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An Interview with Larry Fink

Didier Aubert

1. Do you happen to remember the first time you actually made money with a picture you took?

You have to go back to 1961. Before that I was trying to pick up work here and there as an assistant but I couldn't because I was an undisciplined bum, so people would fire me. Then I studied with Lisette Model¹. My parents were very nice to me. They allowed me to float around as an artist. I didn't really have to suffer or suffocate myself by driving a cab or anything like that. So I was very fortunate, plus New York was very cheap then.

Nevertheless, I wanted to have my integrity and some practicality so I did some volunteer work at the Lexington School for the deaf and there I met a priest named Father John. He got me a job with a magazine called *Jubilee*². At that point it was a liberal lay Catholic magazine for, well... intelligent Catholic people. He believed in me, thought I was pretty good. He got me a job to photograph him doing his various daily events, prayers with the good people of this particular area of New Jersey he was from.

I worked for almost a month. I wasn't that good at the time in terms of efficiency, but I managed to get stuff. And it got published—eight or ten pages in *Jubilee*, like they did in those days. Picture stories were really big in magazines. It was well done, beautiful layout. And I got two thousand dollars.

Two thousand dollars was a sum of money in those days, and it was way out of what anybody was paying. *Jubilee*, I found out consequently was only paying two hundred for a story published. So in fact, the Catholic Church—Father John—put in the extra capital to give me a good head start as a young photographer and as his young friend. That was a significant amount of money, and the first money I ever made as a photographer.

2. So Father John was your first patron?

He and the Pope, yes.

3. Do you remember what the circulation of *Jubilee* was at that point?

50 or 100,000 maybe. This led me into an agency called the Three Lions agency. They were three Jewish brothers who [had] escaped the Holocaust. The Lowenherz brothers. They did commercial work as well as magazine work for Catholic magazines. So for two

or three years I photographed exclusively for the Lowenherz brothers but *only* subject matters that dealt with Catholicism.

I was not a Lord-fearing guy, I was a left-wing guy, but I learned. Not about business so much because it was cut-and-dry, they were taking care of me and paying me what they did—they took forty percent of the money of my fee from the magazines. The magazines weren't as good as *Jubilee* but they were OK. *The Sign Magazine* for example... I would go around and photograph choir boys, various lay activities, communions and so on.

4. That was your main source of revenue then?

It was my bread. It would pay my rent and then I would go out and hit the streets and make photographs as a young artist-revolutionary, documenting what I could document, happening in front of me.

5. What turned things around for you? Was it *Social Graces* (1984) that put you on the map? That's a long time further. What put me on the map was 1978 when I had a show of the stuff at the Museum of Modern Art³. I was on the map already except that it was not a national map. It was a local map. I had won grants⁴.

But let go back a little. After Three Lions I started to work as a teacher, first time, in Harlem for Johnson's Great Society program called HARYOU-Act⁵. I taught there for about a year and half. And then I taught visual arts in different programs. Teaching became a serious thing in my life.

But all the while I was still photographing, trying to free-lance as a photographer, working for magazines such as *Pageant* magazine, some of the old Catholic magazines. I tried to get into *Life*, they wouldn't have me. Look, I had a friend who was an editor there, I wrote letters telling them about stories I would like to do—but ultimately the stories were progressive stories, and ahead of their time.

6. In their themes?

Yes. Themes such as women in the military, that we deal with today as common property. For me they were interesting because they signified social change. Magazines, basically, have to apply themselves to what's present, otherwise they don't sell. They're not educating tools, they're communicating tools. I had an idea about magazines that they should be educative, exploratory, but I was—I wouldn't say disillusioned, but certainly *illuminated*.

All the while I was still taking my pictures and I went along and I would submit them to the New York State Council on the Arts and I won grants. And then finally I won a Guggenheim. And *that* put me on the map. That started to put me in a place where I was nationally known as one of the "talented guys" of my generation. That led to the realization of freedom, a new sense of verve and as I started to move further and further into "documentary" if you will, I started to use the flashlight in a way that never was used before, very dramatically. And it was that *formal* issue, plus the fact that my pictures were substantial, that gave my pictures their stylistic clout. You must actually add to the medium; rather than the message, it's the way you are able to illuminate the message, so that the *medium* is enhanced.

7. So do you think it's the recognition of style by the artistic world that gave more legitimacy to the rest of your work?

The thing is, had I been more of a career kind of photographer with bourgeois aims to make money I more than likely wouldn't have developed the same kind of substantial aesthetic or moral or documentary style. I would have been more compliant. In fact, earlier, I had been more compliant because I wanted to make a living. Nevertheless, I kept moving on.

I always tell kids, when I'm teaching, "Please, DON'T - GO - TOO - QUICKLY..." and try to make a living this way and that way. Do your own work as much as you can for as long as you can, drive a cab, wash elephants, I don't care. Do your own work in a way that allows you to see something which is different within yourself. *Then* get yourself a gallery show, then another, then a book. *Then* when you hit the commercial market a little bit later on, say, ten years, *then* you have status. And people *want* to work with you. You don't have to worm your way up. You're already an elite product. You can become a legend way before your time. They say, "Look, he doesn't need us." That's when they really want you. That's what makes all the commercial guys come blobbering.

8. Traditionally, a number of photographers and artists—one thinks of Weston, for example—have made it clear that their professional work is different in nature from what they consider "personal" work. Does this distinction make any sense to you?

Advertising is a different kind of photography. You don't stray too far from these previsualized images the job is sold on. But it's not undignified. You're called on to solve a technical problem in a competent way to please a client. There's no free flying there.

In photojournalism I don't see any difference between "personal" [*and assigned*] work. Except that I wouldn't shoot so much film on my personal work. But I always shoot in a critical way. That's why I'm sought after, and it gives me a chance to treat subjects that would not be so easily accessible for me. If somebody calls me for a shoot about New Orleans' music scene, that's fabulous. Hockey players in training? Cool, let's do that. Poverty in America⁶, where we met? I'll do that. To make a long story short, I'm interested in everything. When you work for major media, you have access. And to me, everything is fascinating.

It is all about making my work accessible to everyone. You can add tremendous diversity and aesthetic expression. The core is accessibility—to everyone. That, to me, is my responsibility. I know what I have to do for my work to be accessible and then I try to express the sophistication I have acquired.

9. Do you think careers are quicker now because most young photographers go to university, where they are supposed to learn about photography as a career?

There was an article recently in *The New York Times* about this young artist, a young painter who was already famous when he was in high school. He figured he had to go to Yale. He got a couple of fancy shows. He's pretty. He's an art star. And they wrote the article sardonically, saying he was a debutante. And indeed. It's a cosmetic world. A world where we have deeper problems than we ever had before. Art *used* to be a moral cypher—consequent, prophetizing. Now it's right within its time. It's all about being bought and sold.

10. How does it affect your teaching?

I'm an applied man but I feel a little bit dinosaursque. I don't want to get anybody a career plan. But I think you live a more worthy life if you live a life of worth rather than just being only worth shopping by somebody else's quantifiable standards.

11. Was teaching something you stumbled on or something you had always planned to do?

I wanted to do it. You know, I'm a leftist and I believe in trying to help humankind. I try to nurture the lives in front of me. Teaching is, deeply, a way to nurture. Trying to teach the young person to find the courage of their imagination. Put out a product out there which is the figment of their own imagination. In a commercial culture, imagination is the first thing to die.

12. Yet it's supposed to be valuable. People keep looking for "ideas".

Yes, but nobody's looking for Spinozza, Schopenhauer or Camus. People are looking for practical ideas. Everything is commodifiable.

13. Do you consider teaching part of your work as a photographer?

It's as important as the rest of my work. And it feeds me of what my life and my pictures are about—people, what it is to be alive. Teaching kids is just teaching yourself about who the kids are. Teaching adults as well, for that matter. It's one big, protracted research project about what it means to be alive, what it means to be a biological specimen and what it means to be a psychological idiot... What does it mean? What does it mean? Teaching is absolutely native to my whole system of learning.

14. What do you teach at Bard?

I've been there a long time and now I do senior projects and seminars. I only go up there every couple of weeks, I no longer do the kind of classroom teaching I did there for 18 or 19 years. I used to teach practical courses, although it's not a practical school. There are no applied courses but at the end of the senior year everybody has to think about applied things so we talk about careers, and so on. But it's not necessarily part of the program itself which is rather about fine art, fine photography. Nevertheless I still enjoy teaching flash technique, how it relates to expressive interpretation...

15. I'd like to talk about the business of art which you mentioned to me once. I read that you were reluctant, originally, to enter the world of art galleries and museums. Did you feel you didn't belong there?

I think it was more like a leftist's snobbery. Thinking that they were the establishment, the imperialists, the institutions. I wanted to work outside of that. And then when I had my show at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1981⁷, I found out that it was the *only place to work* in many ways. Whether or not it was run by rich people or elitists or what not was not important when it came down to the walls. The walls were open for the public. I would hang around the galleries when the show was up and hear all these wonderful commentaries. And the guard—the guards would come in and it was a forum. So regardless of how the institutions are formed, the people are in the institutions and are illuminated by what the institution has to offer. So my leftist snob counter-elitism was cracked right there in half. Not that I became a Republican just because I had success of course...

16. Does the selling of fine prints represent a major source of income for you?

It depends on what year you're talking about. Last year, in terms of fine art prints we made a bunch of portfolios for collectors up in Canada and in London. I made \$275,000 on that stuff. That's a lot of money.

The thing is that now, in the world of advertising and magazines, work is going down. So I'm revamping myself. As a business person and as an artist I'm moving more toward the museum community. I'll be 66 in March, now is time for me to go into the art world, get those prints of mine to be really valuable. Now is my time to get out there and boogie! And also I can see that commercial work is not as fulfilling spiritually, although I try to put my best into it. I'd rather make a living, completely, on selling my prints, doing portfolios, doing projects... I'm moving very strongly into those venues—and having a good time doing it. Also wanting to be a curator. I'm curating a show with *Aperture's* Director of Exhibitions Diana Edkins, focusing on Lisette Model's teaching. I was there yesterday. I'm also looking to help out curating a show at the Whitney on "improvisation."

17. In photography?

No. Inter-cultural improvisation. Between music, photography, painting, dance, everything.

18. Is this what you call reinventing yourself as an artist?

Absolutely! Also the guy who's published my new book (*Somewhere There's Music*, 2006), Andrea Damiani, a really good friend... Well, I'm looking to be part of his New York office. To search for new talent, to edit, create a team of four or five people who will do art directing and this and that—within time of course, not right away. All of this, curating, editorial stuff—that's all about education. There are two major parts in my life—one is my work and the other my educational work. I'm hoping to bring this to another level of participation. And then I'll continue my work, portraits and things like that. I'll always go out and do documents, no doubt, but I'm more interested in the interior life of the face.

19. Does it mean that you are less involved with the magazines you were working with?

Last summer I was running around quite a bit with them. You know, it goes through cycles. So I keep in touch with everybody.

20. In practice, what are the conditions when you do an assignment for a magazine? I know you keep the copyrights to all your photographs.

Yes. Always keep the copyrights. Then they have an embargo for about 90 days on your work so you won't be allowed to utilize it for another magazine. That's standard. If they work the stuff and publish it, you shouldn't really be in the business of publishing your pictures in the same form anyway. I don't think anybody would take it, quite frankly, especially in the culture right here. It would be redundant. You could however sell it overseas, and in fact the magazine could sell it overseas with one of their subsidiaries, kicking you in to some percentage of the sale. Then if you extract one picture or another out of the take, and utilize it in a different context, you could probably do it if you ask permission.

21. How do you discuss your rate?

My agent does that for me. The thing about *Vanity Fair* for example is that Condé Nast is a very wealthy institution and they pay a tremendous amount of money. I don't want to

give figures but they pay above and beyond anybody else. They have expense accounts. With me they're always a little surprised. I'm photographing Sonny Rollins next Tuesday. They have me upstate in his farm and they ask, do I want an assistant, do I want a hotel... No, no. I tell them, "you know I'm the cheapest date out here"⁸.

22. I thought status was a way to make them beg?

I know, but I'm old now, so that's not a problem. I got a reputation. And now with the music book, everybody thinks it's a f... masterpiece.

23. The pictures from the 60's are very moving, there's a physical presence to them...

You know what else happens? When you go off outside of the musicians' lair and you get out on the street, there's these guys on the street—the old guy with the fiddle case looking in the automat and having some lunch. That picture. And some of the drummers. You lope around, meander around inside a life. Lived. And then you back into the studio and see the cats blow. It moves around. Like a movie.

24. There are fewer photographs of the R&B scene, compared to jazz. And they seem to suggest that there's more business and less life there. Is this your impression also?

Different world. I don't have any really close affinity. Those pictures were done on assignment. I met them, hung out with them for a certain amount of time. They weren't really close to my heart. They were close to my skills of observation. The picture with Lil'Kim is funny. She's in the arms of the hotel manager who came upstairs to see what the f... was happening in that fancy suite that we had gotten. Jay-Z, I actually liked him. He was interesting. A very clever lyricist, that's for sure. Not a lot of soul, for me. A lot of anger. And there's also such an unbelievably protracted commercial hype that goes against my grain. And then again I'm on assignment, I'm not there to make nasty pictures of them. And I don't care to do that anyway. I'm ironic, but I'm not cynical. Then again, as soon as you get away from there and back in New Orleans, which is the last part of the book, the f... souls in those pictures! An old city, old cats playing the blues.

25. How easy is it to run the different aspects of your work from Martins Creek?

When I first got here I was not thinking about world-travelling. I was rather thinking about getting high and be with my wife Joanie Snyder⁹. Joanie was making the money then, I was making some grant money. And I didn't think about this as a business venture at all. I thought about it as a farm, a place where I would build my body, I would solve problems, I would chop trees. That kind of experience—getting back to nature, to a certain extent. I was doing all the work around, helping Joan manage her career as much as I could.

And then, when she and I separated in the 1980's, that was the beginning of my business. It was clear I had to get back to work. By that time I had become somebody, I had been shown in museums, I had the *Social Graces* book out and all of a sudden, kids that were coming out of photography schools were calling me up because they were the picture editors and the art directors of various magazines around town. They would come to me deferentially, saying, "Will you work?" Yeah, I'll work!! So lo and behold, here I am running around, helter-skeltering and working quite a bit. Not necessarily by putting a portfolio together but by the process of being a well-known fine art photographer and being admired as such. So it was really a fluke, a good luck fluke.

26. A coincidence?

Yes, a coincidence of contexts. And it became very apparent that I could be way isolated and chop my wood and have a legendary existence of wild man and still go out there and put another suit of clothes on and get to work with those people who ostensibly admired me. Sure, that was cool...

27. Did you start right away to have your assistants there?

No. A little while later a certain number of fine art portfolio deals where I couldn't do it myself, so I had to have assistants. And then I was doing more and more production. And I'm no fool. I do what's in front of me and what seems to be happening and I want to make money and take care of myself and be generous to others. So I kindled up the fire that was apparently given to me and I managed to make it work well.

28. You now have three assistants in Martins Creek?

Yes, two full-time and one half-time. They're sub-contractors, they work free-lance. Incorporation is a pain, taking out taxes... We don't do that. They have to take care of their own taxes. I pay half of their medical insurance.

29. Did you ever feel that the remoteness of Martins Creek could be detrimental to your career?

Yes and no. I have some sort of a legend now. Pretty romantic. People come out here to see me on the farm. It's a kind of magnet. And we have parties here from time to time. But then again I'm not on the avenue in New York, I don't see as many people, maybe I'm left behind because I don't go to any parties. There are some pros and cons, but obviously it hasn't been devastating.

30. Nowadays, how do you feel about your position as a leftist photographer working for such mainstream publications as *Vanity Fair*?

If people hire me to do a certain work, I'll do it. I'll do it with joy.

31. Because the curiosity is still here?

Absolutely. If people want me to go out and photograph who knows what... I live in the moment, although I have a lot of references because I remember everything. Still, point me at something and I'm gonna be sniffing it. I like the sniffing so if people send me here and there I'm gonna do it because I love it. On the other hand, it's not something that I would necessarily do myself. Actually, I just called a guy down in Kentucky, a guy I bumped into last year. He said he would get me into Derby Row, which is where all the horse owners hang out at the Kentucky Derby. So I'm still out there looking for that, regardless of what I say about doing portraits, the "internal landscape" and blah, blah, blah... I'm gonna do that *also*, but not to the exclusion of everything else. I'm interested in being aligned and realigned with the parts that make up a life.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON THE WEB

art2art offers travelling exhibitions, including a Larry Fink retrospective.

Lehigh University, in Bethlehem, PA, was the first venue to show Fink's "Forbidden Pictures".
<http://www.luag.org/pages/viewfull.cfm?ElementID=10>

www.billcharles.com is the website of Larry Fink's agent. An extensive and diverse selection of his work can be found there.

The Cleveland Museum of Art offers a large selection from *Boxing* as well as a short biographical sketch.

The George Gund Foundation's 1998 report on the Cleveland School of the Arts included a photo essay by Larry Fink. Some of the pictures can now be seen in *Somewhere There's Music* (2006).