

Interview

ART KANE'S ANGULAR EYE

BY EMILY MCDERMOTT DECEMBER 2014

For nearly 40 years, Art Kane was one of the most widely published photographers, appearing in a variety of magazines including *Life*, *Vogue*, and *Esquire*. His images ranged from conceptual fashion editorials to portraits of musicians like Bob Dylan, The Who, and Janis Joplin, as well as political imagery that could be interpreted as a form of activism during the civil rights movement and Vietnam War. In 1958, he assembled 57 jazz musicians—including Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Greer, Hank Jones, and Benny Golson—for a portrait outside of a Harlem brownstone. The image, now commonly known as *A Great Day in Harlem*, inspired the production of a documentary by the same name and was also used as a major plot point in Steven Spielberg's *The Terminal*. Today, nearly 20 years after the photographer's suicide, we see the release of *Art Kane (Reel Art Press)*, a book featuring over 200 images that span the entire length and breadth of his career.

"From the late '50s to the middle '80s you virtually could not open a magazine without finding [Art Kane's] byline, but what he did not do was make books," his son, Jonathan Kane, says. Prior to *Art Kane*, only two books had been released with his images—one on the masters of contemporary photography in the '70s and another about fashion and news in the '80s

Jonathan, a musician and photographer himself, and his wife Holly Anderson, a poet and lyricist whose work is collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art among others, run Art Kane's archive and worked with Reel Art Press to conceive the book. "It's not divided by decades; it's not divided by genres," Anderson explains. "The images are a kind of dance and they flow."

Art Kane saw his images the same way—he did not limit his subject matter and fused conceptual ideas, such as the layering of multiple negatives, with political subject matter, as seen through his series on Native Americans. Although his name is oftentimes lost within history, Kane shot during the same period as figures like Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton, helped pioneer the use of color photography, and introduced the wide-angle lens to fashion editorials. He also shot one of the first Marlborough cigarette campaigns, introducing the world to the Marlborough Man.

Kane's images retain highly graphic elements, which likely stems from the fact he studied under Alexey

STEVEN
KASHER
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Brodovitch alongside Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and Diane Arbus, and worked as an award-winning art director for both *Seventeen* and *Esquire* before shifting his focus to photography. Prior to the release of the book and a corresponding exhibition in London, we spoke with Jonathan and Anderson over the phone.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: I know Art Kane only kept a small and select amount of film. What is his archive like because of that? Other photographers have huge archives with all these negatives that have never been seen, but what is it like for you?

JONATHAN KANE: My father had a real vision about what was number one, about the image that he wanted to represent himself. In most cases there was one, maybe two, pictures from a shoot and those were his masterpieces. Rather than keeping the outtakes like most people, he filled trashcans with transparencies. He would sit in his room with his projector going through his shoots and would throw away hundreds and hundreds of outtakes. So what's left is...

HOLLY ANDERSON: ...really the core selection.

KANE: In the making the book, we occasionally would dive in and pull up work that he did not publish and the images were amazing, so we acted as editors and second-guessed him a little bit. But in large amounts, Art Kane did a lot of the editing for himself.

ANDERSON: Really 90 percent of the book's images are Art Kane's selection. He tossed a lot, but he didn't throw black-and-white negatives away the same way he threw color chromes away.

MCDERMOTT: That's interesting...

KANE: Well it's in the nature of the medium. The black-and-white are negatives and cut into the standard segments of 35mm film with about 6 or 7 pictures in a strip, [whereas] with transparencies—they're individual items. He could sit there with his carousel, look at the image and go, "Nope, nope, nope. Yes!" The yeses were the ones he kept.

MCDERMOTT: Did you ever see him doing that?

KANE: Yes, absolutely.

ANDERSON: Yes. One of his assistants caught him doing it and would go in and pull them out of the trash, but then he would get back in and throw them out again. [*laughs*] He was surgical in what he selected.

MCDERMOTT: One of my favorites in the book is *Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention*, the group

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KASHER
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shot of the musicians with children.

KANE: Actually, I was there.

MCDERMOTT: So you can really talk about it.

KANE: Yeah. That photo was part of a very important essay called "The New Rock" for *Life* magazine, which also included the photo of The Who wrapped up in the British flag, Janice Joplin falling out of the frame, and Jim Morrison. Originally, though, he had another idea for The Mothers. He wanted to photograph each guy screaming as if they were protesting and then blow up each of those screaming faces and put them on picket signs. He then wanted to take The Mothers to Washington D.C. and photograph them picketing in front of the White House with their own faces on the picket signs. It was kind of a counter culture political death. He told the idea to Frank Zappa, who said, I quote, "That's the worst fucking idea I've heard in my life." [*laughs*]

So it went to plan b, and plan b was mothers, babies—plain and simple. He asked the band members if they had kids, and of a few of them did, so he said, "Please bring your children." Then they cast a few professional model babies. A bunch of moms, circa 1968, showed up and nervously stood around while their beautiful little babies were put in the hands of these terrifying, bearded, long-hair freaks. I showed up for the shoot after school—I was 11 years old—and I was a bit nervous to meet these rock stars. They looked so terrifying, but immediately Frank Zappa rushed up to me, hugged me, and said, "Hey man, you should've been here an hour ago, man. The babies were pissing all over us! We got soaked, man!" Apparently that did happen—the babies were naked and at one point they all started peeing. Everybody got saturated.

For me, though, that photo is so full of life, love, and humor. It's so packed in the frame with a Renaissance-like theme. Everybody, with the exception of the babies, has their eyes glued on Art Kane and that was one thing my dad demanded. Unless he had another vision, he insisted that subjects look directly into his lens.

MCDERMOTT: That's not necessarily a standard technique with editorial photography. Do you know why he did that?

KANE: He was quoted saying a couple things. One is that when you shoot a performer you have to own them, even during the rare times that there wasn't a concept behind the picture. For example, the Bob Dylan portrait, he still made Dylan look at him. Dylan was not used to photographers telling him what to do; he was in no mood to be told what to do. He was on a break from his first electric tour, when people all over Europe were screaming [about him], and he was *Bob Dylan*. Nobody told Bob Dylan what to do, but Art Kane stalked him around a rooftop in Los Angeles saying, "I need you to look at me." The outtakes show Dylan looking at my father with contempt and looking really pissed off, but finally he stopped Dylan

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

in the corner and he freaked out, put his hands on his face, and looked at my father.

MCDERMOTT: He doesn't look very happy in that image.

KANE: It's an incredible photo and speaks so much about Dylan at the time, and my dad did that with full love and respect. He loved Bob Dylan. He loved his music. He was a big fan, but he wasn't leaving without getting what he wanted. What he wanted was eye contact.

ANDERSON: Art always wanted subjects to do what he wanted them to do. He would always direct.

MCDERMOTT: I'm sure that stems from being an art director.

ANDERSON: Absolutely.

MCDERMOTT: How else do you think being an art director bled into his photography?

ANDERSON: I think his sense of space and use of color. There's also virtually not a photo that doesn't have a strong design element.

KANE: He knew exactly what it was going to look like on the page because he spent 10 years as an art director. He also famously fought with art directors as a photographer because he didn't think he needed them—his work is cropped already. You can't really crop his photographs; you have to run them full-bleed because he was already seeing in his shutter exactly what he wanted.

MCDERMOTT: Going back to your childhood, Jonathan, what's one thing your dad said that has stuck with you?

KANE: I think it was that you really have to get up close and personal with a subject and you can't take no for an answer. A personal point of view is everything. I'm a musician and that applies to how I've directed my music career—I never wanted to do anything the way other people were doing it. I think those lessons from Art Kane as a dad apply to different areas of my life, both as a photographer myself and as a musician.

MCDERMOTT: Did he play music?

KANE: He did! He played a lot of instruments: he was a pretty good drummer, guitar player, and chromatic harmonica player. He played a little trumpet and wrote songs. He wrote a hit song in the late 1940s when he got out of World War II. There was a radio show called "Songs for Sale" that was a little bit like a proto-American Idol—amateur songwriters submitted songs and if your song won, a leading recording artist would record it. Art Kane wrote a song called, "Oh What a Face," and it won. It was

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

recorded by a number of people and available as sheet music. Then later in his life he was writing lyrics and Michael Kamen wrote the music for a package for a Broadway musical. They had a few people interested, but it did not get produced.

MCDERMOTT: I also wanted to talk about the intro text—a lot of it goes back to the idea that Art disrespected authority.

ANDERSON: I think of the houndstooth coat [photograph] right away. He had very ambivalent feelings about fashion and shooting fashion. There was money and there was interest, but in 1962 the houndstooth coat—that black-and-white photo—that was the first use in fashion photography of a wide-angle. It was distorting and not what you perceived as a fashion photograph. Diana Vreeland initially rejected it. She thought it was awful.

KANE: She called it anti-fashion. Even though she was the boss of *Vogue*, another editor somehow put it through and it ran. It caused an overnight sensation and within the next month, everyone seemed to be going wide and delivered the '60s to the fashion industry. It's not that he would disrespect authority, he just wouldn't let it him stop from fulfilling his vision. The other thing that was a big innovation was this device he called "the sandwich."

MCDERMOTT: Right, the layering of multiple negatives.

KANE: Yeah. He would take the 35mm transparencies out of the carriers and put them together to create this multiple image effect that helped him tell his stories and deliver messages. He also shot specifically for that by doing one environmental shot and another with the subject so there would be no interference from the background of the two. Sometimes he'd layer three or more images together. It helped him with the concept of photography as illustration, not just as a mirror of society, but as a tool for delivering stories and social issues. During the turbulent '60s, when things like civil rights were hard to understand for a lot of America, these photographs helped people understand the depth of the issue with one look.

ANDERSON: His images became like activism.