

## AFTER ROBERT FRANK'S PHOTOBOOK *THE AMERICANS*: REMAKES, VARIATIONS, AND ICONOCLASM

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Nathalie Dietschy** 

# AFTER ROBERT FRANK'S PHOTOBOOK *THE AMERICANS*: REMAKES, VARIATIONS, AND ICONOCLASM

*Many contemporary artists' publications pay tribute to famous artists' books or photo-books, such as Ed Ruscha's conceptual artist's books or Robert Frank's landmark photo-book The Americans. This paper examines Mishka Henner's version of Frank's The Americans that he appropriated and partly erased. It questions the process of re-appropriation and studies Henner's approach: is it a variation in Goodman's term? Or a remake? It explores both the act of remaking a seminal work, as well as destroying it. It compares Henner's work to other contemporary projects based on Frank's book, by Jonathan Lewis, Michel Campeau, Andreas Schmidt, Andrew Emond, as well as Dafydd Hughes, and concludes that these various versions after a classic photobook is a means to be part of a tradition, to be part of what Leo Steinberg called "the glorious company", as well as departing from its legacy.*

## Photography and the book<sup>1</sup>

Numerous contemporary photobooks and/or artists' books<sup>2</sup> refer to previous books. Contemporary artists recycle famous books that have already been published, copy their layouts, their designs and their typographies, or imitate their titles<sup>3</sup> as a means to pay tribute to these books that are seen as models, or as a means to offer a playful reappropriation of books that have become iconic and as such "untouchable".

Robert Frank's *The Americans*, first published in 1958, is considered one of the most important photobooks in the history of 20th century photography. Many publications refer to that iconic photobook, such as Mishka Henner's version. His book, which he made *after* Robert Frank's, is not only a remake, but an erased

version of the original. I wish to compare Mishka Henner's remake to other contemporary artists' works by Michel Campeau, Andreas Schmidt, Jonathan Lewis, Andrew Emond, Jonathan Day and Dafydd Hughes, that offer new interpretations of Frank's photobook. They all recycle *The Americans* in various ways, from diverse perspectives, using different means. How can these processes of appropriation be understood today?

## Re-making after ...: appropriations and variations

In 1958, Swiss American photographer Robert Frank published the first edition of his photobook, *Les Américains*, by the French publisher Robert Delpire. The second edition, in English, *The Americans*, was published a year later, in 1959, by Grove Press. The 83 black and white photographs reproduced on the right pages, are facing blank pages. This edition, that corresponds to Frank's project, includes a preface by Jack Kerouac.<sup>4</sup>

While Frank's photobook has inspired several "variations", his photobook is itself inspired by a seminal photobook, Walker Evans' *American Photographs*, published by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1938 to accompany the retrospective that was held at the museum.<sup>5</sup> The small format photobook (22 x 19,5 cm), with its sequential arrangement of black and white images reproduced on the right pages, was a strong influence on Frank, who saw Evans as a mentor. Evans had encouraged Frank to apply to the Guggenheim Fellowship, which supported his journey through the USA. Frank carried Evans' book with him on his road trip to capture American society.<sup>6</sup> Evans had also written a text, which Frank eventually declined, for the preface to *The Americans*.<sup>7</sup>

Several reprints of Frank's photobook have been published. As such, the book is the result of a process of "remaking" with various cropping of numerous images.<sup>8</sup> In 2008, the German publisher Steidl published a new edition of *The Americans*, based on the American original edition, made in collaboration with Frank. Both the Steidl edition and the reference catalogue *Looking In*, prepared to accompany a major touring exhibition on Frank's work, were published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *The Americans*. The reedition of Frank's book, widely distributed, has surely reinforced the aura of the photobook and its subsequent "variants".

In 2012, Mishka Henner published *Less Américains* (Figures 1–2).<sup>9</sup> The 180-page book is a reinterpretation of the classic book by Frank. Henner partly copied the cover of the French edition except that Saul Steinberg's drawing doesn't appear on it. The title, slightly modified, reveals that the reader will be confronted with a reduction. With digital manipulation, Henner emptied the content of Frank's photographs, cut the faces, and erased the objects so as to obtain a form of graphical minimalism between figurative and non-figurative.

Henner has worked as a documentary photographer before reorienting towards a conceptual approach on photography and a practice of appropriating images, for the most part found on the Internet. His act of erasure of Frank's photographs comes from a reflection upon "the nature of photography and the nature of documentary

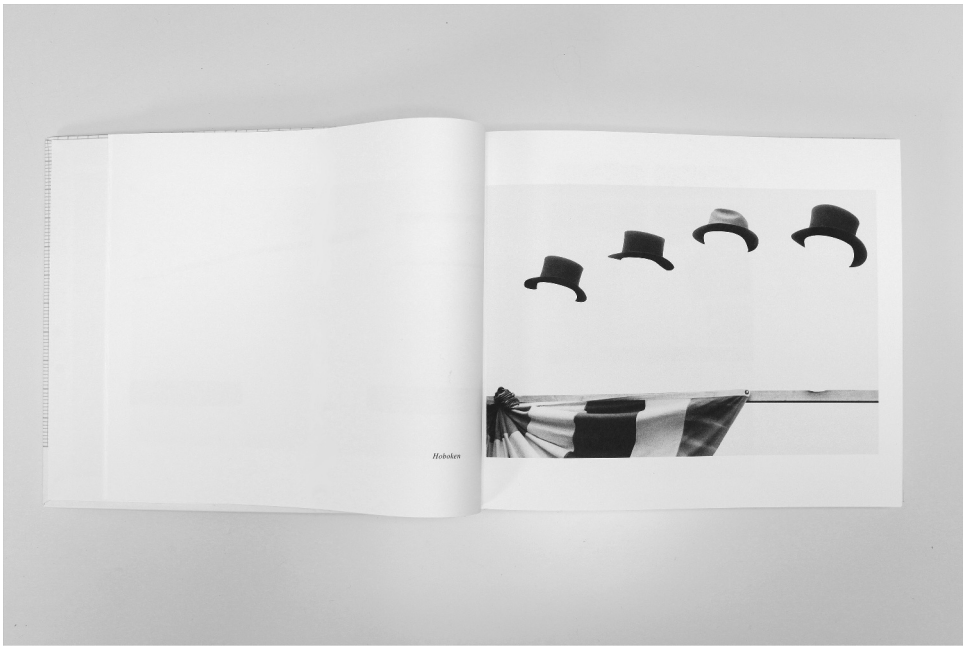


Fig. 1. Mishka Henner, *Hoboken* (*Less Américains*, 2012).



Fig. 2. Mishka Henner, *Paravent* (*Less Américains*, 2012).



photography”,<sup>10</sup> an issue he had already explored, for example in his artist’s book *Photography Is* (2010), a volume of more than 3,000 sentences, found on Google when searching “what is photography”, that supposedly define photography.<sup>11</sup>

Henner describes his artist’s book as “a remake of Robert Frank’s classic photobook”.<sup>12</sup> While the term “remake” refers to the cinematographic field, encompassing a wide-range of processes upon the original, from the pure copy of the movie to the re-use of the idea as the genesis of the film,<sup>13</sup> it is generally used in English to describe other forms of adaptation. In the visual arts, a “remake” is usually not a negative term, as it develops the avant-garde gestures regarding the values of originality and is inherited from the readymade. In contemporary art, the artistic remake is legitimated by the art world as a means to deconstruct common values of the uniqueness of the artwork and the status of the author. But while in the movie field a remake is often judged on its relationship with the original work, on the basis of its fidelity to the original or its betrayal of it,<sup>14</sup> the act of *re-making* an artwork does not lead to a debate on its loyalty to the source. French artist Pierre Huyghe reshot, for example, Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954) in his video *Remake* (1994–95), asking amateurs to imitate the actors’ performance. Despite the fact that the film obviously works on the comparison with its famous model, the differences are so important that the core of the process rather relies on the simulacrum of repetition.

Nelson Goodman, in his famous essay on Picasso and Bach, explores the notion of variation in music and in other arts such as painting. Goodman explains that there is variation upon a work when a part of the work or a theme is comparable in some features and different in others:

A variation upon a painting is another work referring to it by exemplification of certain shared features and contrastive exemplification of certain differing features.<sup>15</sup>

Goodman gives two specific examples of variation in visual art. He argues that Rembrandt’s drawing based on Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* in Milano, is “an exemplary variation”<sup>16</sup> upon Da Vinci’s fresco. The Dutch painter kept the formal depiction of the Biblical scene that the Italian artist had given in the Santa Maria delle Grazie, but the style and the interpretation of the spirit of the scene — far more dramatic — transforms the original work upon which the drawing is done. Goodman then develops his reflection with Picasso’s variations on Velázquez’ *Las Meninas* that are described as “studies” of Velázquez’ painting.

Within the contemporary reinterpretations of iconic works, can we use the term “variation” in Goodman’s definition as Stéphane Reboul proposes it in his essay on remakes upon Ed Ruscha’s artist’s books<sup>17</sup>? As Susan Grace Galassi states, “in a variation the structure (or schema) of the original is preserved, while style, technique and, most significantly, content undergo transformation”.<sup>18</sup> Is *Less Américains* a variation upon Frank’s photobook? Henner’s own description of his work as a remake is indeed presented as being a work “after Robert Frank”. Huyghe’s video *Remake* also re-enacts a seminal movie within the history of cinema. But unlike numerous variations upon pre-existing works such as the dozens of remakes of Ed Ruscha’s artist’s books,<sup>19</sup> also seen as

precursory and seminal works within the history of art, Henner's artist book does not only re-make Frank's photobook, it *erases* it.

### After Robert Frank: erasure and iconoclasm

In an interview, Henner explains that his project originated in Robert Rauschenberg's iconoclastic gesture erasing a De Kooning's drawing (*Erased De Kooning Drawing*, 1953).<sup>20</sup> His approach is, however, different. Rauschenberg, in his will to explore the status of the artist and the value of art, operated by erasure and by dispossession, his intention being to create a work with an eraser.<sup>21</sup> However, Rauschenberg made De Kooning an accomplice of his process, the latter having been aware of Rauschenberg's intentions. Besides, Rauschenberg makes an irrevocable gesture by erasing the pencil strokes of a single drawing, while Henner takes a subversive approach by manipulating with Photoshop digital reproductions of Frank's photographs. Frank's originals, as well as the photobook, already a multiple by nature, are thus not lost. The iconoclastic act is therefore symbolic, as none of the originals were attacked nor destroyed in any way.

In 1969, Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers chose iconoclasm as a means to respond to an inaugural modern work. By adding black bars to the famous poem by Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*, 1897/published in a book form in 1914), Broodthaers stressed the language of space within the poem reduced to a pure formal sequence. His transgression highlights the graphical pace of Mallarmé's typographic poem, a major publication that led to a new approach towards poetry and the book. Elisabeth Tonnard's introduction in Henner's book is an iconoclastic version of Jack Kerouac's text, published in the English edition of Frank's photobook. By omitting numerous letters throughout the text, in fact by erasing all the letters in "a-m-e-r-i-c-a-n-s", Tonnard makes the text illegible and removes its significance by letting the letters float without forming words, but instead composing an abstract dance of letters. Tonnard and Henner's iconoclastic gesture are thus reminiscent of Broodthaers' variation upon Mallarmé. It also recalls previous acts of vandalism towards artists' books, and in particular works that refer to Ruscha's publications, such as Bruce Nauman's photographic series *Burning Small Fires* (1968–69) showing the burning of Ruscha's book *Various Small Fires and Milk*; or Jonathan Monk's film *Small Fires Burning* (*After Ed Ruscha After Bruce Nauman After*) (2003). Henner follows these infinite processes of remakes that are based on destroying the original artwork.<sup>22</sup>

Michael Schirner's series *Bye Bye* (2011) also works on an iconoclastic gesture. The German artist appropriated photographs of historical events found in newspapers, on the Internet, in films or in TV programmes, and erased the central elements originally in the images. The book plays on the recognition of the images emptied of their event.

*Afterlife* (2009) by Adam Broomberg and Olivier Chanarin is a series of prints on glass that consists in an isolation of the figures in the photographs that reporter Jahangir Razmi took of the execution of eleven Kurds during the Iranian revolution in



Fig. 3. Mishka Henner, *Canal Street* (*Less Américains*, 2012).

August 1979. These cut-out silhouettes — victims of executioners — scrutinize the particular event, a way for the two artists to “dissect” the images and deconstruct the documentary value assigned to the photograph.<sup>23</sup> The title “afterlife” inscribes the act of the artists temporally, but it indicates above all that Broomberg and Chanarin give a second life to these images, that their fragmentation of the content makes it possible to go beyond the original image, to go beyond the singular drama to focus on a choreography of falling bodies. The artists’ iconoclasm requests that the viewer forget the decisive moment and make a pause and look at these men imprisoned in this fragile and fleeting space, between life and death, which the reporter had captured. The artists do not offer a remake or a variation upon an image; they offer, as they state, “a re-reading of a controversial photograph”.<sup>24</sup> In eluding some of the content of the images, they ask the viewer to have a second look at those images. The critical view that Broomberg and Chanarin adopt on images and especially press photography, aims at, in the case of Henner, the deconstruction of the “aura” of a consecrated body of work. Henner attacks a classic of documentary photography, a canonical work by a well-established photographer (Figure 3).

### Before and after: Making new art from old

In using iconic photographs by an acclaimed photographer, Henner’s process could recall artistic gestures inherited from the movement of Appropriation Art. But he doesn’t adopt a kleptomaniacal approach in the vein of Sherrie Levine or Richard Prince. In the late 1970s,

artists — especially American artists — began challenging notions of intellectual property, of authenticity and originality, as well as the status of the author. In 1977, Douglas Crimp organized the exhibition *Pictures* at the Artists Space in New York, which gathered artists whose practices were appropriative.<sup>25</sup> American artist Sherrie Levine produced works that were not inspired by pre-existing works, but that were reproductions of the originals, even if the status of the “copy” is questionable, as it remains a work of art that still has an aura in the Walter Benjaminian sense.<sup>26</sup> Appropriation Art gave value to the lack or the thin differentiation between the object of reference and its replica. Levine used Marcel Duchamp’s formula of the “infra-thin” to describe the relationship between the original work and the work produced after it.<sup>27</sup> This “infra-thin” represents, for example, the distance between the original prints made by Walker Evans and Levine’s re-photographs of reproductions of Evans’ photographs (*After Walker Evans*, 1981). The title assumes its depth towards the seminal artist, as well as the temporal status of the work, following the model of Evans as well as following him temporally. The works, by reproducing reproductions, are marked by a mechanical accuracy towards Evans’ work, obtained thanks to photography. Rather than copies of Evans’ originals, Levine’s works are copies of Evans’ reproductions.<sup>28</sup> Levine’s artistic gesture — re-photography of photographic reproductions — deconstructs the figure of the author, the values of originality and of authenticity, as well as questioning Benjamin’s remark on the loss of artworks’ aura due to the reproducible potentials of the photographic medium.

Levine doesn’t replicate Evans’ prints; she copies the reproductions of the prints. In *After Walker Evans*, she used a photographic series, a documentary series on the United States that is retrospectively included within the pantheon of major artworks in the history of art and photography. Like Levine, Henner takes a documentary photographic series on America as his subject. Like Levine, his work is based on a photobook. Nevertheless, and unlike Appropriation artists, Henner’s practice defends a quotational process as well as a distance with the work he quotes. He manipulates with digital tools an iconic photobook to create a book “after”. He pays tribute to Frank’s work, as well as marking a break from the original.

Henner’s approach is part of a more general practice of contemporary artists and/or photographers who operate by selecting, editing and curating images that are, for the most part, not theirs. The use of Frank’s book is indeed tightly bound to the use of digital technologies. Nicolas Bourriaud has shown the growth of artworks since the 1990s that are based on pre-existing works. He uses the technical term “postproduction” to embrace these processes of artists who, like the activity of the DJ who mixes, samples, and performs music, insert material made by others in their own works, making obsolete the opposites of “production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work”.<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin had already stressed that photography and cinema, two mass media, and especially photography as a reproductive medium, had marked a turning point in experiencing artworks, causing the loss of the artworks’ aura. He wrote:

The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which certain art forms aspire to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standards, that is to say, in new art forms.<sup>30</sup>

Digital technologies have increased the reconsideration of the activity of the artist. In 2011, in Arles, the exhibition *From Here On* is accompanied by a manifesto signed by Clément Chéroux, Joan Fontcuberta, Erik Kessels, Martin Parr, and Joachim Schmid, who declare that artistic practices are radically changed due to the Internet and digital technologies. The first sentence transforms the role of the photographer/artist to the one of the editor: “Now we’re species of editors. We all recycle, clip and cut, remix and upload [...]”.<sup>31</sup> The manifesto defends a new recycling<sup>32</sup> practice fundamentally linked to the culture of the Web, its search engines and social networks. Henner points out that in the verb “to take photographs”, there is already the idea of possession.<sup>33</sup> These borrowings are more particularly a practice of “adoption” of images, as Spanish artist and co-signer of the manifesto Joan Fontcuberta affirms. Adoption focuses on the gesture of borrowing and assumes the non-paternity of the recycled images. Joan Fontcuberta explains:

I think that now most artists adopt images because they don’t pretend to be the biological parents, they just pick those images to make them alive in another context.<sup>34</sup>

Henner took part in the exhibition in Arles, as did other artists that we will discuss thereafter such as Andreas Schmidt and Hermann Zschiegner. In *Less Américains*, Henner shifts the status of the content of Frank’s photobook. On the cover of his book, he replaced “photographs by Robert Frank” (in the original cover in French: “Photographies de Robert Frank”) by “images by Mishka Henner” (he left it in French: “Images par Mishka Henner”). He thus declares the shifting turn from photography to image making, from a photographer’s work to an artist’s work using images in a conceptual approach. He pays tribute to Broodthaers who had also changed the title of Mallarmé’s work, from “Poème” to “Image”. But the filiation with the original is still very present, as Henner confesses:

It’s very difficult for me to look at these images now and wonder whose images they are. Are they my images, or are they Frank’s images?<sup>35</sup>

Henner’s statement is nevertheless surprising. The images are explicitly displayed as his. His perspective refers to the obvious affiliation with the original work of reference and his version “after”. There is indeed a particularly striking impression when one opens Henner’s book: Frank’s photographs are often unrecognizable. Sean O’Hagan, critic at the *Guardian*, points out that, without their caption, it is unlikely that one can acknowledge that Henner’s images come from Frank’s book.<sup>36</sup> The result obtained by Henner is so “dramatically different”<sup>37</sup> from the originals, as the artist states himself, that we might ask ourselves why he chose to intervene on these iconic images if one can barely recognize them. Henner responds by admitting that, precisely, his gesture of erasure sometimes makes it impossible to recognize the original work, but enables the viewer to identify new “shapes” hidden in Frank’s photographs that provide “a whole new significance”<sup>38</sup> to the work:

[...] I discovered the patterns, the repeated shapes that hold the book together; there are so many circles, grids and diagonals. Then there are the hats and the hairstyles.<sup>39</sup>

Henner reveals the graphical strength of Frank's photographs once emptied of their documentary content (Figure 4). Jim Casper severely judges Henner's act of erasure, finding in this process neither the possibility to adopt a new perspective on Frank's photographs, nor the means to question the status of the original work:

I wanted to find something I liked in this book. However, Mishka Henner's exercise with Robert Frank's classic seems more like a copy-cat prank and publicity stunt, rather than a true work of art. The only original idea is the cheeky title shift from *Les Américains* to *Less Américains*.<sup>40</sup>

However, it is indeed the project that Henner undertook: he wishes to offer a new interpretation of the famous photobook. The purpose is thus not to compare Henner's images with Frank's photographs. He does not seek to play on a "before-after" scale, as does for example Hermann Zschiegner's series *After/Before Gursky* (2007–2009). The American artist searched on Google Earth the locations of the sites that the famous landscape photographer visited. But unlike Andreas Gursky, he only used his computer and Internet, imitating the perspective taken by the German photographer. The work is meant to "reveal the amount of Gursky's digital manipulation",<sup>41</sup> stressing the post-production used by Gursky who modified the landscape as well as the colors in order to obtain much more painterly photographs.



Fig. 4. Mishka Henner, *Miami Beach* (*Less Américains*, 2012).

Zschiegner's series doesn't work without its reference: it relies on its comparison with its model. His before-after process not only deconstructs the apparent objectivity of photography, but it playfully suggests that Google Earth gives a more accurate image of landscape than a photographer.

According to Jim Casper, Henner's iconoclastic version doesn't add anything ("less is not more"),<sup>42</sup> while Colin Pantall, in the *British Journal of Photography*, defends the opposite ("less is more").<sup>43</sup> The question doesn't rely on a tension between less or more, but rather on doing something new from something old, on doing something different from something so well-known and established that it becomes iconic and as such "untouchable". What is important is the process of creating something new from something that has been canonized and thus mummified.

Henner's emptied photographs, though revealing their aesthetic power, do not show anything and do not serve as documents anymore. One might be attracted by the abstract patterns created by Henner, but what the artist really did to Frank's work is the modification of the function of the images from documents to pictures. Henner's images do not tell the story of America in the 1950s, do not provide a personal narrative on American society as Frank's photobook did. Henner's practice follows the principles described in the *From Here On* manifesto in which these new works are said to "turn old into new".<sup>44</sup> Henner uses the same argument to defend his iconoclastic gesture. By "erasing the old", he wishes "to make something new".<sup>45</sup> The innovative aspect lies in the status of the image, the shift from photography to image, from document to art, and this questions the status of Frank's photographs and his legacy.

### Frank's "afterimages": remakes and tributes

Several variants of Frank's photobook have been published, which are reminiscent of the layout, format or content of the original, rather than being actual remakes.<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Day's *Postcards from the Road* (2014) takes Frank's photobook as a reference, following Frank's path in driving through the USA to give a contemporary version of Frank's book. The subtitle of the book "Robert Frank's *The Americans*" pays tribute to the work that Jonathan Day refers to.

In 2009, a photobook entitled *Les Acadiens*, showing 83 black and white photographs from François Carl Duguay, is published by the publisher La Ligne À Harde, an assumed reference to Frank's *The Americans*.

*The Canadians* (2016, Figures 5–6) is a photobook published by Bone Idle Books that can be seen as both a homage to Frank's seminal book, as well as a "Canadian" version of *The Americans*. The book shows press photographs that were selected by Roger Hargreaves, Jill Offenbeck and Stefani Petrilli from the image archive of the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail*. While working on the collection to build an exhibition,<sup>47</sup> the curators couldn't help but think of Frank's book.<sup>48</sup> The title of the book clearly alludes to Frank's photobook. The cover photograph of a bus comments on the one of Frank's cover, but while similarities are evident, the contrasts are also preeminent. The bus riders are smiling to politician David Lewis who, standing outside the bus, greets them, while in Frank's iconic photograph, faces are mostly silent and far less joyful (in Frank's case, the racial issue is also important, while it is





Fig. 5. Cover of *The Canadians* (2016).

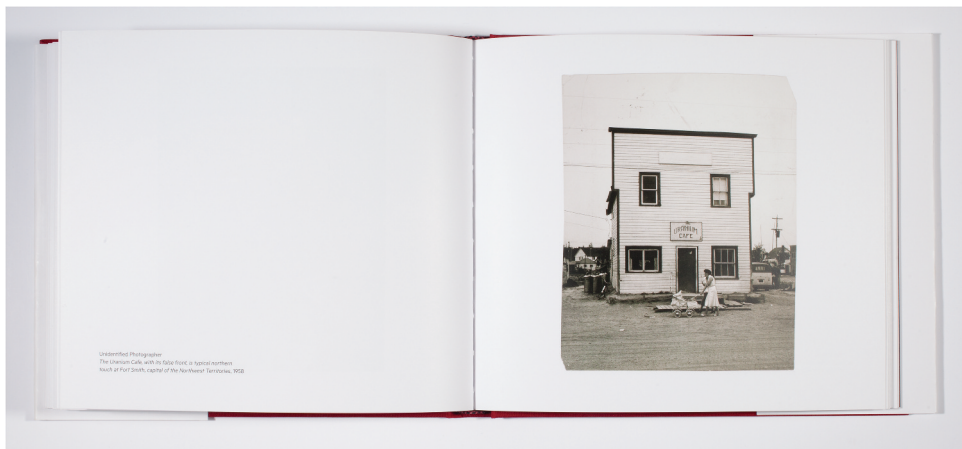


Fig. 6. Unidentified Photographer, *The Uranium Café*, with its false front, is typical northern touch at Fort Smith, capital of the Northwest Territories, 1958: (*The Canadians*, 2016).



absent in the Canadian book). The website of the publisher assumes the iconic reference of *The Canadians* that “re-imagines one of the most revered photography books of the 20th century, Robert Frank’s *The Americans*”.<sup>49</sup>

Dafydd Hughes’s book *Every Face in The Americans* (2010) is also based on Frank’s photobook. It reproduces close-ups of faces photographed by Frank, detected by the software iPhoto (Figures 7–8). The project — which was his MFA work — challenges the practices of documentation and of face recognition by a software such as iPhoto. Even if the core of the project relies on the technological potentials, Hughes made a book that is presented on his website as “modeled as closely as possible after the 1977 edition of *The Americans*, from which the scans were made”.<sup>50</sup> As a book, the project clearly shows its depth towards the original and follows the current practices of variations. The book consists in white pages with the original caption of Frank’s photographs on the left pages, and reproductions of one face taken from the photograph on the right pages. This gallery of portraits, more or less pixelized, more or less out of focus, by deleting the setting, by omitting the objects, locations, and contexts, provides a new perspective on Frank’s photographs that is automatically revisited by the digital software as a creative agent.

*Looking in* (2012, Figures 9–10) by Jonathan Lewis is an artist’s book that doesn’t function as a remake of Frank’s photobook, but literally explores one of its photographs, the famous *Metropolitan Life Insurance Building, New York City* (1956). By operating a progressive zooming through the pages, the reader discovers, at the end of the book, by a discreet editing, a message allegedly hidden in the original photograph. In the kiosk which presents newspapers and magazines, focusing on a part of the booth, the sentence “A Down Beat Record Of The Life Fantastic” can be

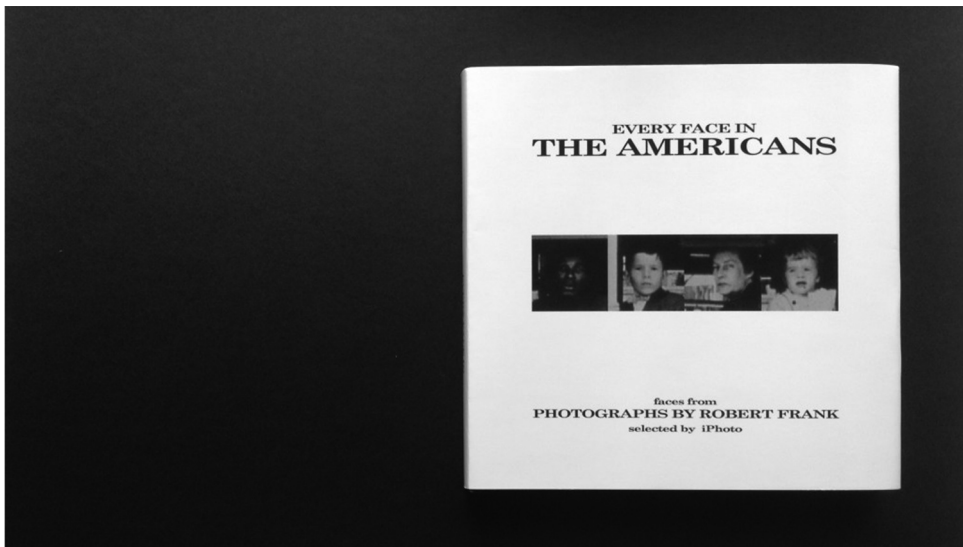


Fig. 7. Dafydd Hughes, Cover of *Every Face in The Americans* (2010).

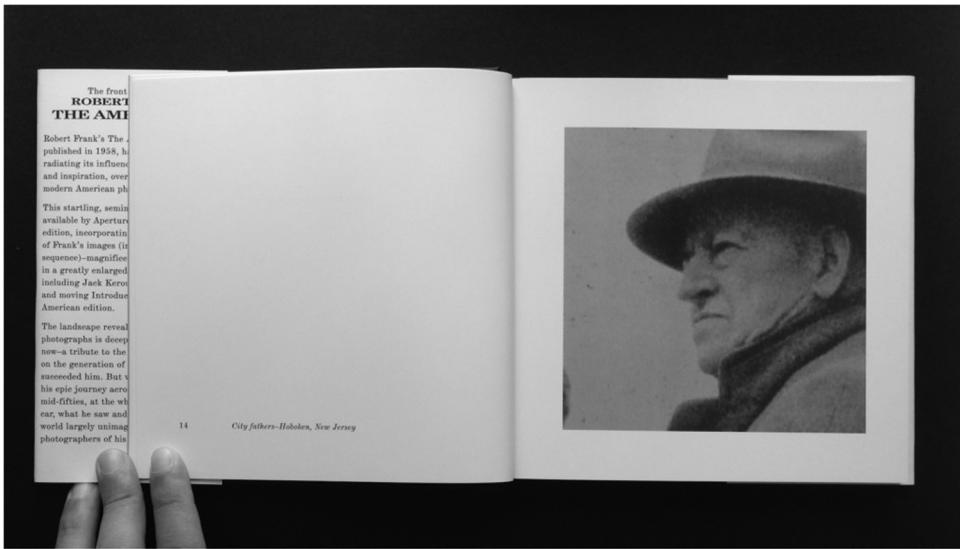


Fig. 8. Dafydd Hughes, Cover of *Every Face in The Americans; City Fathers — Hoboken, New Jersey (Every Face in The Americans)*, 2010.

read. The title of the book refers to the exhibition catalogue, *Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans* (2009) published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Frank's photobook.<sup>51</sup> Lewis' approach recalls the current common practices of recycling that consist in selecting an established pre-existing work to manipulate it, distort it, discuss it, in operating by appropriation and displacement towards the original and in putting value to a certain ease of production and an amateurish rendering.

Canadian artist Michel Campeau also worked on Robert Frank's iconic book. His project *Revisiting Robert Frank and The Americans through Amateur Color Photography in the Fifties* (2014–2016, [Figure 11](#)) brings Frank's photographs into dialogue with amateur colour pictures from the 1950 s. Campeau, by using colour photographs that claim no artistic value, makes two types of photographic images meet, master photography and vernacular photography. Campeau, whose series on darkrooms<sup>52</sup> shows the inevitable death of the argentic photography, wishes "to highlight the unexpected and sometimes incongruous wealth of amateur practices and vernacular images, long considered unattractive and uninteresting, underestimated, and often excluded from the history of photography".<sup>53</sup>

German artist Andreas Schmidt also gave his interpretation of Frank's photobook. *The Americans* (2011, [Figures 12–13](#)) is made of images gathered on the Internet using Google Images. Schmidt used the captions of Frank's photographs given in the Steidl edition, and compiled the images found, from amateurs, sometimes not corresponding to the original photographs. In bringing Frank's photographs into confrontation with Internet images made by often anonymous amateurs, Schmidt operates a playful discrepancy that emerges clearly from this

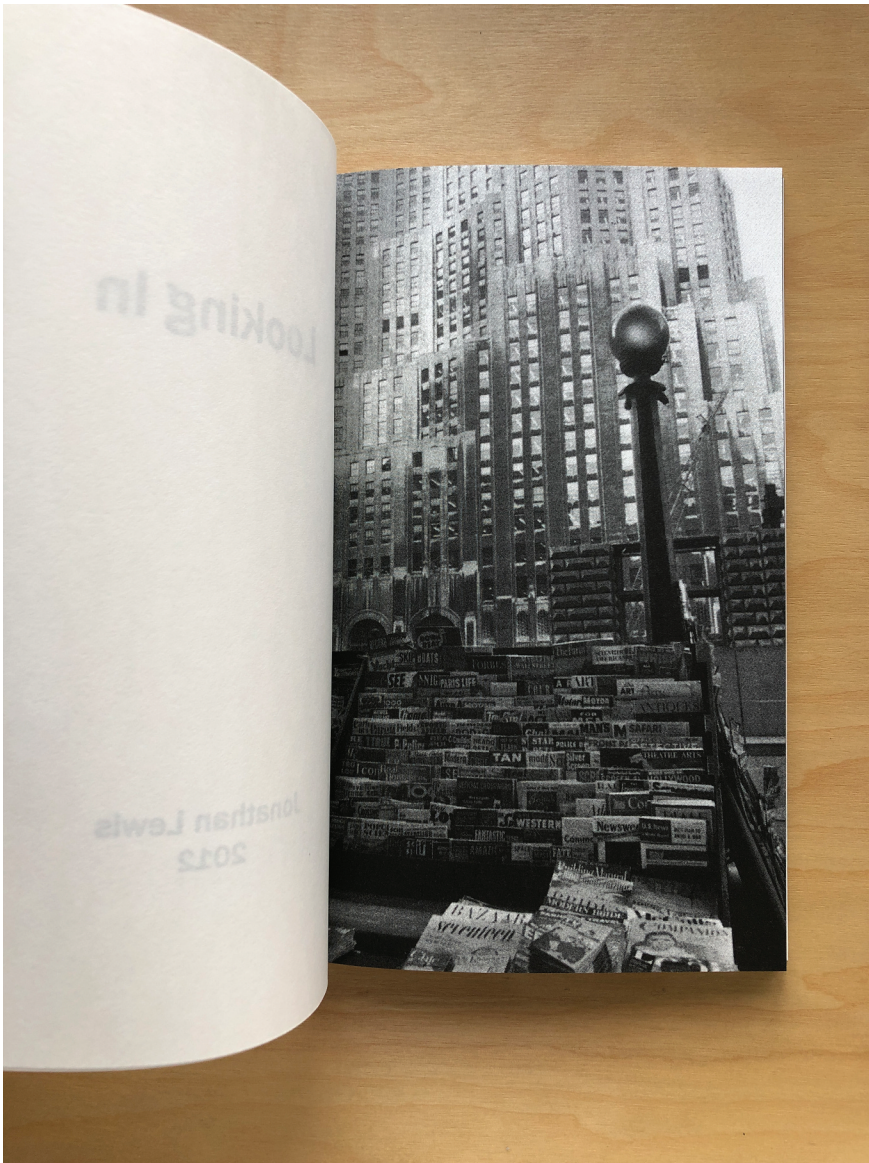


Fig. 9. Jonathan Lewis, *Looking in* (2012).

process of inversion of the hierarchy of values. The description of the book on the website of Blurb, where the book can be purchased, reveals the irony of Schmidt's project: his artist's book, clearly a remake of Frank's famous photobook, was "made entirely without the help of a Guggenheim fellowship" — unlike Frank's photobook — and is meant to picture American society, a "story of contemporary America — pictures of normal people, everyday scenes, lunch counters, bus depots and cars, and the strangely familiar faces of people we don't



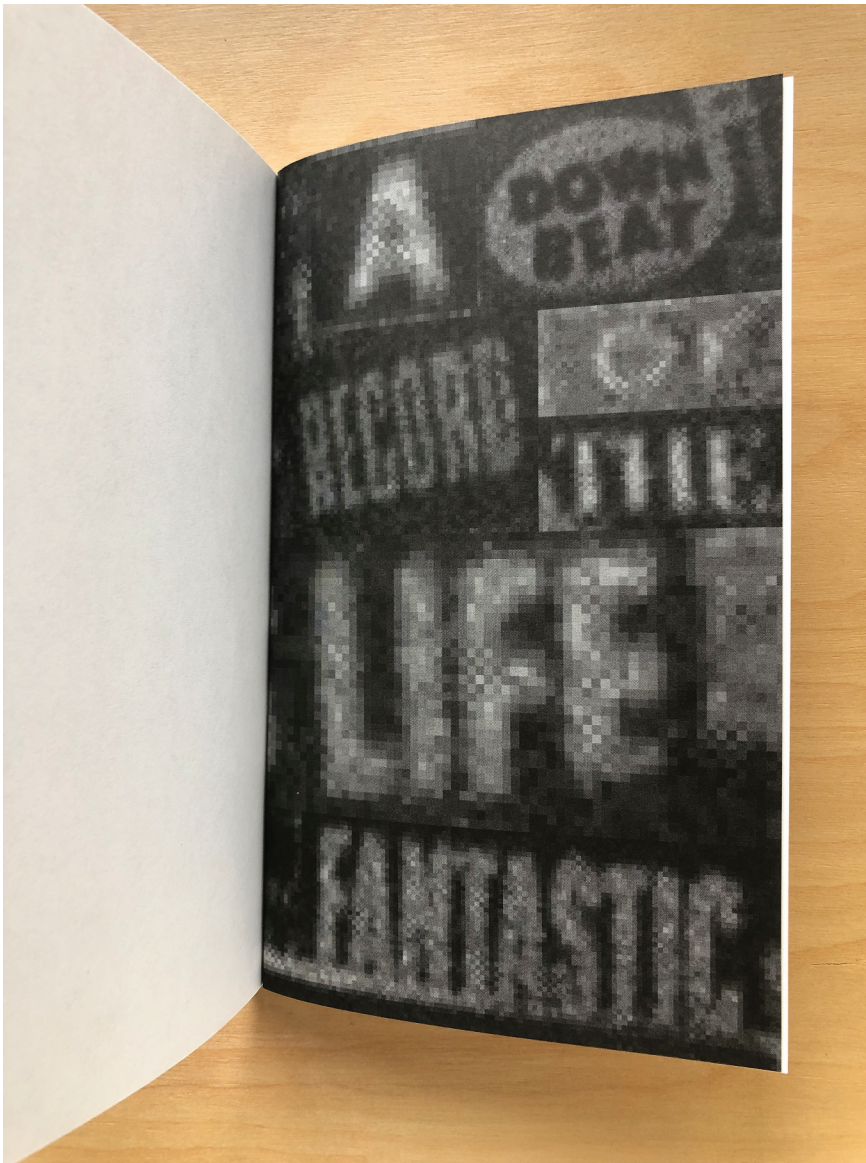


Fig. 10. Jonathan Lewis, *Looking in* (2012).

quite know but have seen somewhere”.<sup>54</sup> But unlike Frank, Schmidt didn’t travel through the United States, and he didn’t capture what he witnessed, but he selected images easily and quickly found on the Internet: “My version of *The Americans* is a road trip through America made whilst I was sitting in a comfortable arm chair in my London apartment in January 2011”.<sup>55</sup>



Fig. 11. Michel Campeau, from the series *Revisiting Robert Frank and The Americans through Amateur Color Photography in the Fifties*, 2014–2016.



Fig. 12. Andreas Schmidt, *City fathers — Hoboken, New Jersey* (*The Americans*, 2011).

Schmidt offers a new version of Frank's book, by comparing the original photographs to the 83 digital images found online as a new way to portray

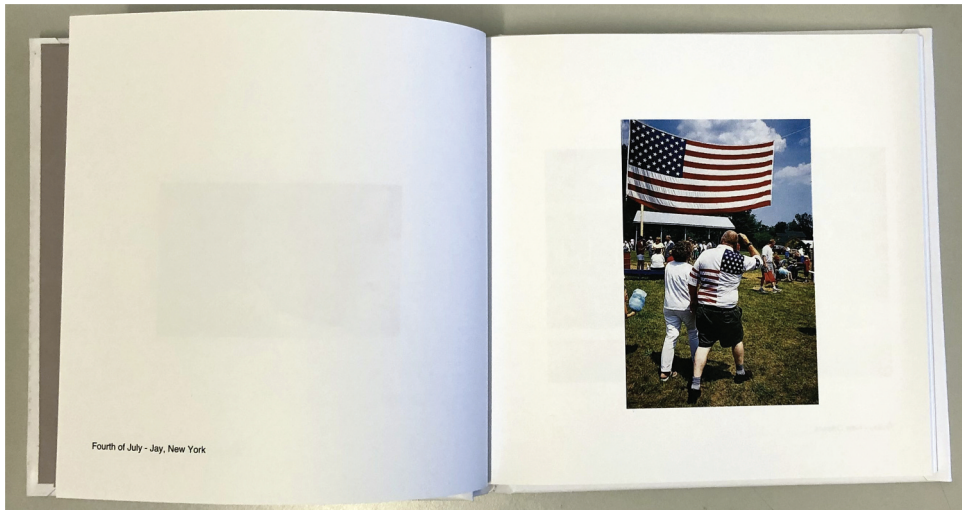


Fig. 13. Andreas Schmidt, *Fourth of July — Jay, New York* (*The Americans*, 2011).

America.<sup>56</sup> Campeau asked Schmidt about the genesis of his project on Frank's book. Schmidt's answer illuminates the value he grants to the consecrated photographers and vernacular photography, especially found on the Internet:

Perhaps my goal was to produce an ordinary photobook on contemporary America, as a large part of photography favors the spectacular and the extraordinary. In other words, it is an art book and not a photobook.<sup>57</sup>

Schmidt, in taking over Frank's photobook which he incorporates into the digital popular culture which values sharing and networking, reverses the values of originality and uniqueness. He explains:

[...] my intention was not to produce a photographic masterpiece or a "bible" (as Frank's book is sometimes called).<sup>58</sup>

By valuing vernacular photography and revisiting a seminal photobook, Schmidt interprets a masterpiece in the history of documentary photography in the digital era, showing both how a book can be produced with digital tools (self-publishing with print-on-demand companies) and with digital content (by selecting images easily found on the Internet).

Other explorations have been made, working on a multimodal approach: Andrew Emond's *Sounds of the Americans. An Exploration of Robert Frank's Photography* converts Frank's photographs into sounds, using a specific software. Images are then recreated from the audio files. *Sounds of the Americans* is thus a multi-sensory experience: the images are displayed on a website, whereas the audio files in WAV format can be downloaded.<sup>59</sup> The Canadian photographer explores the process of "variations" upon Frank's photobook, using a software to experiment with Frank's book in a new



manner, which is — one has to be honest — difficult to hear, the sounds created upon the 83 photographs being barely audible.

### After the father: legacy and desire

The relationship with the original work or with authority is a key element to consider when analysing works of this kind and yet also a complex aspect. Goodman stresses the paradoxical attitude that Picasso had towards Velázquez, speaking of both “veneration” and “rebellion”.<sup>60</sup> Levine is also ambiguous when she describes her “attraction” and her “desire” to emancipate the work from the ideals the original works embody.<sup>61</sup> In Henner’s case, the artist explains that erasure enabled him to go beyond Frank’s legacy:

It felt right and *necessary* to erase Robert Frank’s *The Americans* [...]. Not just because of the dogmatic way in which that work is talked about and mythologized in photography circles but also because of an idea of America that Frank’s original represented. *The Americans* was and remains a masterpiece but, by its very nature, it provokes and demands today’s reader to interpret it rather than remain a passive spectator.<sup>62</sup>

Henner attacks a seminal photographic work, a consecrated work by an established photographer. Sarah Greenough quotes Thomas F. Barrow who, in 1970, wrote that Frank’s photobook “has become an incredible amulet of sorts for students, maybe too much so, as some seem to have trouble getting beyond it”.<sup>63</sup> J. T. Mitchell stresses the “hypercanonization” of Frank’s book, whose reading is accompanied by a “ritual recitation of its legendary status as a classic”.<sup>64</sup> Henner declares:

I had been making a lot of work that is about photography, and I love the photobook. My background is in documentary, so I thought if I’m going to remake a photobook, I should start with the Bible — *Les Américains*.<sup>65</sup>

The process of both erasing and recycling thus consists in discussing and in liberating himself from the authority of the sanctified photobook. Henner positions himself after Frank, as well as marking a break with his legacy. But isn’t there in this process a kind of Freudian patricide?<sup>66</sup> Rauschenberg’s act of transgression towards De Kooning’s drawing has also been read as an oedipal act, even if this interpretation should be moderated.<sup>67</sup> In Henner’s case, does this interpretation fit his approach?

As a paternal figure, Frank would be destroyed — or erased — in order to give space to new generations of artists that still feel the strong impact of Frank’s legacy. Even if its publication dates back to the 1950 s, *The Americans* is still considered a model to young generations, as Henner shows:

To many photographers working to this day, the book [Robert Frank’s *The Americans*] has taken on almost sacred significance.<sup>68</sup>

Galassi explains, regarding Picasso's variations upon masters, that "in opening these well-known works to dissection, Picasso released the forces of the present on the past, liberating them from their static positions in the canon".<sup>69</sup> One might see a similar approach in Henner's gesture upon Frank's photobook, as a liberating step towards the master, even if this liberation emerges from an act of iconoclasm.

The act of iconoclasm doesn't result in pure destruction, but in a re-creation through an act of erasure. The formal abstraction of Henner's images is driven by a respect towards the original works. His comments on the genesis of his work, citing Rauschenberg's vandalism on De Kooning's drawing, also argue for a need to liberate himself from the father, from the oppressive influence of the master who, paradoxically, also raises desire.

Dafydd Hughes confesses on his website regarding *Every Face in The Americans* that he feels "sincerest respect and admiration for Robert Frank".<sup>70</sup> We can also assume that Michel Campeau is fascinated by Frank's photobook and, in giving his own perspective on the book, attempts to breach the aura of the authority. Andreas Schmidt instead cites Ed Ruscha as a major influence in his work. He never met Frank, but owns two copies of his photobook as well as *Looking In*. At the time of the publication of his book, he was in close contact with Mishka Henner, Elisabeth Tonnard, and Joachim Schmid, who all work with the book form and on found images (mostly from the Web).<sup>71</sup>

Most of all, these contemporary versions after pre-existing works are bound to digital technologies and their principles of recycling. As Bourriaud highlights, the process of reusing pre-existing works is not new, but the concept of recycling ("postproduction" in Bourriaud's terminology) lies in the ideology of "sharing",<sup>72</sup> a collective activity deeply linked to the current culture of the Web 2.0. Andrew Emond and Dafydd Hughes's use of technologies underscores the effects of software and digital processes in understanding photographs and photobooks. Jonathan Lewis, Michel Campeau, and Andreas Schmidt operate by questioning the hierarchy of values and by elevating amateur images and Internet content as a worthy culture. By using amateur images and by publishing books on-demand, they adopt a perspective that gives value to secondary images and self-publishing. But, on the other side, by offering a variation upon Frank's photobook, whose book is sometimes seen as "a Bible", they still give value to Frank's book by taking it as a seminal work. By commenting on Frank's book's legacy, and even by questioning its aura, they still assume that Frank's photobook is a book worth remaking.

## After all: The glorious company

Why then continue quoting a landmark book? How can we explain these multiple versions upon an iconic photobook?

As Georges Roque suggests,<sup>73</sup> Leo Steinberg, in a text on the borrowing of patterns and their migration in other historical and cultural spheres for other purposes, might enlighten us. Steinberg questions the reason for these loans and explains these processes by the artist's will to be part of a tradition, to fit into the



history of representations, seeking to be part of the “glorious company” of emblematic artists from whom these patterns are taken.<sup>74</sup> Do contemporary artists, who are offering new interpretations of artists’ books or landmark photobooks, also aim to position themselves within the “glorious company” of acclaimed artists to whom they refer? Jim Casper, in his criticism of Henner’s *Less Américains*, wonders what motivated the artist to intervene in Frank’s book and points out:

I’m not sure it’s meant to be seen as provocative or an outrage or an excuse to be mentioned *in the same company* as Robert Frank [...].<sup>75</sup>

Casper uses the same term as Steinberg, “company”, revealing the suspicion that can spontaneously emerge when an artist appropriates the work of another: Is the borrowing motivated by the will to take advantage of the artistic merit of the landmark work? Does it show the artist’s will to be included in a tradition?

Henner’s gesture of erasure consists in a variation upon Frank’s work that departs radically from the original photographs. As Steinberg explains about the re-use of patterns created by others, “there are instances by the score where the artist invests the work he takes from with renewed relevance; he bestows on it a viability hitherto unsuspected; he actualizes its potentialities [...]”.<sup>76</sup> Rather than working on the content of Frank’s photographs, Henner, by erasing it, addresses issues regarding the consecrated names in photography and the photobook. By doing so, he questions the photographic medium and the figures of authority in the history of photography. Henner’s book explores the relationship of an artist with photography and its history today. He takes part in that history, “in the company” of Frank, as well as in the history of contemporary art, following approaches inherited by Duchamp, Broodthaers and Rauschenberg.

Andreas Schmidt, in re-interpreting Frank’s photobook with vernacular images found on the Internet, also discusses the authority of Frank’s book. He favours anonymous photographs taken from Google Images over pictures taken from an acclaimed photographer. Schmidt states that “there is no original or unique. In my opinion, everything is a copy or a derivative”.<sup>77</sup> As provocative as it can be, his perspective is bound to the culture of the Web and its culture of content sharing. It follows what Bourriaud has observed in contemporary art since the 1990 s: the remix of pre-existing material, which leads to the diminishing of the importance of “originality” (seen as being at the genesis of something) and the reconsideration of the artwork, as a work comprised in a never-ending network, of a never-ending process of remaking, remix, re-interpretation.<sup>78</sup>

The curators who selected the press photographs reproduced in *The Canadians*, by openly making reference to Frank’s photobook, include press photography (mostly from anonymous) within the history of photography (and photobooks).

Michel Campeau follows a similar path: amateur colour photographs are valorized, the artist operating a balance between documentary photography and vernacular images. Campeau confesses the respect he feels towards Frank and his will to “shake” (“ébranler” in French) the mythification of Frank’s photobook.

There is no nostalgia in these works, but rather a taste for playful strategies, which associates opposites — well-accomplished photographers versus amateurs;

documentary photography versus digital images; photobook versus artist's book; serious work versus playful approach; analogue versus digital.

Operating by negation, Mishka Henner positions himself in the "company" of Robert Frank, and he confronts the master without dismissing him. With digital manipulation, he reveals the graphical strength of Frank's photographs emptied of their documentary content. Jonathan Lewis, Michel Campeau, Andreas Schmidt, Andrew Emond, as well as Dafydd Hughes, by re-making Frank's iconic photobook, not only question the canon, but confirm its vast influence, and by offering variations upon this book using vernacular photographs, digital images or software, like Mishka Henner, they make themselves part of the history of art, and especially of photography, in which the photobook has a primary role.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

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2. As Ute Eskildsen affirms it, trying to delimitate or oppose photobooks and artists' books within the contemporary works is pointless and vain. Eskildsen, "Photographs in book," 27.
3. Since the invention of photography, photography and the book share a very close relationship. From Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) to the most recent publications of photographers, the book is a key element within the photographic production. Patrizia Di Bello and Shamoan Zamir stressed that photography has, since its early years, been displayed in books as well as on walls. Di Bello et al., *The Photobook*, 1.
4. Greenough, "The Americans (*Les Américains*), 1959, de Robert Frank," 603.
5. Douglas R. Nickel states that Evan's book is "for its genre, as canonical a work as can be imagine". Nickel, "American Photographs Revisited," 79.
6. Rosenheim Jeff L., "Robert Frank and Walker Evans," 150.
7. The French edition reproduces short texts, whereas the English edition publishes Jack Kerouac's preface. Greenough, "The Americans (*Les Américains*), 1959, de Robert Frank," 603.
8. See Nelson, "Making and Remaking *The Americans*".
9. The work also exists as a photographic series of gelatin silver prints.
10. Henner quoted in: Baker, "Erasing *The Americans*".

11. The exhibition *Qu'est-ce que la photographie? (What is Photography?)* organized by Clément Chéroux and Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2015 featured Mishka Henner's artist's book. See Chéroux, Ziebinska-Lewandowska, *Qu'est-ce que la photographie?*
12. <http://www.mishkahenner.com>.
13. Moine, *Remakes*, 21.
14. See what Raphaëlle Moine discusses in: *Ibid.*, 67–99.
15. Goodman, "Variation on Variation, or Picasso back to Bach," 74.
16. *Ibid.*, 76.
17. Stéphane Reboul uses Goodman's terminology in order to offer a typology of the various versions after Ruscha's artist's books. Reboul, "Typologie pragmatique de la reprise des livres d'artiste d'Ed Ruscha," 21–35.
18. Galassi, *Picasso's Variations on the Masters*, 11.
19. Ed Ruscha's publications, considered by many to stand for a renewal of conceptual artists' books in the 1960s, are books that reproduce photographs. Stéphane Reboul drew up a list that could be today expanded and which already included, in 2013, more than 180 remakes of Ruscha's artist's books, showing the infinite variants of his publications. Reboul, "Typologie pragmatique de la reprise des livres d'artiste d'Ed Ruscha," 21–35. See also: Jeff Brows et al., *Various Small books*.
20. Pantall, "Less is More"; Baker, "Erasing *The Americans*".
21. Roberts, "Erased de Kooning Drawing".
22. See Reboul, "Typologie pragmatique de la reprise des livres d'artiste d'Ed Ruscha," 21–35.
23. Broomberg, "*Afterlife*, 2009," 176.
24. <http://www.broombergchanarin.com/kodak-1-1-1-1/>.
25. Crimp, "Pictures," 75–88.
26. Levine declares on that topic: "I am interested in making a work that has as much aura as its reference. For me the tension between the reference and the new work doesn't really exist unless the new work has an auratic presence of its own. Otherwise, it just becomes a copy, which is not that interesting". Lewallen, "Sherrie Levine".
27. She used Marcel Duchamp's concept in the conference she gave in 2001 at the Getty Research Institute. See: Singerman, "Sherrie Levine's Art History," 96–121.
28. See Trespeuch, "Sherrie Levine: de l'appropriationnisme au simulationnisme," 51.
29. Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, 7.
30. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 239.
31. Chéroux et al., *From Here On*.
32. On the use of the term "recycling", see: Roque, *L'image recyclée*.
33. Henner quoted in: Shore, *Post-Photography*, 8.
34. Fontcuberta quoted in: Pett, "Mois de la Photo".
35. See note 10 above.
36. O'Hagan, "Mishka Henner's erased images: art or insult?".
37. *Ibid.*
38. See note 10 above.
39. Henner quoted in: Pantall, "Less is More".

40. Casper, "Book Review: Less Américains". *LensCulture*.
41. <http://www.follow-ed.com/afterbefore-gursky/>.
42. See note 40 above.
43. See note 20 above.
44. See note 31 above.
45. "Erasing the Old to Make Something New," <http://www.mishkahenner.com>.
46. Jno Cook's *The Robert Frank Coloring Book* (1983) which gathers drawings made on the basis of Frank's photographs can be seen as a comment on Frank's canonical photobook.
47. The exhibition *Cutline: The Photography Archives of the Globe and Mail* shown in 2016 at the Old Press Hall of The Globe and Mail was part of the Contact Photography Festival. It was later shown in 2016–2017 at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
48. Adams, "Photography book *The Canadians* a kind of reimagining of *The Americans*"; and Butet-Roch, "Finding the True. North in Canada".
49. <https://boneidlebooks.com/product/the-canadians>.
50. I wish to thank Dafydd Hughes for sharing his thoughts on his project. [www.everyfaceintheamericans.ca/book/](http://www.everyfaceintheamericans.ca/book/).
51. Greenough, *Looking In*.
52. Campeau, *Photographic Darkroom, Photogenic Obsolescence*.
53. My translation from the French quotes. I would like to thank Michel Campeau for sharing his documents and his thoughts on his work. His series "La photographie amateur, l'instantané et Robert Frank" was shown as part of the exhibition "Michel Campeau. Life Before Digital" at the McCord Museum in Montreal (02.14–05.06.2018).
54. "About the book *The Americans*" on the website of Blurb: <http://www.blurb.com/b/1977415-t-h-e-a-m-e-r-i-c-a-n-s>.
55. I wish to thank Andreas Schmidt for answering my questions in August 2017 and for sharing his thoughts on his work. Interview with Andreas Schmidt, August 2017.
56. Interview with Andreas Schmidt, August 2017.
57. My translation. Andreas Schmidt's email to Michel Campeau, January 2016. Campeau's documents.
58. My translation. Andreas Schmidt's email to Michel Campeau, January 2016.
59. <http://www.soundsoftheamericans.com/index.html>.
60. See note 15 above, 78.
61. "attirance", "envie". Levine's words of the 1980s, quoted in: Buchloh, "Allégorie et appropriation dans l'art contemporain", 107–153.
62. I emphasize. Henner quoted in: Shore, *Post-Photography*, 14.
63. "A Letter with Some Thoughts on Photography's Future". *Album*, n°6 (July 1970), 2–3, quoted in: Greenough, "Blowing Down Bleecker Street: Destroying *The Americans*," note 26, 350.
64. "a moment of special intensity in the photographic revelation of 'the truth' about the American nation". Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* 276.
65. Henner quoted in: Pantall, "Less is More". He explains in Baker, "Erasing *The Americans*": "I wanted to do something that was in some ways about the photo

- book as much as about documentary photography, and Frank's *Americans* is kind of the bible of a certain idea of documentary photography if you like".
66. I wish to thank Professor Martha Langford who gave me an enlightening comment on the first draft of this paper when I presented it in 2017 at the Concordia University in Montreal, under the title: "Les livres de photographie et livres d'artistes 'd'après': recyclages, appropriations, hommages".
  67. See note 21 above.
  68. Henner, "Some thoughts on *Less Américains*," unpublished, June 2013: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0mxn7BULcSUYlpTUXhJYWdXaVU/view>.
  69. See note 18 above, 18.
  70. Preface to *Every Face in The Americans*: <http://www.everyfaceintheamericans.ca/preface/>.
  71. See note 56 above, 2017.
  72. Preface to the second edition: Bourriaud. *Postproduction* (2005).
  73. Roque, "Introduction," 29.
  74. Steinberg, "Introduction: The Glorious Company," 8–31.
  75. I emphasize. Casper, "Book Review: *Less Américains*". *LensCulture*.
  76. Steinberg, "Introduction: The Glorious Company," 25.
  77. See note 56 above 56, 2017.
  78. Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 7 *et seq.*

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## Credit lines

- 1-4. Mishka Henner, *Less Américains*, 2012, 7.5 × 8.5 in (19x21.5 cm), self-published, 180 pages, hardcover, edition of 350. Courtesy of the artist, © Mishka Henner
- 5-6. Roger Hargreaves, Jill Offenbeck and Stefani Petrilli (curators), *The Canadians*, 2016, 7.8 × 8.8 in (19.8x22.4 cm), Toronto, Bone Idle Books, 172 pages, hardcover with dust jacket. Courtesy of Bone Idle Books, © Bone Idle Books
- 7-8. Dafydd Hughes, *Every Face in The Americans*, 2010, 7x7in (18x18 cm), self-published via Blurb, 126 pages, hardcover, print-on-demand. Courtesy of the artist, © Dafydd Hughes, Photos: © Silvio Lorusso
- 9-10. Jonathan Lewis, *Looking in*, 2012, 13 × 20 cm, self-published, 80 pages, softcover, print-on-demand. Courtesy of the artist, © Jonathan Lewis
11. Michel Campeau, series *Revisiting Robert Frank and The Americans through Amateur Color Photography in the Fifties*, 2014-2016, various dimensions, inkjet prints, Courtesy of the artist, © Michel Campeau
- 12-13. Andreas Schmidt, *The Americans*, 2011, 7x7in (18x18 cm), self-published via Blurb, 170 pages, hardcover, print-on-demand. Courtesy of the artist, © Andreas Schmidt

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