

Fame after photography : the Museum of Modern Art, New York : July 8 through October 5, 1999

Organized by Marvin Heiferman & Carole Kismaric

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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.

Below: Bruno Bernard/Bernard of Hollywood. *Lili St. Cyr—Goddess Head*. From *The Greek Goddess Series*. c. 1946. Gelatin silver print. 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). Courtesy Susan Bernard/Bernard of Hollywood Publishing/Renaissance Road Productions Inc.



I am my own commodity.

—Elizabeth Taylor

AFTER PHOTOGRAPHY

Organized by Marvin Heiferman & Carole Kismaric

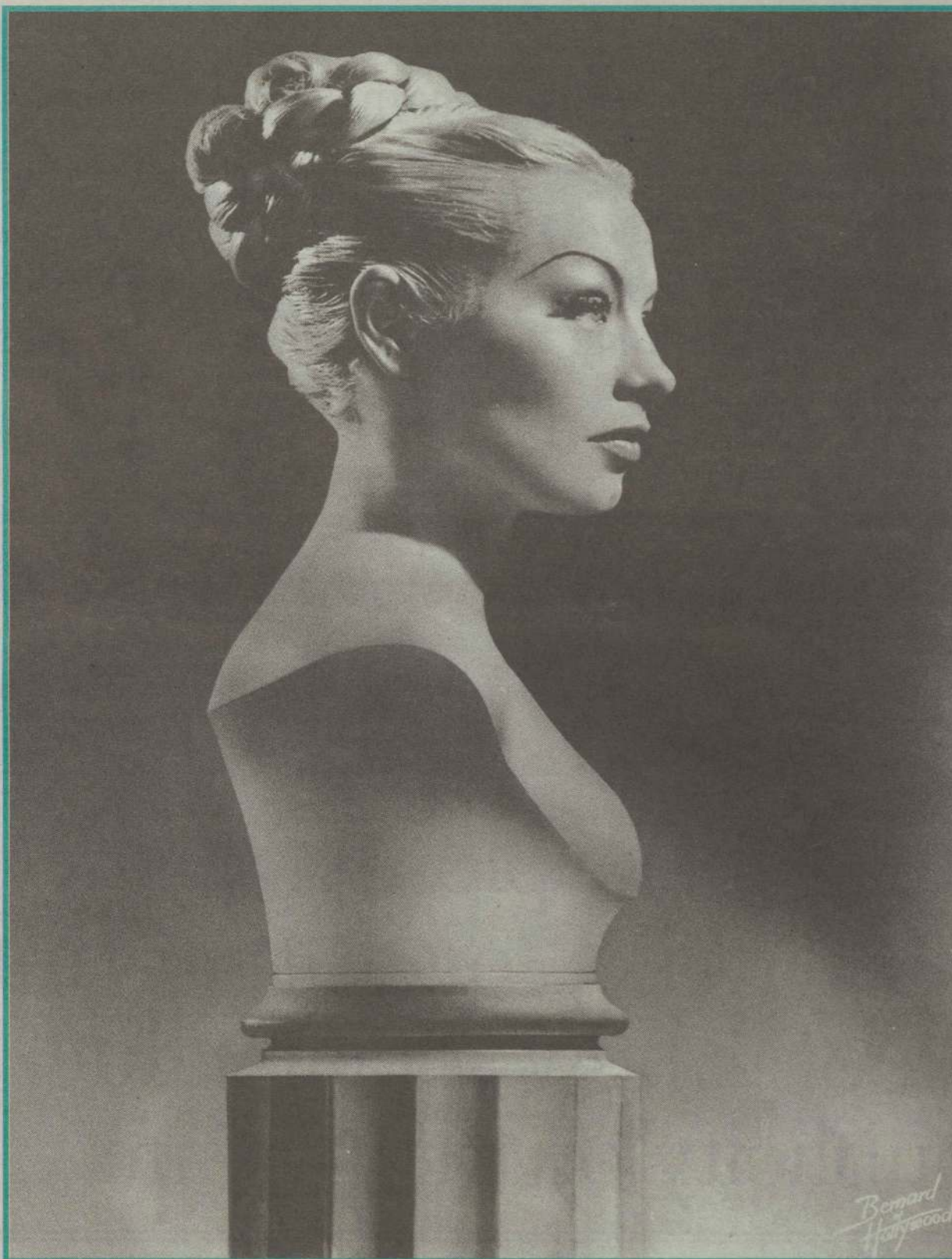
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

12 Pages

July 8 through October 5, 1999

In 1997, when Diana, Princess of Wales, died from injuries suffered in a car crash, media pundits were quick to blame the paparazzi—and by extension photography itself—for her untimely death. Following the broadcast of Diana's funeral to a rapt, worldwide television audience, other cultural observers suggested a more complex relationship between Diana and the media that hounded her, and between photography and the construction of fame. Through discussions on talk shows and in print, all with varying perspectives, people recognized that the most photographed woman in the world was as much a collaborator with and a beneficiary of photography's power as she was the medium's victim. Ironically, when motorized cameras whirled, strobes flashed, and videotape rolled, it was the Royal Princess who became a subject—the favorite subject of photographers—the focus of both sanctioned and invasive images that were devoured by a public that adored and outlived her.

The complicated, symbiotic relationship between photography and fame is at the heart of *Fame After Photography*. Bringing together for the first time more than five hundred cultural artifacts and presenting them in the format that the public first encountered them, the exhibition tracks how since photography's invention in 1839 the representation and the meaning of fame in Western culture, and most particularly in the United States, have been changed by the medium we all now take for granted. Before photography, fame was



typically accorded for excellence of achievement or bestowed on those born into an aristocratic lineage. Fame was paid homage in epic poetry and in prose, and the famous were immortalized when their images were minted on coins, memorialized in massive architecture and sculpture, or captured in paintings, drawings, and prints commissioned for the moral benefit of and appreciation by elite audiences. But that all changed after the introduction of photography in 1839. Who could become famous, how their fame was recorded, and who would be remembered were revolutionized by the new medium.

The first stiffly posed daguerreotypes of the famous—startling, unique, and fragile lifelike images—were handheld and treasured. Today, mass-produced images of the well known are often only made in order to startle by challenging convention, and then circulated more for profit and diversion than for edification. In the one hundred and sixty years since photography's invention, honoring people of serious achievement has yielded to the demands of an image-hungry mass media

and a public that have come to value the famous for their notoriety and the cathartic experience they offer. *Fame After Photography* provides a historical context for people to consider how the histories of fame and photography have been intertwined from the moment photography was invented, and to reflect on how our fascination with images of the famous throughout history have mirrored the changing values of our changing times.

Archive
MohA
1834

Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face. —John Updike, 1989

Celebrities have an intimate life and a life in the grid of two hundred million. For them, there is no distance between the two grids in American life. Of all Americans, only they are complete. —George W. S. Trow, 1978

Dignity never been photographed. —Bob Dylan, 1991

Damn it, what do they want me to do? Go down to the press room and drop my pants and say, "Here it is"?

—Ronald Reagan about press aides who wanted to announce he had a urinary tract infection, 1988

Photography concentrates one's eyes on the superficial.

—Franz Kafka, 1921

The age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private..... —Roland Barthes, 1980

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. —Susan Sontag, 1973

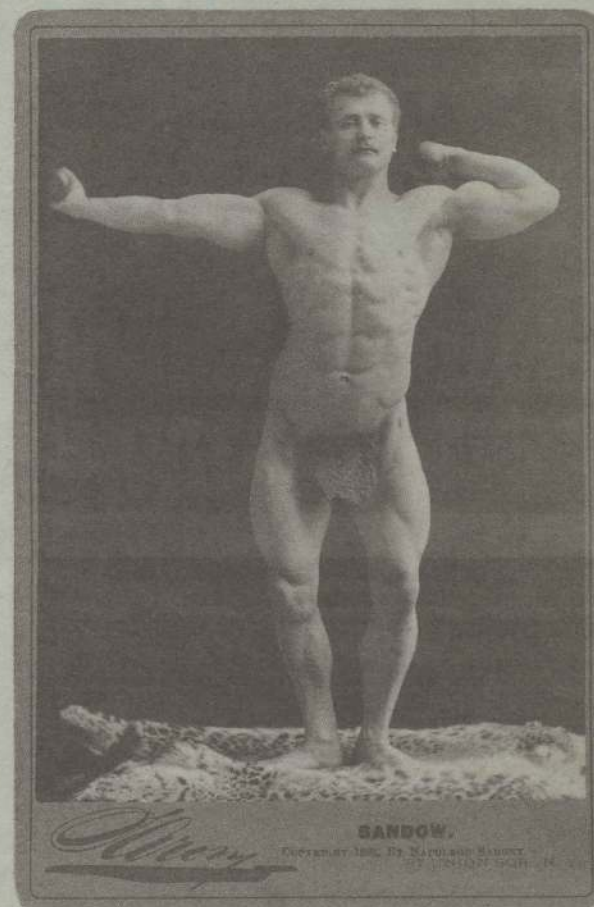
In a world used to endlessly reinventing itself through changing photographic images, it is difficult to imagine just how shocked people were to see the first photographs, how their perception of the world, as well as their consciousness, were forever altered by photography. Because of its unprecedented technical power to describe and record a world just beginning to be transformed by technology, photography quickly and firmly established itself as the medium best suited to record the accomplishments of its most important men and women. The studios of the first photographers were frequently visited by a curious public, and when photographers such as Nadar (Gaspar Félix Tournachon) in Paris or Mathew Brady in New York City competed with other studios for famous subjects—leaders of government, business, and culture—their goals were twofold: to capture the likenesses of the illustrious of their times and to make a name for themselves. Widespread fascination with the new pseudosciences of physiognomy and phrenology led people to believe that people's appearance, the literal form of their bodies, expressed their true essence. Capturing images of the famous for posterity then was believed to morally benefit those who viewed them later. And because the display and sale of those pictures of the famous attracted the person in the street, who were themselves potential customers for portraits, from the earliest days photographic images of the famous also served to entertain, lure, and sell products to a public eager to measure themselves against those recognized and lauded by society.

Left: Attributed to Samuel Root or Marcus Aurelius Root. *P. T. Barnum and Tom Thumb* [Museum director and cofounder of Barnum & Bailey Circus with dwarf showman]. c. 1850. Halfplate daguerreotype. 5 1/2 x 4 1/2 in. (14 x 10.8 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



Right: Napoleon Sarony. *Eugene Sandow* [Vaudevillian strongman]. 1893. Gelatin silver print. 5 1/4 x 3 1/4 in. (14.3 x 9.8 cm). Albert Davis Collection, Theatre Arts Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark.



By the 1860s, portraits of the celebrated were widespread and the mass-production of cartes-de-visite—inexpensive paper prints glued onto 2-by-3-inch cardboard and used as visual calling cards—triggered a collecting frenzy. Images of international notables—from Queen Victoria to the Sultan of Persia, and from Horatio Alger to Friedrich Nietzsche—and of local beauties and outrageous entertainers were sold by vendors in studios, shops, and on street corners. No matter how large or small the accomplishment of the person depicted, each picture was the same size. The democratic nature of photography, however, had its limits. Some of the famed and the celebrated sat merely to get a photographic likeness of themselves, for the novelty of being photographed, or for the honor it conferred. Other sitters demanded, and received, sitting fees and royalties from the sale of their images. So great was the public's fascination with certain personalities that hundreds of thousands of cartes of a single image might be sold in a few months. As the cost of portraits dropped, the cartes of the famous that were passionately collected found their places in ornate albums, side-by-side with cartes of family members, and provided information as well as hours of entertainment.

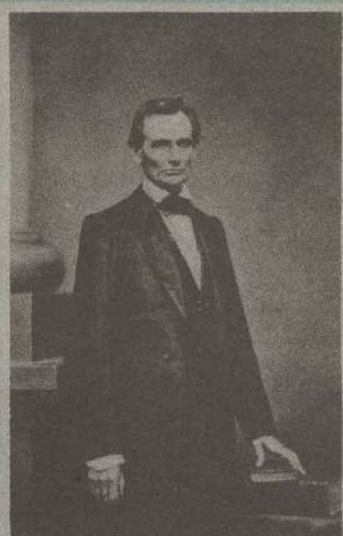
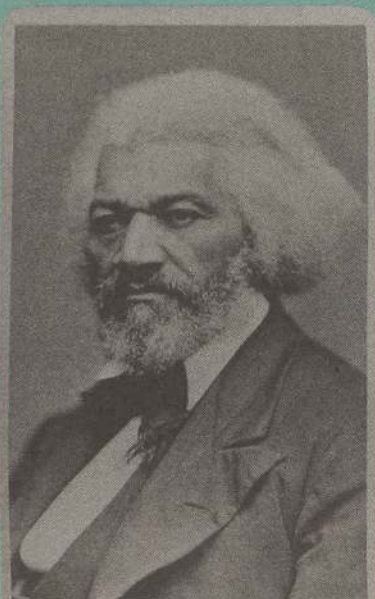
In the late 1860s, the public became bored with the carte-de-visite format. Sales dropped and photographers and publishers in the burgeoning business of photography rushed to market new kinds of images documenting a broader range of cultural figures and performers, in varying formats and sizes. Images of celebrated actors and actresses, businessmen, clergymen, and political leaders were glued onto larger pieces of card stock or onto loose newsprint sheets that were sold individually or in weekly installments, bound into portfolios or together in books, glued onto posters, handbills, and leaflets.

The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name.

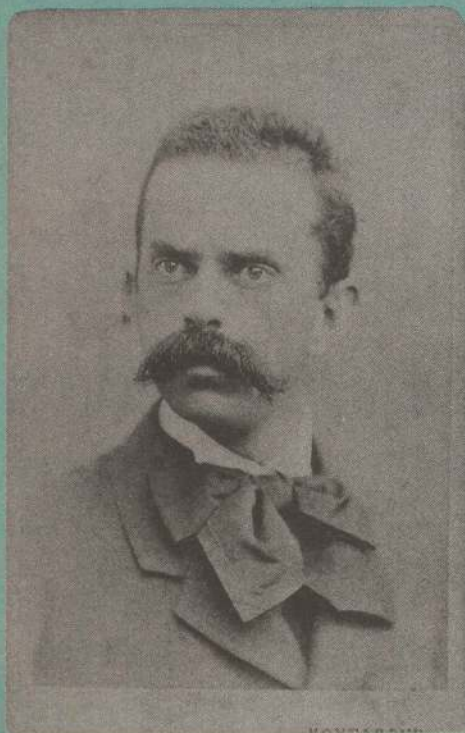
—Daniel J. Boorstin, 1961

Top right: London Stereo Co.
(from a Mathew Brady negative).
Abraham Lincoln [Sixteenth president
of the United States]. 1860.
Albumen print. $3\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{8}$ in.
(8.9 x 5.6 cm). Gernsheim
Collection, Harry Ransom
Humanities Research Center,
The University of Texas at Austin

Below: Warren's, Boston. *Frederick
Douglass* [Abolitionist]. c. 1876.
Albumen print. $3\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{8}$ in.
(9.5 x 5.9 cm). Photography
Collection, Harry Ransom
Humanities Research Center,
The University of Texas at Austin



Above: W. & D. Downey, London.
Queen Alexandra & Princess Baby Louise
[Queen Consort of Edward of
England]. 1866. Albumen print. $3\frac{1}{8}$
 $\times 2\frac{1}{8}$ in. (9 x 5.6 cm). Gernsheim
Collection, Harry Ransom
Humanities Research Center, The
University of Texas at Austin



Bottom left: Luigi Montabone.
Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche [Philosopher].
n.d. Albumen print. $3\frac{1}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{8}$ in.
(9 x 5.9 cm). Gernsheim Collection,
Harry Ransom Humanities Research
Center, The University of Texas
at Austin

By the 1870s, when advances in photographic technology allowed for shorter sittings and less controlled studio situations, portraits started to look more spontaneous. Pictures of the famous became less formal and serious and more animated and theatrical in their iconography. The facial expressions and dramatic gestures and poses of subjects like Sarah Bernhardt and the formerly camera-shy members of high society are evidence of how quickly subjects and photographers learned to collaborate on capturing the perfect "performance" that would resonate for posterity. The public, too, was thrilled with the artificiality, high drama, and nuances of celebrity portraiture, and their enthusiasm continued to swell when 3-D stereograph (stereoscope) photographs became the craze. By the closing years of the nineteenth century, after cameras for amateurs became more widely available in the 1880s, people knew exactly what to do when it was their turn to take and pose for the first snapshot images.

The pace of the visual culture accelerated with the introduction, in 1880, of halftone printing, which allowed photographs to be printed side by side with words in newspapers, magazines, and books for the first time. By the mid-1890s, one-minute motion-picture studies of noted personages, such as sharpshooter Annie Oakley and Eugene Sandow, a popular vaudevillian strongman who performed nearly nude, were filmed by Thomas Edison and viewed in kinetoscopes by awed audiences that were growing exponentially in number. Before the century's end, the spread of telephone, telegraph, shipping, and railroad lines allowed for the wider distribution of information and goods. Photographic images promoting the subject's fame became valuable commodities in their own right as new mass media quickly came to rely on pictures of the beautiful and powerful, the noted and the notorious for content, excitement, and economic survival.

In the 1920s, newsreels brought to international audiences numbering in the tens of millions privileged glimpses of private and far-off events like Rudolph Valentino's funeral and Charles Lindbergh's hero's welcome in France. Film crews competed to record ceremonies important and inane, to capture the pranks of flagpole sitters, and to introduce the public to the latest demagogues, exotics, and swells, seen at work and at home, in motion, in repose, and up close. The introduction of small handheld cameras in the late 1920s gave photographers the freedom to catch the famous off guard and in revealing detail. And should the circumstances or trappings of everyday life or special events not be photogenic enough, no one complained if pictures were staged and people were costumed and rehearsed to make them more compelling. With the rise of the new business of public relations, constructed pictures (known as "pseudo-events" by the end of the century) of newsworthy personalities were a staple of daily newspapers and periodicals.

The public's expectation for novel pictures that could be guiltlessly thrown away at day's end was good for the media business. Big city tabloid newspapers, vying for advertisers and readers, splashed large, sensational photographs of sports stars, crime czars, debutantes, adulterers, and saviors on their covers and across their centerfolds. The ephemeral nature of images of the famous

reached an even more frenzied height with the shimmering close-up images of the first movie stars. More than any earlier photographs of the famous, the publicity photographs circulated by Hollywood studios in the 1930s transformed the public's relationship to fame and celebrity. For the first time, constructing bigger-than-life images of people whose job it was to be famous became a successful business. Meticulously crafted glamour stills gave actors a godlike, sexual aura. Every week audiences wearied by the Depression anticipated the promise of seductive trailers in movie theaters across the country, and looked forward to each new issue of their favorite fan magazines that delivered behind-the-curtain peeks into the stars' private lives. Hollywood learned how to create charismatic images that mesmerized worldwide audiences and helped Americans make the uneasy transition from buttoned-up Victorian morality to the freewheeling modern times, and thereby cemented the relationship between photography and fame.

Magazines, which had reproduced photographic images only sparingly until the 1920s, began exploiting photographic images of the famous to stimulate reader curiosity and loyalty. Advertisers began to pare down texts pushing their products to make room for the flashy modern photographs that made the sales pitches more effective. Social barriers were falling—members of high society found themselves shoulder-to-shoulder with boxers, gangsters, bon vivants, gossips, and Broadway stars in speakeasies—

Page Two

SUNDAY NEWS ROTOGRAVURE SECTION



THE MOST TALKED OF PICTURE EVER PUBLISHED.—Due to the tremendous interest in the execution of Mrs. Ruth Snyder and widespread discussion of the whole question of capital punishment, THE NEWS today republishes what is perhaps the most remarkable unofficial and exclusive death room picture ever taken and one which may be the last of an execution of a woman in America. It shows Mrs. Snyder strapped into the Sing Sing chair, helmeted, an electrode strapped to bared right leg as lethal current surged through her. (© 1928 by Pacific & Atlantic)



Federico Fellini. Still from *La Dolce Vita*. 1960. Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art/
Film Stills Archive





VERONICA LAKE
in Paramount Pictures

P2745

and socialites, for example, began to loosen up and even appear in ads to share their consumer thoughts with less privileged readers. Eleanor Roosevelt promoted mattresses. The Vanderbilts, the Whitneys, and the Morgans touted silverware, cosmetics, and expensive cars. Opera stars and crooners extolled the soothing restorative qualities of their favorite cigarettes. The attention-grabbing power of celebrity images seeped onto magazines' editorial pages. By the late twenties, Edward Steichen was creating a photographic style for *Vanity Fair*, with streamlined stylish pictures of the latest toasts-of-the-town. By the thirties, punchy photographic portraits featured on covers were central to *Life* magazine's unprecedented success, and it became the prime source of human-interest picture stories.

During World War II, images of patriotic celebrities—in uniform, entertaining American troops, or selling war bonds—were circulated widely to bolster morale and further the war effort on the home front. An idea that became popular during the rise of the postwar consumer culture was that in a democracy, the famous were “just folks” too. As the American population shifted away from urban centers toward new and more isolated suburbs, the mass media—and most notably television—used images of fame and celebrity to draw people together and to the new medium. Images of the famous on TV were free, and the new stars of news, entertainment, self-improvement shows, and commercials were human-scale. Early television stars frequently portrayed middle-class or working-class characters, “normal” people easier to accept and welcome into homes. Some programs featured celebrities who crossed over from radio, while others like *Person to Person* and *This Is Your Life* had guest appearances by actors who appeared as themselves. Interview and talk shows and programming like *Queen for a Day* implied a new intense, albeit false, intimacy that kept audiences glued to the TV set busily scrutinizing the telegenic winners and losers.

By the 1960s, famous people had become popular culture's common denominator, as more and more photographic images were made to fill the mass media's insatiable needs. Pictures of the famous and the infamous jumped effectively from one media outlet to another. The format and value of photography—the medium that had revolutionized how images of fame were constructed and distributed—was now evolving, too, from relics that were cherished and honored to ghostlike images that flickered on a gigantic movie screen to electronic pulses that bounced off satellites twenty-four hours a day, helping to trivialize the content and resonance of those very images. Human achievement doesn't appear on schedule, but newspapers, television shows, movies, and magazines have to. And so images of celebrities—people not necessarily known for making significant cultural contributions to the world but fascinating for their engaging style, novel behaviors, and modest achievements—were in demand to fill up the slots and to provide the distractions for a culture worrying about the threats of atomic bombs and Communism. Not surprisingly, as the culture became inundated with images of famous people in the 1960s, the notion began to percolate that

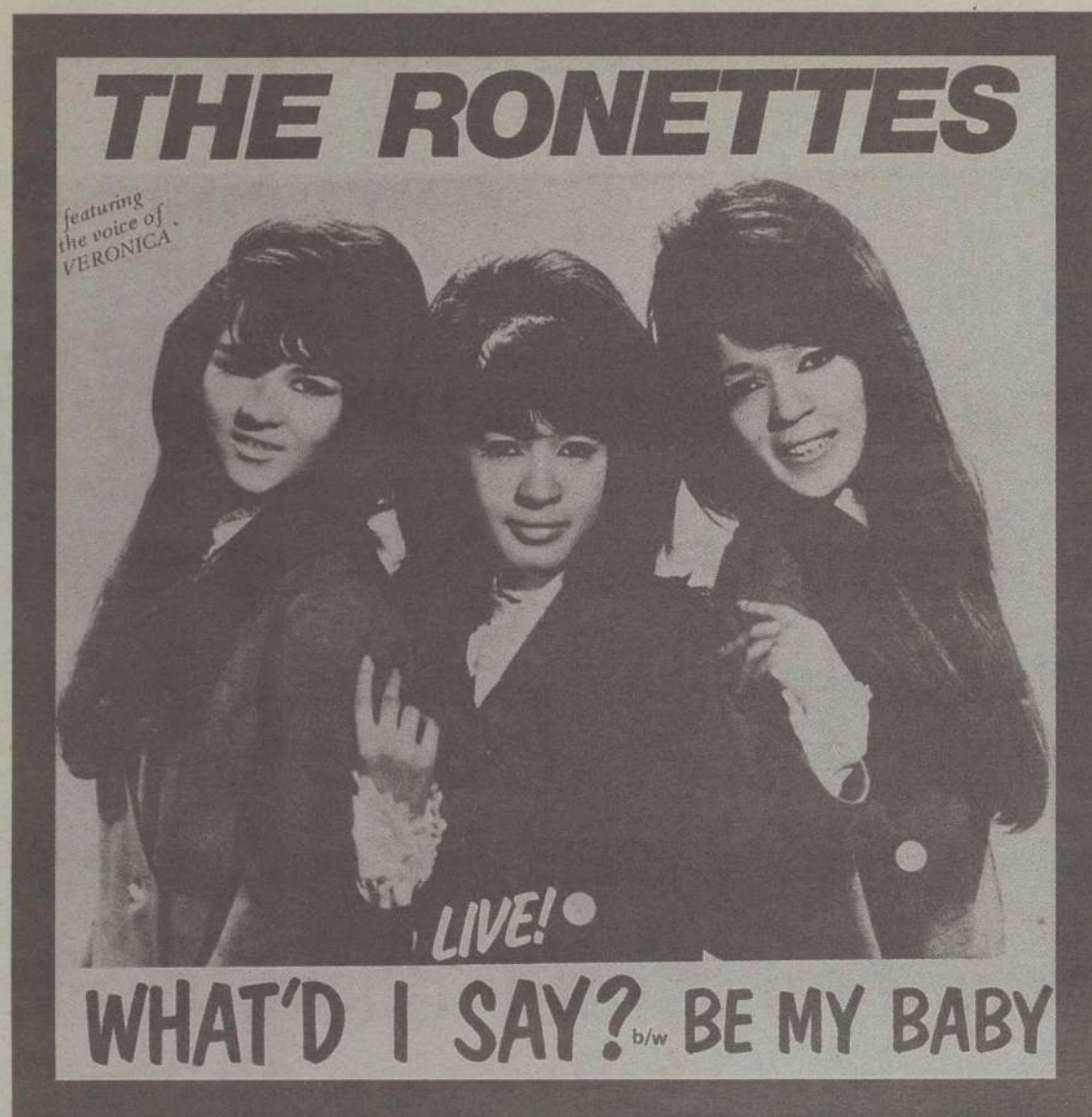
What the editors and publishers of to-day want are photographs of things which are happening at the moment or about to happen to-morrow. Yesterday's event, no matter how beautifully done, is of no use to them; they want, too, portraits of the man who will be famous to-morrow, or the celebrity who will die to-night: whether these portraits are at all faithful or artistic portraits of the people represented does not matter in the least.

—Frank M. Sutcliffe, 1903



Above: Photographer unknown. *Bob Hope* [Comedian]. n.d. Photograph printed on Borden Company ice cream container, manufactured by Dixie. Offset reproduction. Diameter: 2 1/4 in. (7 cm). Private collection

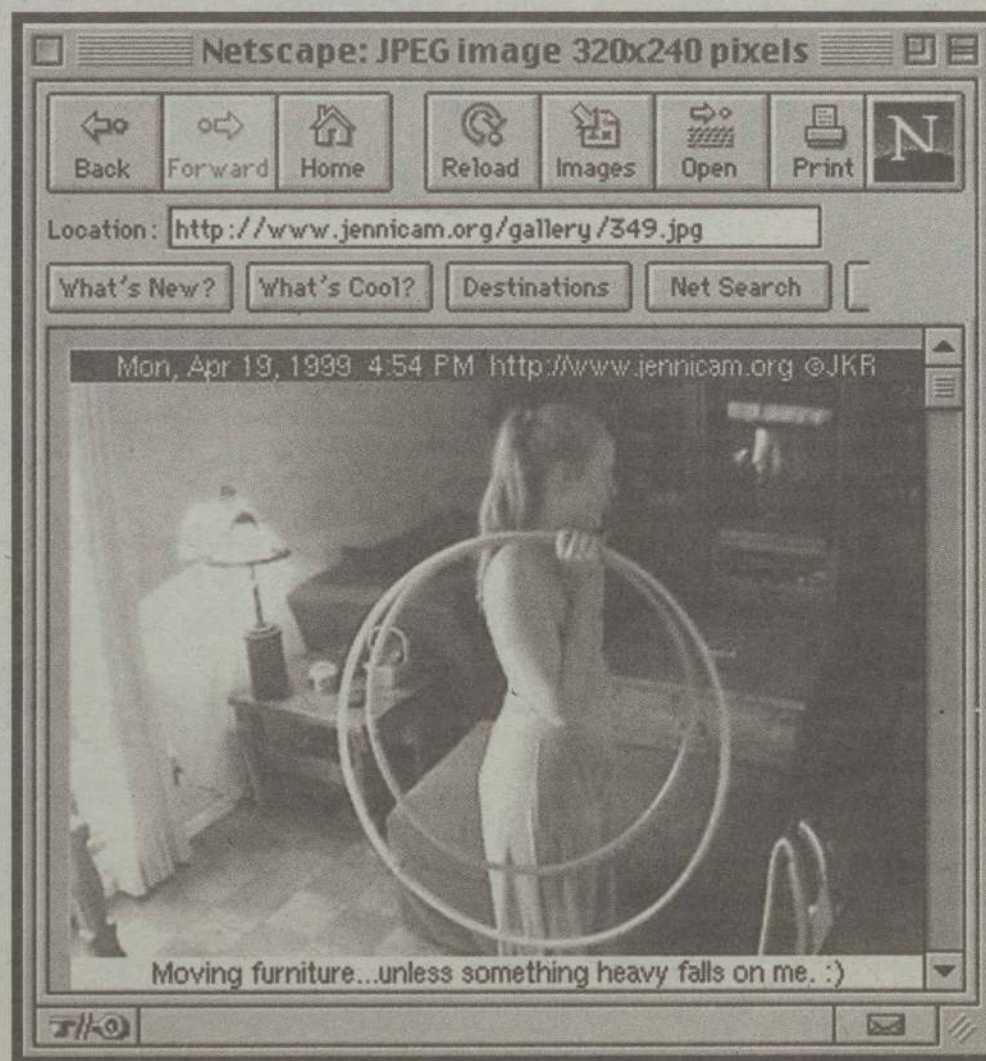
Opposite: E. R. Richee. *Veronica Lake* [Actress]. 1940. Gelatin silver print. 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive



Clockwise from top left:
 Photographer unknown. *The Ronettes; What'd I Say?/Be My Baby*. 1963.
 Offset lithograph, 7 1/8 x 7 1/8 in. (18.1 x 17.9 cm). From the collection of
 the ARChive of Contemporary Music, New York

Yasumasa Morimura. *Self-portrait (b/w)/After Marilyn Monroe*. 1996. Gelatin
 silver print, 17 1/4 x 14 in. (45.1 x 35.6 cm). Collection of Lawrence
 Luhring and Leslie Alexander

Still photograph from JenniCam Web site (www.jennicam.org)



each of us might be just as special, as idiosyncratic, and as worthy of fame as the people we were seeing in the media. Anti-heroes and ethnic characters who looked nothing like the glamorous movie stars but more like the person down the street came to dominate movie plots. Persistent images of youthful counterculture heroes and protesters helped shift cultural and political tides when they appeared on network nightly news, on front pages of local newspapers, on posters tacked up on bedroom and dormitory walls, on record covers, buttons, and T-shirts. After an intense decade of social upheaval, including the Vietnam War, Watergate, women's liberation, the rise of youth culture, and the sexual revolution, Americans were ready to lighten up, and they did so by indulging in a revitalized celebrity culture with a new cast of characters and a new set of values. When *People* magazine was published in 1974, the unspoken but firm distinctions that separated fame from celebrity, leaders from followers, and stars from their audiences began to erode. The personal and cultural narcissism that characterized the "me decade" of the 1970s, the popularity of pop anthems like "Everybody Is a Star," and the implicit promise of success in movies like *Fame* and *Saturday Night Fever* hinted at the preoccupations and the tenor of the new celebrity culture.

Fame, once rare, was everywhere now that the combined seductive powers of photography and celebrity had crystallized. Cultural critics, writers, and artists took note, including Andy Warhol, who explored the thrill of fame from afar and firsthand, and who sensed the depth and poignancy of our need for attention and celebrity and our secret pleasure in seeing the mighty suffer and fall. Celebrity culture reached a new plateau in the 1980s with the popularity of TV shows like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, a rash of confessional interview and talk shows, and the interminable late-night appearances of stars on infomercials suggesting that we become their peers and share their fame by buying name brand cosmetics, lines of clothing, and even kitchen appliances. In contrast to the awkward solemnity of portraits made a century earlier, lottery winners and victims of tragedies instinctively knew how to pose when cameras pointed in their direction. Pictures of the famous were no longer meant to be viewed from afar; they were deconstructed and evaluated with a criticality and sophistication that came from living in a world that confused image and appearance for substance and value.

If we tire of celebrities' faces—staring down, out, or up at us, smiling, pouting, scowling, and flirting with us—there is little opportunity to avert our eyes. As conglomerate ownership of once independent media outlets become more concentrated in the hands of fewer companies, as pressures to increase corporate profits persists, and as markets become more segmented and targeted, the mass media is beholden to the gravitational pull of fame and celebrity as never before. Magazines like *Hello* snag hard-to-get subjects for feature stories by overlooking their mortal brushes with alcoholism and disease, their high visibility arrests for minor crimes, and their sexual foibles, and by allowing the subjects to have full editorial approval of the stories and photographs that get

published. Olympic athletes and beauty pageant contestants, eager for future endorsements and career opportunities, are obliged to perform in heart-tugging mini-documentaries that flaunt both their personal crises and their star qualities. The programming of numerous cable TV channels is dominated by the heavy rotation of celebrity news and video biographies of our favorite heroes and villains. Products branded with the names and images of movie, sports, business, cooking, and style czars fill crowded store shelves.

Because of photography, fame is one of America's most valuable commodities, a subject of contemporary artists and the target of comedians and parodists. On shows like MTV's *The Real World* and Web sites like Here and Now (www.hereandnow.net) temporary fame visits youthful strangers who move into shared living environments where crews keep the video cameras rolling. At Tinseltown, a theme restaurant in Anaheim, California, a make-believe, evening's-length version of fame comes to any dinner guest who'll pay forty dollars to be treated like a movie star, surrounded by actors impersonating excited fans, fawning reporters, and pushy paparazzi. At the end of the evening, after the "stars" have performed scenes from famous movies that are screened at an "awards ceremony," winners are chosen, honored with glittering statuettes, and given prewritten speeches to read that thank those who made their triumph possible. On the Internet, fame is self-appointed for the first time, as hundreds of worldwide individuals point their camcorders on themselves to record and broadcast their every move in streaming video images available round-the-clock and around the world to anyone interested in looking.

Fame After Photography lets visitors gain a perspective on how, since 1839, fame has been driven and transformed by photography. Are we desperate to elevate the importance of celebrities in our lives because, as some psychologists believe, so many of the institutions that give purpose to our lives—the family, education, and religion—are in flux? We are no more addicted to pictures of the famous than people were in the nineteenth century, but because of their stimulating and often oppressive presence in the visual culture we live in, there's no relief from fame. *Fame After Photography* raises the questions that resound in our heads each time we sneak a peek at the latest cover story about Diana, Monica, or the celebrity of the moment: Why do photographic images of the famous continue to have such a powerful impact on their audiences? How has the boundary shifted between what was once considered private and what is public? What fascinates us so much about the portraits of the famous that are replaced so speedily that there's little time to reflect on their meaning? Given that we learn from our own experiences of being photographed, what do we register when we look at images of the famous and celebrated with a knowing eye? Finally, in a culture that demands that photographic images be constantly restyled and refreshed, how long can fame of any kind possibly last?

—Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric

Everybody is a star

I can feel it when you shine on me

I love you for who you are

Not the one you feel you need to be

Ever catch a falling star

Ain't no stopping 'til it's on the ground

Everybody is a star

One big circle goin' round and round

Chorus: Shine, shine, shine, shine

"Everybody Is a Star." 1970. Sylvester Stewart/Mijac Music (BMI). Recorded by Sly and the Family Stone

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