviously separate for you...?

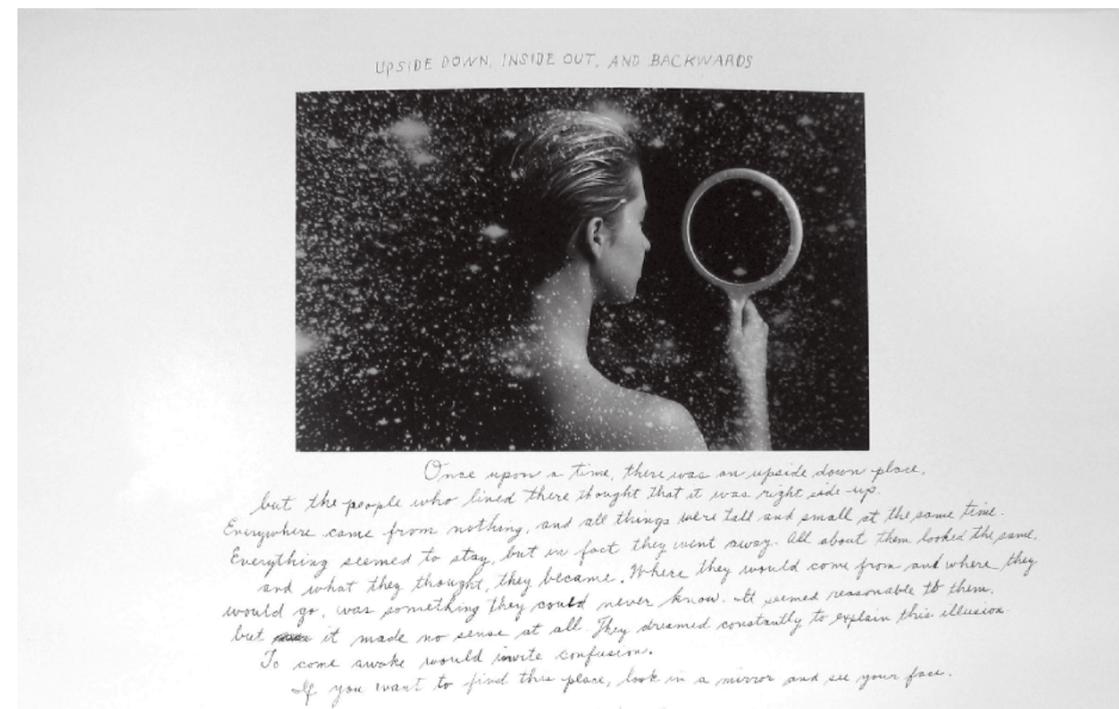
DM: Well, they were simultaneous. I'm working on the Joyce movie now. I read *Ulysses* a long time ago and I've gone back and I completely immerse myself in him again. My movie, which is going to be a strange film, is like a collage, it's a series of events. There is no story line. I always had a bottom-line energy which I based on my curiosity to experience. The biggest thing is I have no regrets. There's no 'I wish I had gone to Texas when I was fourteen.' Oh, I did that! It would have been great if I had gone to Russia. I did that too, and nobody gives a fuck about what you did. Nobody gives a fuck and if you don't give enough fucks, don't feel bad if you're fifty-five and nothing ever happened. I'd rather be a grand failure than a great success at a mediocre life. We grow from mistakes. Success makes you too comfortable. You will become comfortable in your own success. Comfort is the death knell of curiosity and creativity.

CT: How do you not become comfortable?

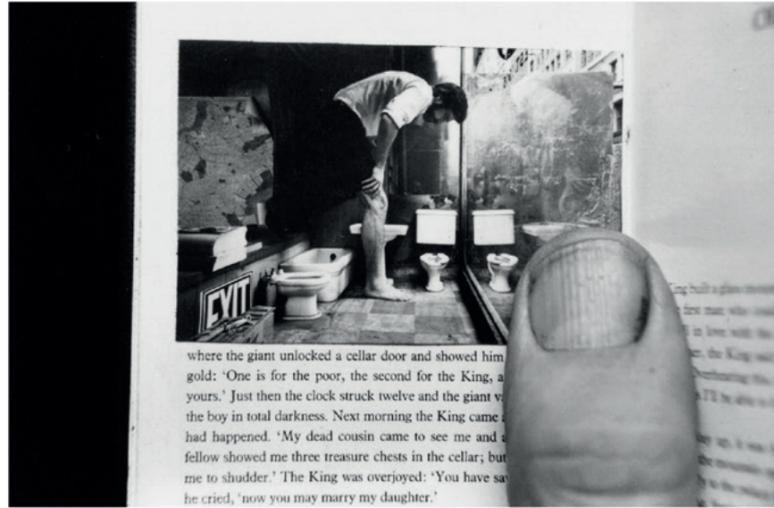
DM: I don't know. Because that's on you. Fred and I, we did the house in the country and we loved to garden, we did all that stuff back then. While I was there working on the garden, I began to do this whole body of work. I did three books in the country. One on Walt Whitman, one called *Questions Without Answers*, and one with the Japanese fans. It depends on your personality. There's such a thing as being entitled.

CT: Well, it's curious coming from someone with so much success.

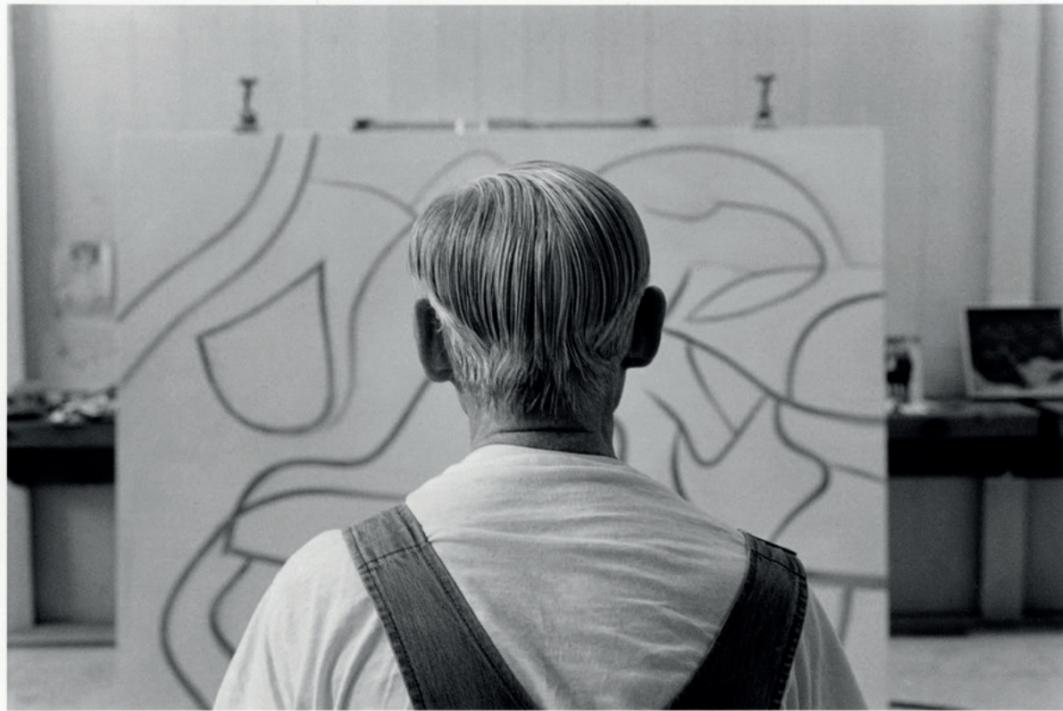
DM: I don't pay attention to that. I started doing *Sequences* because I was frustrated with still photography. It didn't tell me enough. I hated the silence of still photography. So then I expanded it. You're either defined by the medium or you redefine the medium in terms of yourself. When I came on the scenes in the Sixties, you could either be Ansel Adams or you could be Robert Frank, who is my favourite photographer, you could be Diane Arbus or you could be Garry Winogrand. That was it. Well I'm not any of those people, so why should my photographs look like that? I just finished this, an old book of *Empty New York*, pictures I did in 1964 based on [Eugène] Atget. I got up every Sunday morning at six and photographed the streets. I finally got the book published after all these years. I knew that wasn't



THINGS ARE QUEER







Willem de Kooning



René Magritte

a destination. I knew it was an exercise. Atget wasn't well known then, and I was enthralled by him. When I began to look at these empty barber shops and stores, I began to see them as stage sets. I particularly remember there was a barber shop, and there was a hook and the little white jacket that the barber had on the hook. I said oh, look at that. The man comes into the stage set. The barber puts on his barber costume. The whole day he does his barber act, and then he goes home. I began to see everything as a stage set. Then, without anyone telling me, I started to look at Balthus' paintings. I like the artificiality, the pose. If I had thought 'Oh well gee, Garry Winogrand doesn't like my picture' – well fuck Garry Winogrand. If you don't have enough chutzpah or balls to say fuck you... I have a way with words.

CT: You talk a lot about death, and I want pinpoint how you're feeling about it. How is that different?

DM: [DM lets out a scream that turns into laughter] The second book I did is called *The Journey of the Spirit After Death*, based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead. I also addressed it in my first book, *Death Comes to the Old Lady*, who was my grandmother. I did a picture called 'Anna's Old Clothes'. My grandmother's name was Anna, and my grandfather asked me to photograph her in a casket when she died. And then when he died, I photographed him, which was a tradition in Europe. I wrote a little piece called 'Grandma'. I said, 'I'm looking in the casket and I see my grandmother but that's not my grandmother. Her hands have become her gloves, her stockings have become her legs, her blouse has become her torso.' [The phone rings] Let me see, maybe it's my dead grandmother, she usually calls.

So I've been enormously influenced. How could you not be influenced? Not by the facts of death but by the metaphysical implications. I do not believe in God. I think that's the silliest thing I have ever heard and anyway, that's a whole different discussion. I should warn you, I can do twenty minutes on any subject. I can't stand people who don't have opinions. My mom and dad would come to an exhibit and they would see all this weird stuff and I said, 'What do you think?' And my mother would say, 'Well that's nice,' and my dad said, 'Yeah, those were nice pictures you know.' But death is the eternal, the ultimate, the inexplicable, the overwhelming, the terrifying, the liberating, the... [exhales deeply].

My brother and I are the last ones. Everyone else is gone. You know when it becomes real? If you go to the doctor one day and you cough and the doctor says, 'Oh, well you know that little thing you have, we have to look into that.' Then you pay attention to death. You have to have some direct experience, but I've always had a deep awareness of it. It's all about awareness, not about looking. It's about how conscious you are, breathing and shitting and drinking – those are the facts of being alive, that's the animal, that's how we function as animals.

I'm thinking of Henri Bergson the French philosopher. He had this concept called the *élan vital* which, and this I'm really very aware of, the Chinese call the *qi*. Hindus call it *prana*, I call it the animating energy. Now here's Duane alive, here's Duane dead. Here's a plant alive, dead. It's the energy. What happens when you die? The energy ceases, the energy withdraws, the energy is transformed into something larger. I don't know what that is, but it's so obvious to me. Watch what happens in April, every square inch of the park will have plants shooting up. We don't even see it, it's overwhelming, and Bergson talks about it. You have to say, 'Look at that, look at the tulips coming up. Yeah, aren't they nice?' No, but look at that, don't you

see every square inch is alive?' I mean it's fascinating, so how do you express that? When I did the guy in the subway turning into a star, that was about the energy. If I took off my

DM suit, you would just see my pure energy.

CT: What does your community within photography look like?

DM: Well I've always been such a loner that I hate communities. I could never be a joiner. I did a piece for a magazine on an ashram or something. They were all [Duane hums]. Those are other people's rules. I'm not a joiner. I could never join anything. Some people need communities. They are so bereft of their own energy or consciousness or curiosity, they need somebody. I meditated for twelve years. I believed in the principle. I wasn't identifying with my Duane suit.

CT: Why did you stop meditating?

DM: Because it became a pose, it really became a habit. I have been going to the gym for years and it's just a habit, good habits. First of all I was looking for something that you can't look for. I believe in illumination. I call it my business brain. This is my business brain talking to you. I'm probably 98.6 degrees, 120-over-60 blood pressure, that's all the stuff. This is my energy, and I can do anything I want with it. So I began to realise that when you look for it, you can't find it, which is the problem. Do you know that 90 percent of all Buddhists who meditate never get an enlightenment? Part of the problem is, if you want it, you're not going to get it. So I abandoned chasing it. If you ask me, one of the singular most important things is curiosity, and if you don't have any curiosity in any category of this smorgasbord of life, then you're dead. [Robot voice] 'Yes I will watch the TV tonight.'

CT: Something I never associated with your work is just how funny it is. It doesn't live with other 'funny' photographers, people like Martin Parr, etc. Do you place your work there?

DM: No, no, no, it's just my nature – I'm a very funny person. I've always been goofy. Who was that guy that said the best revenge on death is living well? My thing is the best revenge on death is having a sense of humour. The trouble is when people take themselves much too seriously. I have no fear of talking about the Buddha and then saying fuck you in the next sentence. I have no hierarchy. Humour is this great salvation. You don't have to have a lot of money to have a sense of humour. I have no restrictions for my mouth. I would much rather be funny than serious. I'm very funny, I mean I'm on 24/7. Now that I'm old, I am nutty. I'm curious and I'm a curiosity.

CT: Do you know what memes are?

DM: Is that a computer thing?

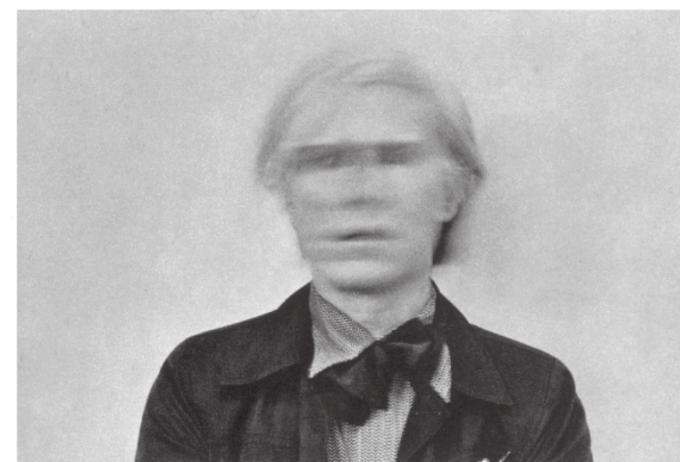
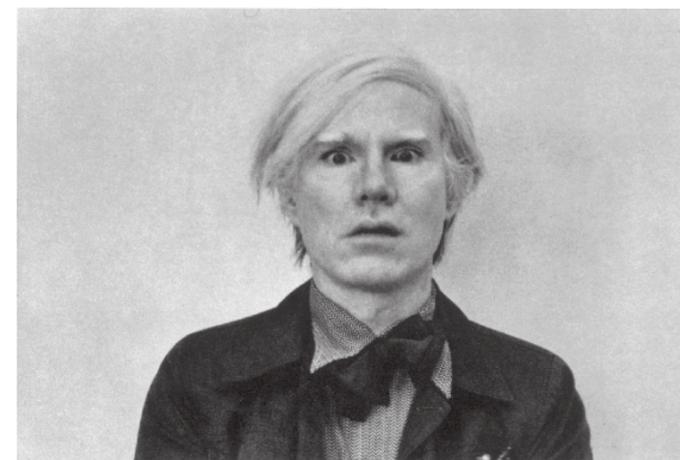
CT: Kind of.

DM: Those people who go like [mime gesture]?

CT: [Laughing] No, no.

DM: Those are mimes. Oh those little faces, smiley faces.

ANDY WARHOL 1972





CT: No, that's emojis. But memes are like a viral joke, an anonymous viral joke that is in the form of an image. So it'll be an image that millions of people will see and alter, and it will become sort of funnier. Anyway, I was thinking a lot about your work and memes. On your wikipedia it talks about your innovations, and I was thinking you're kind of an inventor of memes.

DM: Well look, you know, I know nothing about computers. I have computer stuff that we work off. Oh, I have to show you the movies. They're going to knock your socks off. The small movies are around five minutes, the new ones are ten minutes, which is my epic, but I know nothing about computers, literally nothing. I'm not proud that I'm computer illiterate, but it's not unusual for someone my age.

I'm going to have a big show this fall at the Morgan Library, which is in September/October. I'm very thrilled because it's my favorite place in New York. Books, I love books. I don't really like MoMA. I don't like any of those cash-cow museums. I like intimate ones like this.

CT: I loved the Peter Hujar show that was there. Has your work been received the way you wanted it to?

DM: I have never thought about it. No, I have never thought about that. In the beginning, I remember the first time I had the show of *Sequences* and Garry Winogrand came and Joel Meyerowitz too. They were very close. Garry Winogrand said, 'Well, this isn't photography,' and he walked out. I was like, 'It's not your fucking photography.' The whole idea that he could tell someone else what photography is and what it's not. The principle is the pleasure of the doing. In *Grandpa Goes to Heaven*, I had this idea that a little boy sees his grandfather get up and go to heaven. So, most straight photographers would photograph death by photographing a corpse, or a woman crying. You photograph women in black, cemeteries, tombstones; those are the facts of death. The facts of death are not at all the same thing. If I want to photograph love, I could take a picture of you. I'm sure a lot of people love you, take a picture of you and say: 'This is the girl I love.' OK. But how do I photograph love? Fred and I were together for fifty-seven years. How do I photograph not just the facts of him? I try to talk about the nature of something, not the thing itself. I don't know how to do that, so every time I do something, I have no guarantees. I did my self-portrait a 100 years ago, looking at my own corpse. You see me on the slab or whatever it is, and you see me looking at myself. From the very beginning I was doing that.

CT: What did you change about the apartment when Fred passed away?

DM: Well, a couple of things, but there was a big bed here. We have a sleeping loft upstairs, but he couldn't go up and down the steps. I had a big bed for him and I had round-the-clock care. Fred was an architect and he was very good, but he had a more formal self. I have a lot of stuff – I like all that stuff, and I have a lot of books everywhere and stuff. It's not decorated, it's just that I collect stuff I like.

CT: Have you always been collecting?

DM: Yes. I'm not a big collector. I had a wonderful art collection which I gave to the museum in Pittsburgh. I love Pittsburgh. I love

that city. I have no reason to live there. I hate LA. I love New York but I hate Dallas. I hate freeways. You spend your whole life taking the 103 to the 106 to get to Pasadena. No, no, no. I've got my front door, my bank's on the corner, my gym is a block and a half away, there are about six restaurants within two minutes' walk. I don't have to have a car anymore. Everything here is intimate and very personal, you know? It suits me.

CT: How has your relationship to sex changed?

DM: Oh well, [laughing] am I getting it? Yeah I am. I am getting laid. Yeah it's great, are you kidding? I am certainly gay, but I dislike Mapplethorpe. Just the same way I'm not a typical photographer and I'm not a typical spiritual person, I'm not a typical gay person. Mapplethorpe would have considered Fred and myself gay Uncle Toms. I'm really angry at him.

CT: Mapplethorpe?

DM: Mapplethorpe. For somebody so professionally gay, he turned out to have very little insight. His *magnum opus*, the gay book. He photographed himself with a whip up his ass, a black guy with a big dick, which is the equivalent of photographing a woman with big tits. Leather, every cliché in the book. He photographed himself in drag – who gives a fuck? I'm much more subversive because for me homosexuality is simply a variation on the sexual spectrum. Everything in nature is done in abundance. Nature makes 30,000 kinds of beetles, 25,000 of kinds of butterflies, god knows how many different variations of fish in the ocean. Black people have black skin because they grew up in Africa where the sun was intolerable, and if you had white skin, they would be burnt to the crisp. So your melatonin developed to protect you in that environment, and people in Scandinavia have white skin and skinny blonde hair and little skinny noses, because there's no sun there, so they don't need to be protected.

In the sexual spectrum, there are some people who are 100 percent gay or 100 percent straight or whatever but others who are 50 percent straight, 50 percent gay, you know. There are variations in the spectrum. Men love to fuck. I wish people would just underline it. Men will do anything to get laid. Men love pussie, p-u-s-s-i-e. Anyways, it's a sexual spectrum. How could you not have feelings for somebody of your own gender? It's all culturally defined. The fact Fred and I could get married was amazing, I never ever thought it was a possibility. I went from high school not knowing anything about gay shmay. I dated all the way through high school and college. We had 'sissies'. I get very angry at people like Mapplethorpe who become rich and famous by exploiting, by showing off how 'bad' they are. I couldn't care less what anybody does, I really don't as long as they don't hurt me.

No but, the reason I am successful to whatever degree I am, is because I'm totally consistent with myself. This is the real thing. I'm not pretending.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PART OF A WOMAN'S BODY



In the oldest dreams of old men,
Women's breasts still remain,
Long after their desires have turned to dust.
They are their first memories,
Warm, nurturing, home,
The point of satisfaction,
Perfect in their gracious arcs,
Women wear their breasts as medals,
Emblems of their love.

HENRI CLOUZOT



משה מילר

THE BOGEYMAN



2



3



4



5



6



7



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A special thank you Josiah Cuneo

SELF PORTRAIT AS IF I WERE DEAD



» URSULA MICHALIS 9/25