

Raymond Foye

*- You knew Allen even before you started working with the photographs.
How did your role with the photos begin?*

I met Allen in 1973 when I was sixteen, and a junior at Lowell High School. I went with the senior English honors class to a Kerouac symposium held at Salem State College, in Massachusetts. My English teacher, a lovely woman named Rita Sullivan, allowed me to go with the senior class even though I was a junior, because she knew I was reading Kerouac. Peter Orlovsky and Gregory Corso were also there, as was Peggy Biderman, a close friend of Gregory's who lived at the Chelsea Hotel. Eventually all these people became very close friends. Somehow I managed to stay in touch with them as I was growing up and travelling around.

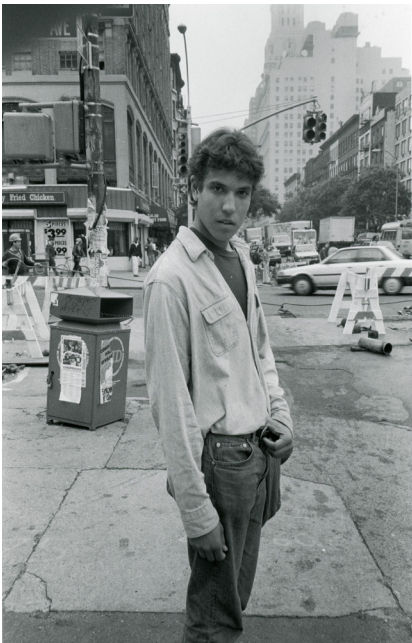
I worked at City Lights Books in San Francisco from 1977 to 1979, and renewed my acquaintance with Allen there. When I moved to New York in 1979, I worked freelance as an assistant to Allen on various projects. At one point he paid me as his assistant to go up to his archives at Butler Library at Columbia University – he wanted some items, so I had to go up and retrieve them. Now this was 1984, and I was twenty-seven.

I had a letter from him which I presented to Kenneth Lohf, head of Special Collections at Butler Library. I started going through the boxes of materials, and in the course of my search I encountered all of these photographs and negatives in drugstore envelopes. In those days you'd send the film to the drugstore to be developed and you'd get the prints back, with the negatives. They were not good prints, but I could see right away that the negatives were good: mostly well exposed, and in most cases they were 2 ¼ inch square, or 2¼ by 3¼ inches, a less common format. I was familiar with some of the photos from Ann Charters' book *Scenes Along the Road*, and also in her biography of Kerouac. The photos had been reproduced here and there, but not well. They were just treated as snapshots.

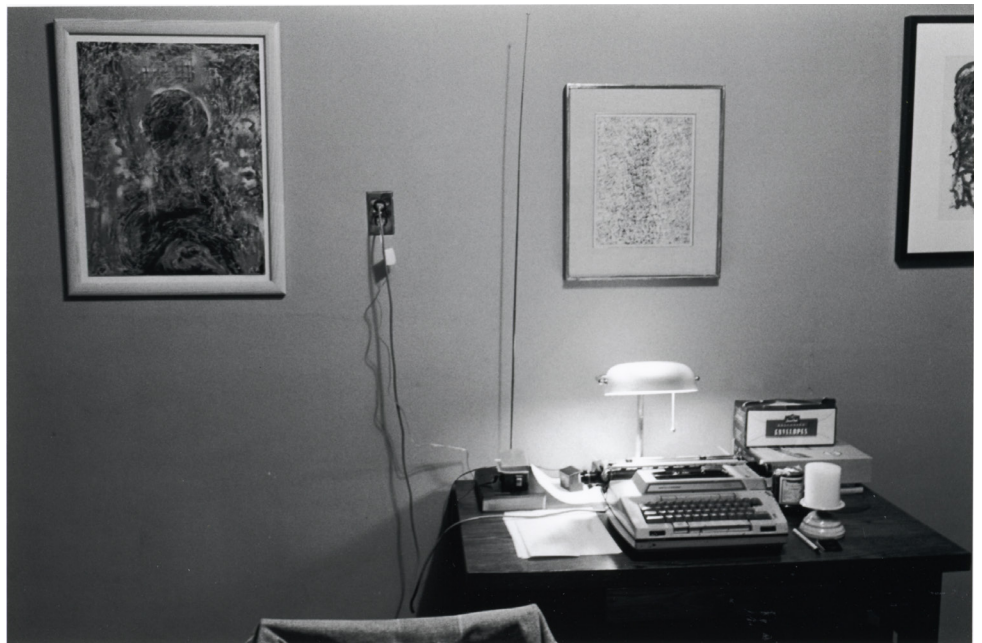


Philip Whalen, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Robert Creeley, Vancouver, July 1, 1963

I had studied photography at the Philadelphia College of Art with Ray Metzker, and at the Art Institute in Chicago for a semester with Ken Josephson, and later at the San Francisco Art Institute with Linda Connor, so I knew photography. I knew how to shoot, I knew how to print, I knew darkroom work, all of that. I could tell just by looking that these were very good negatives. When I got back to his office I said to Allen, 'I'd like to take some of these negatives out of your archive and make really good prints from them.' He said ok, so that was another letter, another permission. These things still belonged to Allen, they were only on deposit. For many years Allen was hoping Columbia would purchase his archives. Since Allen was a famous alumnus it seemed like the right place for the materials. But they never did make the purchase, which was a terrible missed opportunity, in my view. In any case, I removed a small selection of negatives – they were the classic 1953 shots of the apartment on East 7th Street with Kerouac and Burroughs. There were darkrooms for rent by the hour on West 20th Street that I regularly made use of. I spent a couple of days doing nice, large prints, 11x14, on Agfa Brovira paper, put them in a box, and brought them to Allen's apartment, spread them out and showed them to him. And it was a revelation to him: he had no idea that he had this kind of material, that they were that good, and that they could be blown up like that. I said, 'If you were to caption these, they'd be really great and we could sell them.' Allen was always very enterprising and so was I. So he started writing captions, and we experimented with a lot of different kinds of ink, a lot of different kinds of pens. The Montblanc pen worked well, and I got Allen to start putting captions underneath them. I thought they would be marketable and saleable. I knew they were beautiful and I knew they were important, and I knew they could be shown. Actually I didn't have much practical experience with that side of things, but I had hopes that we could sell them.



Nicolas Gardère, Sheridan Square,
NYC, May 16, 1990



William Burroughs's writing desk, The Bunker, NYC, c. 1985

- So the idea behind captioning the photos came from you?

The caption idea came from Elsa Dorfman: she published a book called *Elsa's Housebook*. That was one of those books I owned when I was young. Fred McDarrah's *The Beat Scene* was another one. I'd just sit there and look at the pictures and dream about hanging out with Beats. 'How can I hang out with them? How can I live in the Chelsea Hotel?' It was all such a dream that I had. I love *Elsa's Housebook*. It was a great book, the way she put the captions underneath. Allen's handwriting was very similar. I knew he could be great at captions because he loved summing things up in a very precise way. And it amplified the picture: the captions were not derivative; they were parallel, a separate thing.

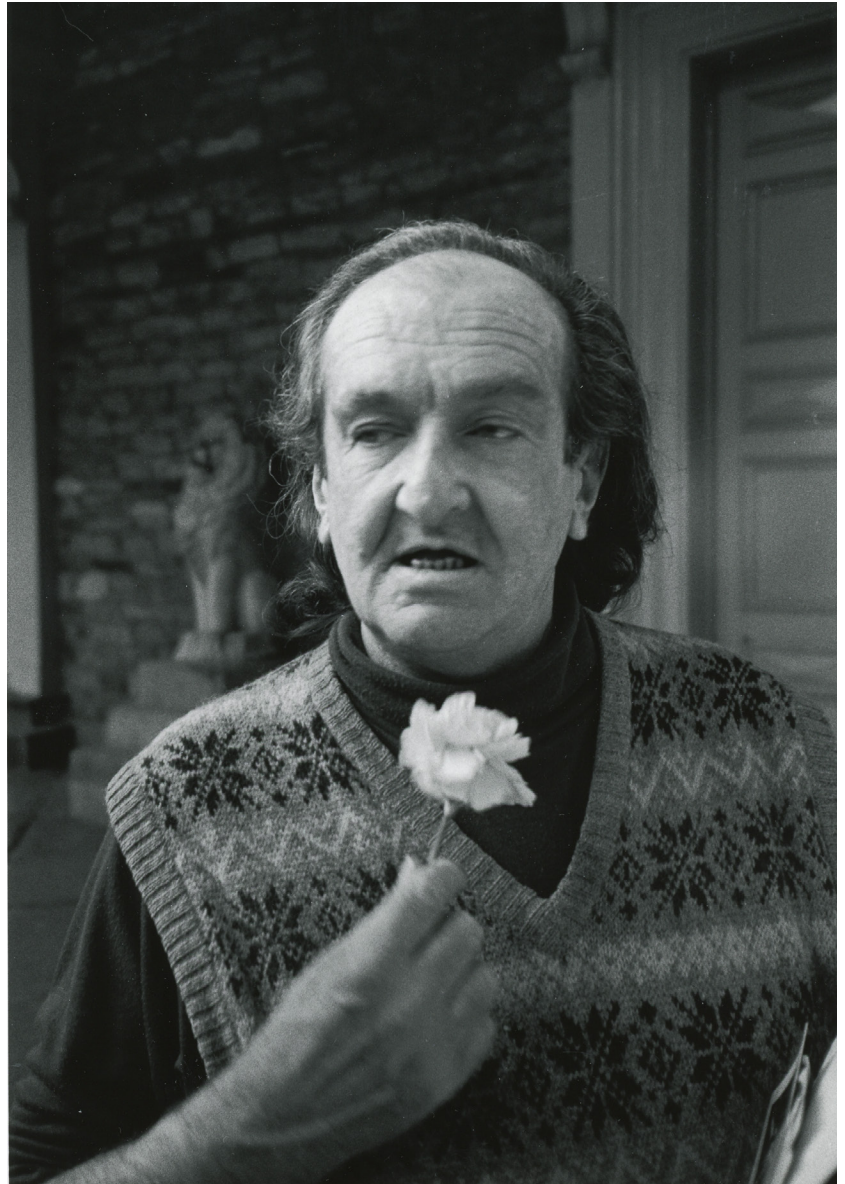
Obviously the captions are such a unique element of those photographs, particularly the early iconic ones of the Beats. With the captions, they reminded him of things that he otherwise wouldn't have been reminded of. He was teaching and was re-reading things like Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*, but seeing the photographs definitely jogged his memory. The captions became an art form in themselves, and he started making sure they kept copies of all the captions. They went from becoming haiku-like, just a line or two, to being more epic – sometimes they'd be longer than the size of the photograph. Of course every time you remember something, what you're really doing is remembering the last time you remembered it. And that then becomes a palimpsest. It does change.

- You helped arrange the first gallery showing of the Ginsberg photographs?

Yes. The first show was at Holly Solomon's in January 1984. I would guess it was spring that I went up to Butler Library, and the summer when I was doing the printing. By this time I was borrowing a darkroom on Fulton Street that belonged to Andrew Moore – it was summer and extremely hot in the dark room, I remember that – then by the fall I went to Holly Solomon with these photographs. I knew Holly, I liked her, and the Director of her gallery was Manuel Gonzalez. He was originally from Cuba; he was full of energy and very intelligent.

It's difficult to remember why I decided to take them to Holly – I knew she would like them. If there was a specific reason, I don't recall. It seemed right for her, and I was friends with Manuel. At the time Holly showed Laurie Anderson, William Wegman, Nam June Paik. There was a little backroom in the space in the gallery and they liked to do two-person shows. So I went up to 724 Fifth Avenue with a box of photos and showed them to Manuel and to Holly and said, 'Can you do a show?' And they were like, 'Yeah, great, let's do it.' We didn't have a budget for framing or matting, so we just put them behind glass and pinned the glass to the wall with clips. We filled the back room with photos. At the last minute, Allen took a marker and wrote a line on the wall from his poem "Footnote to Howl." The line was "Hideous Human Angels," and that became the name of the show.

We installed the show on a Thursday, and the show opened on a Saturday. And between that time, the gallery called around, and word got out in the press, and Allen of course was a one-man press agent.



John Wieners, St. Mark's Poetry Project, NYC, c. 1995

That opening was so packed. I don't remember whose show was in the front room. We completely overwhelmed whoever was in that front room.

Before the opening I said to him, pointing to the photographs in the shows, 'You know Allen, this is all well and good, but this is 1953 and this is 1957 and this is 1963, and there isn't anything after 1965.' So I said, 'Go buy a camera, start shooting again.' He said, 'Oh, okay, great.' He went to Robert Frank, and asked Robert to take him to a camera store. Imagine that! But Robert was just around in those days, nothing special, just hanging around. Unless you were a photography student like myself and happened to know that this is a man who singlehandedly changed the face of photography, if you saw him, you'd think he was just a bum on the street. He was very demure, he was not seeking the spotlight, he did not go to things that were public. It was a very different world in those days, the media was not so involved in branding everything every minute of the day. Of course to some of us, Robert was a very important underground filmmaker and photographer. But you could bump into him on the Bowery, and you could hang out with him at his studio on Bleecker Street, and everything was cool as long as you didn't make a big fuss about him being Robert Frank. I spent a lot of time at his place, we'd smoke pot, we'd listen to Dylan and Van Morrison and Neil Young. One day after I'd passed some sort of test I guess, he took down a box, showed me the contact sheets to *The Americans*. I'll never forget that.

- Did the Ginsberg photos sell well?

They did. They weren't too expensive. One thing I did do, prior to that show, to raise money to be able to buy supplies and dark room time and pay myself a little bit, I put together two sets of a hundred prints. He captioned every one and I tried to sell those sets for \$5,000 each. Robert Rainwater at the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library bought one set. He jumped right on it. But I couldn't get anyone else interested. A lot of institutions – the Getty, the Met, the MoMA – I took them everywhere I could think of, they all turned me down. One hundred signed photographs for \$5,000, in retrospect, not bad. We never sold that second set. But with the Berg sale, that's how I was able to finance the printing.

- You were involved with the Twelve Trees Press book, Allen Ginsberg Photographs, as well?

Yes, I was friends with Jack Woody from Twelve Trees, and I engaged him in that project. He was doing beautiful photography books with Herb Ritts and Robert Mapplethorpe. In many ways Jack Woody invented the contemporary photography book aesthetic as we now know it. Certainly, Minor White and Michael Hoffman got the ball rolling at Aperture, but Jack Woody upped the scale, and gave even greater prominence to really fine gravure printing. So Jack Woody came by Allen's house, and in a few hours we put together that book of photographs.

And then Allen really got into the photography, which is something that a lot of people had a hard time forgiving me for because he became so obsessed. I remember at the time, those around him like his secretary Bob Rosenthal, they loved Allen and supported him, anything he wanted to do was fine, but Allen was spending a lot of money and a lot of time on the photography. It was an expensive hobby, and it was a lot of work for everyone in the office. But in retrospect it was far more than a hobby. And he became a real nuisance with that camera. I'm joking, but he really did get in everybody's face all the time. But because he was Allen Ginsberg, people put up with him, they were honoured to have that attention paid, they would cooperate. Even Dylan would sit still for him. That's part of the magic of the portraits: the subject is being photographed by Allen Ginsberg, they are interacting with someone whom they deeply admire.

- Robert Frank was obviously an important influence for Allen.

For most people I knew, Allen was a real hero, but Allen had his own heroes, and Robert was certainly one of them. Allen worshipped Robert. So the photography was a way for him to bond with Robert, and to be his student. He had another friend who was a photographer, who lived above Strand Books, Hank O'Neal. He was the commercial agent for Bernice Abbott. He was another person whom Allen relied on for help and advice. Through Hank, Allen met Bernice. She was in her eighties by then. She had kind of an imperious quality, very gruff and blunt, and she'd tell him off. He wanted to take a photograph of her, he'd be jumping all around, and she'd say, 'Allen, slow down. Don't be a shutterbug, compose your picture.' She taught him about composition. I remember Robert once when Allen was doing a portrait of somebody, he said, 'Allen, try to get the hands in as well. If you can get the hands in as well as the face, you can tell twice as much about a person.' He was getting little pointers. And he would always be asking about film speeds and aperture, figuring it out. You see, Allen wasn't just a great teacher, he was a great student as well.



Robert Frank and Harry Smith, Christina's Restaurant, Lower East Side, March 29, 1987

- So he was interested in some of the mechanics of the camera?

He was usually more interested in simply taking the photo, but he had to learn some of the mechanics. He couldn't have gotten the good photos [without that knowledge]. If you look at his photos, they are very well exposed and in focus. I sat with him and explained to him the Minor White Zone System Manual, how you meter – how you calculate film speeds, shutter speeds, aperture openings. It's about pre-visualizing the picture. I got him a light meter, a Weston Master 5, a classic. You could pick all this stuff up at the time in pawn shops for very little money. I showed him how it worked. Although he wasn't a gear head, Allen was a very practical person.

- He was also purchasing better cameras too, from what I understand.

Yes. He has a small Olympus at first but once we got going, he began buying better cameras, a Leica and a Rolleiflex. He was going to camera stores with Robert Frank. I went with them once to a place called Olden Cameras upstairs on Herald Square. Robert was very careful when it came to examining the lenses. 'The camera is just a box,' he told Allen. 'It's the lens that counts. Photography is about optics.' Robert went for Zeiss lenses but they had to be from certain years, when Carl Zeiss himself was still making them.

- He obviously could see the interest the old photographs were generating. Was that part of the motivation in terms of thinking, 'Hmm maybe I should try my hand at photography?'

Absolutely. At one point he said to me, he said, 'Why did I ever stop!?' He told me he lost the camera so he just stopped. I don't think he was getting any good feedback, either. It was the appreciation and the feedback he was getting that encouraged him to continue. And then of course it very much fit in with his poetics. Allen's photographs are very much like his poems in they're extremely well observed; they are very intimate, confessional, poignant, tender, well drawn, and have great attention to detail. I always thought the photographs were a continuation of the poems. I know some of the things that thrilled Allen the most in his photography were things like that scene in his kitchen with the window open, and the drapes blowing. He was just captivated by that photograph. He shot that image over and over down through the years. The magic of the ordinary moment.

I remember once we were looking through a Bernice Abbott book, and there's a picture of 42nd St. and 5th Ave. by her from up high. And I remember we were looking at it together and marvelling at what an absolutely magical, captivating photograph it was. Even though it's such a seemingly ordinary photograph. And I said to Allen, 'It's like being on acid.' And he was like, 'Exactly.' It just had that sacred dimension of total ordinariness. Which is really what enlightenment is supposed to be.

- How do Allen's photographs fall within his work as a poet?

It was an extension of his poetic sensibility, and it was a way of interacting and engaging with people. Allen always had a strong sense of the historicity of the moment: everything was worth documenting. Why else would you save a laundry list from Kerouac, or a grocery list from Burroughs? That was a marvelous thing about Allen: he saw his friends as heroes, he perceived the mythic dimensions of everyday life. He honoured the moment. It also then became a diaristic endeavor, the day-to-day flow, the quotidian. That's a book I would like to see done, that I would really like to do, since the greatest hits approach has been done. We've seen the perfect, isolated images over and over. I'd like to see a big thick book that would have five thousand images, page after page. Before Allen's negatives went off to Stanford University, I went through all of the contact sheets because I wanted to make prints of things that I had an emotional connection with. I wanted pictures of myself, or myself with certain people. That experience of going through all of the negatives and contact sheets made me aware of the day-to-day story that the photographs tell. That's the book I would like to see.

- You stopped printing the photos.

At a certain point, I just couldn't keep printing, so he started to use Brian Graham, and then Sid Kaplan.

- There's an argument made that unless one prints his or her own photographs, one can't be considered a serious photographer, that it lessens the photographs. Do you agree?

That's one perspective. It depends on the photographer.

- How much attention would Allen pay to the print quality?

A lot. He spent time on cropping, he wanted to see detail, he began to understand how detail in shadow areas might be brought out, he understood about burning and dodging. And then at a certain point, there came a process where one could actually somehow redevelop negatives and pull more information out of them. Because there were some things that were taken in very, very dark situations, some of the photos of Kerouac and Burroughs horsing around. At a certain point, Sid Kaplan went back into those negatives, reprocessed them chemically, and got prints that showed you twice as much as you'd ever seen before, and that was very exciting.

He definitely knew a good print when he saw it. Allen loved going around to artists' studios, he loved going to galleries. He spent a lot of time at [artist] Francisco Clemente's loft, he knew artists from the past like Larry Rivers, Rauschenberg. And he had a real sense of the art. Allen was always going to jazz clubs, and underground films. He was into all this counter culture stuff, in a way that Burroughs and the others were not.



Rick Danko, Woodstock, NY, April 18, 1993

- How long then were you involved with the Ginsberg photographs?

I segued out of it at a certain point, sometime after the first couple of shows. I had other things going on, and frankly there wasn't enough money to be made strictly from Allen's photography. I was happy to lend a hand and check in and be around, but the office began to be capable of handling things. And I didn't need to be involved day to day. He named me in his will as an advisor to his estate, in particular regarding the photography. But they never asked me, and I didn't feel like intruding. I didn't agree with a lot of the things they were doing, and very often I thought they weren't asking for enough money. I remember once when Allen got asked by Microsoft, when they were launching some program, and they wanted to use "the best minds of my generation" in a campaign ad to launch Windows 95. And he said to me, 'How much should I charge?' and I said, \$500,000, and he went ashen. He asked for \$50,000. I said Allen, if REM turned down twelve million dollars for "It's the End of the World as We Know It," you can get half a million. Allen didn't care about money. As soon as he got that fifty grand from Microsoft, he gave it away. The only thing I ever saw him financially motivated about was getting a loft, right at the end of his life. From the first I hung around him he was always talking about wanting to live in a loft with paintings, it was an idea he had about chic New York. He said, 'I'm tired of all these

little tenement rooms.' He held out for a million dollars for his archives because he knew that would get him the loft. And he did get it, but sadly he died a few months later. I saw him a week before he died and he signed a book for me, "In my new loft, where I aspire to expire."

- Do you have some favourites from the collection?

I love the Harry Smith photos. He really captured Harry. He nursed Harry back to health after Harry got hit by a car. Allen had lost track of Harry and one day he was in a cab on the Bowery and he saw Harry hobbling across the street. He stopped the taxi and yelled to him, nobody had seen Harry for months and months, nobody knew where he was. Harry burned down a lot of bridges. When you disappear in New York City, you really do disappear. Allen invited Harry to live in his house and nursed him back to health. Harry would have died otherwise. Then he couldn't stand him anymore. Eventually he came to the Chelsea and I got him a room, and we got the Grateful Dead to pay his rent. Harry was very photogenic. And he wouldn't just pose for anybody. I love those photos.

The famous photo of Harry Smith drinking milk hangs as a mural in the fancy lobby of the Ace Hotel in New York City. It's formerly the Breslin Hotel, which was more of a flophouse than a hotel at the time Smith lived there, from the late 1970s until 1984. Now people are sipping \$25 cocktails and typing on their iPads, and Harry is staring down at them in that famous photo by Allen Ginsberg. I guess that's a New York story. But Harry would have liked that.

- What about other photographs?

The one of Gregory Corso in Paris, in that garret, I always loved that one. The one of Burroughs typing Naked Lunch in Morocco. Some of the portraits of Robert Frank in his loft. He took some really great pictures of Clemente.

- Do you think the photographs could stand on their own if it wasn't Ginsberg holding the camera and releasing the shutter?

That's like saying, if you take the music away from the libretto in a Wagner opera, does it stand up on its own? It's a nonsensical question because the two are one. If you were walking along the street and you found a bunch of them in the trash, would you keep them or would you save them? If you recognized the person in the photo, you probably would hold on to them; if you didn't, probably not. But what would an ordinary person do if they found a Paul Strand photograph lying in the trash? They'd probably pass it by.

- Do you know how he felt about his own photographic work?

Jack on the fire escape, and Neal with Natalie Jackson under the marquee. I remember him specifically remarking, 'Wow, I really captured a moment.' He was impressed with himself, with those images. The ones of Kerouac and Bill pretending to wrestle with each other, holding the knives. The family portrait of the Orlovskys, the tragedy of that family, like something out of Dostoevsky. He liked that photo quite a lot.

- Do you think there's anything specific that give the photos a special quality?

There's an aura of Ginsberg behind the lens. What he had was an extreme level of sensitivity. He really had an incredible antenna. He always saw the human element in things, the sadness of people, how sad people are because they're striving and lonely and hurt. He had such empathy. He also, from years

of being a serious meditator, he understood the nature of the mind and perception, the texture of consciousness, he understood an awful a lot about what we see, and the mind's eye – he was a very astute observer. He was calm and poised and he confers that vibe on his subjects. He could penetrate reality with his mind. So the photographs are extremely well observed. Are they as good as Robert Frank? No. Are these as good as Elsa Dorfman? Yes, I think so. Where would I put him in relation to other photographers? He's not as much of a formalist as Richard Avedon, but his project is very similar to Avedon: he's letting the people come through. It's hard for me to be objective because I was so close to it all. The lack of aesthetic imposition is refreshing. He would never be so mundane as to chase after a style.

One photo that he always liked was a photo of me and Holly Solomon, sitting on a sofa at her apartment, taken after the opening of his first show. It's a classic Fifth Avenue apartment, cocktails and fancy art. I'm wearing an Irish tweed suit and she's all dressed up. I have a drink in my hand, and I'm laughing and she's gesturing, and he always used to say, "This is uptown society." Allen loved going between the high and the low, which you could do in New York. He loved being down on the Lower East Side with the poets, but he also loved the uptown scene too. He had a refreshing lack of judgement that came from seeing things as they are. I suppose that is his photographic legacy.

END

All images by permission of the Estate of Allen Ginsberg.