

2016 Contest Photos: Pinhole/Plastic Camera

FOR COLLECTORS OF FINE PHOTOGRAPHY

Black & White

**Miron Zownir:
Odyssey in Otherness**

**Bryan David Griffith:
Searching Within**

**Santi Visalli:
Making of an Archive**



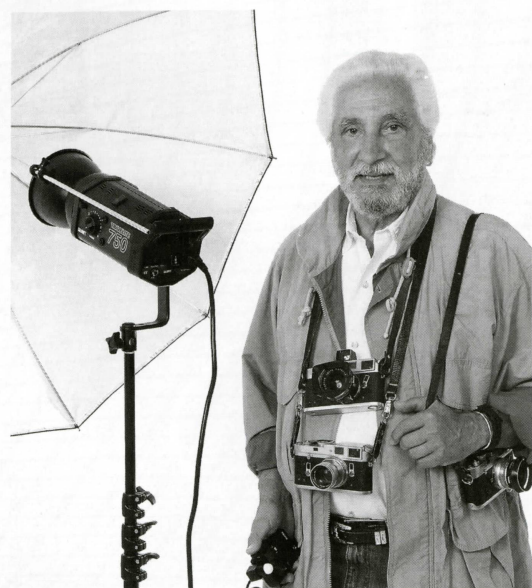
Issue 118 December 2016
US \$7.95 Can \$9.95

Santi Visalli and the Making of an Archive

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In 2014, Facebook estimated that 200,000 photographs were uploaded to its servers *every minute*, making it and sites like Instagram and Tumblr our individual and communal archive. As well as storing and sharing our images with friends through social media, we also save them to the “cloud,” and house them in our smartphones, which have become our de facto cameras. The family storehouse of past and present photographs, safely residing in a shoebox upon a closet shelf, has become a quaint memory.

Even so, we still depend on museum, library and university archives to warehouse and protect our most important visual documents—the negatives, photographic prints and associated ephemera that have shaped our culture. In fact, we need these gatekeepers to help us make sense of the abundant and steady flow of imagery we consider crucial. Beyond mere storage, we also rely on their ability to systematize their holdings, and create avenues for public access.



Santi Visalli (photo by Newell Clark)

Two types of archives exist: informal ones, created to serve our personal needs, that are in a digital state of being, and which may be important only to our family and a few of our friends; and formal ones, staffed by professionals, whose job is cataloguing and caring for objects that warrant the expenditure of time, energy, physical storage space and money on their preservation.

Those in charge of collections for institutional archives must then make decisions as to what they can accept. This can be a difficult process, as the material may not fit within their mission. Some newly formed archives, however, *are* flexible about what they take in. One such is the fledgling library at California State University Channel Islands. (Located in Ventura County in the city of Camarillo, it's among the most recent additions to the California State University system.)

Matt Cook is the head of Unique Collections and Scholarly Communications at the John Spoor Broome Library on campus. Cook is an image librarian who acquires, preserves and shares non-traditional library materials, which is to say photographs and 3D objects.

In 2015 Channel Islands was approached by the well-regarded photojournalist Santi Visalli (more about Visalli further on) to see if the school would be interested in his documentary archive of over 100,000 images rang-



Rose Kennedy in feathered mask at Truman Capote's "Black and White Ball," Plaza Hotel, NYC, 1966.



Blind detective Harry Meyer, National Park, New Jersey, June 11, 1974.

Another incentive for the University's acquisition of Visalli's collection was his generous gift of turning over copyright to his images. At this point Visalli and the University share the copyright; upon his death the University receives full ownership. Typically, archives do not own copyright. They are, as compensation, paid a fee for licensing the imagery on behalf of the owners. Cook relates that although the potential for faculty or student research using the collection may be small, he feels that the broad scope of the photographs will be of interest to independent scholars. The requirements necessary to store Visalli's work will also expand, through the setup of storage infrastructure, the University's ability to take on more photography-based collections.

Although Visalli donated a very organized collection—which he notated, numbered and sleeved—the contents of each folder must be separated to ensure their preservation. The University committed to purchasing cold-storage vaults: color slides will be put in archival sleeves and placed in a cold vault at about 30° F; negatives in a cool vault at about 55° F; proof sheets, tear sheets, letters, newspaper clippings and other documents will be housed in acid-free folders and stored in a secured room outfitted with controlled temperature and humidity. Before the files are broken down, each negative, slide and document will be scanned, allowing researchers to view the imagery and for photo reproductions to be made without having to re-handle the original material, which will be retired to the vaults. Cook admits that this is a large commitment in resources for just one collection.

Using this example as our guide, we can begin to understand what larger institutions face in managing hundreds of photographers' collections. Cook points out that it's exceedingly expensive to maintain an archive or a special collection—the costs fall on the institution that holds the material, as analog materials need to be held in stable environments and digitized to make them available to the public. Including the equipment and personnel to scan Visalli's 100,000 images, the digitization process alone may cost \$250,000. This inherent expenditure of resources poses a challenge to photographers who want their life's work preserved in this manner. What steps can they take to ensure that their work is made available for researchers and scholars? For an idea of how

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ing from the 1960s through the 1980s, along with more recent photographs from his many books portraying American cities.

Although the University's nascent archive is tending towards material—photographs, oral histories and documents—related to Ventura County history, Cook felt that a unique body of photographs, which falls under the category of Special Collections, was a necessary addition. Says Cook, "When you're providing the service of collecting material for the general public, you want to collect materials that have value and should be preserved or need to be preserved. But there's also a component of collecting, that if people aren't using it then it begs the question, why are you collecting it? Oftentimes, when you are collecting you try to get something that, for the lack of a better word, is 'sexy.'"

"The Santi Visalli collection, although not our first, is the sexiest collection we have. It has images of Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald, movie stars like Donald Sutherland and Robert De Niro, images that people want to see. If you can share those through the web, it draws attention to the other collections and someone may wander down that path and engage them as well."



Rally to protest air piracy sponsored by Ad-Hoc Committee Against International Terrorism, NYC, February 26, 1970.



Hardhats demonstrate on Wall St., May 20, 1970.



Liv Ullman, April 10, 1972.

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to achieve that goal, we can turn to Santi Visalli as an excellent case study.

As with many photographers of his generation, Visalli was not formally trained, but came to shoot pictures as the default family documentarian. Born in 1934 in Messina, Sicily, Visalli was a teenager when handed his uncle's camera and told to photograph the family's events. In his mid-20s Visalli and several buddies bought a postwar Jeep and for three years traveled the world documenting everything of interest, ultimately with the intention of ending up in the United States. He arrived in New York City in 1959 and obtained an education visa, eventually got married, and steadily made his transition into professional photography.

Visalli began his career as an Italian photojournalist in America, shooting for the agency Publifoto based in Milan, Italy, which had a bureau in New York. He wasn't an immediate success, however, and during this period worked other jobs to pay the bills. But tenacity, hard work and grit finally led to a turning

point in his career.

In November 1966 Truman Capote held the memorable "Black and White" masked ball at the Plaza Hotel's Grand Ballroom in Manhattan. Attending were 300 of the east coast's most important socialites, celebrities and literati. Visalli crashed the party by paying a security guard, a fellow Italian, \$500 to allow him access by way of the garbage elevator. "I was dressed in a tux and looked like everyone else in the room," Visalli recalls. "I came in through the kitchen and into the ballroom. I kept my equipment in the kitchen. I'd take one of my Leicas and my flash, I'd take a picture and the security people would come and throw me out. I'd get back in the elevator and go up again. *Newsweek* wanted the images and so I asked them to look at my book, and that's how it all began."

It was Visalli's insistence that the editor look at his portfolio, along with the great images of the Capote ball, that brought him more work, not only with *Newsweek*, but *Time*, the *New York Times* and other national and international magazines and newspapers.



Norman Mailer campaigning for mayor of New York at the Village Gate Nightclub, April 1969.



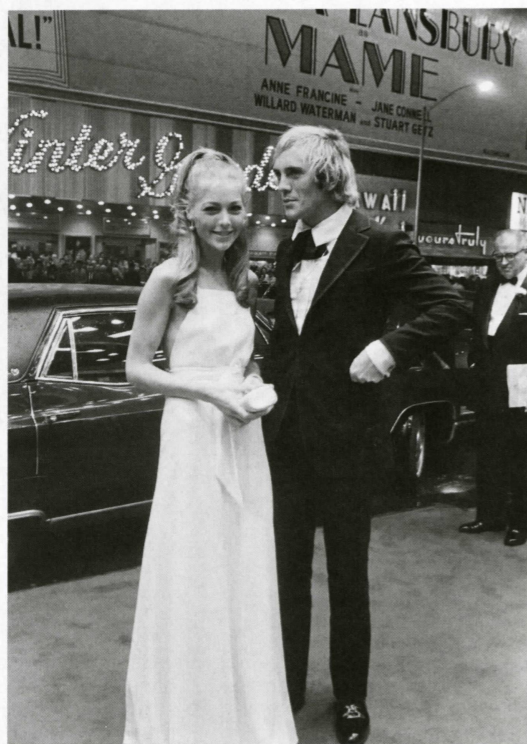
Chet Huntley prior to going on air, March 14, 1970.

Visalli's access to political figures, celebrities and artists of the 1960s and 1970s produced an important body of work, but it's the many images of common people with compelling stories that make it invaluable.

Certainly, Visalli's access to important political figures, celebrities and artists of the 1960s and 1970s produced a significant body of work, but it's the many images of common people with compelling stories that make it invaluable. "I always tried to do a story that had meaning, that had a universal subject," says Visalli, who throughout the 1970s operated a photo agency called Photoreporters. His partner took care of the bookings and paperwork, and Visalli was the sole photographer.

"What I used to do was sit at the agency. My partner would get upset because I wasn't filing pictures! I would read the paper looking for an item, perhaps only three lines, and see one on a woman dogcatcher. A woman dogcatcher is a human-interest story people want to know about that. The blind detective was also one of those stories."

Visalli's subject matter, which is still accessible and universal, is an important element of his archive. Even more crucial was his decision, made at the beginning of his career, to hold onto all of his negatives in order to build what he calls his patrimony. "Everybody who gives you an assignment wants the rights to the pictures. For that they pay you double, so many photographers become fascinated by the amount of money they get right away, and



Joanna Pettet and Terence Stamp at the New York City premiere of "Far From the Madding Crowd," October 18, 1967.

later find themselves old and have nothing in their hands. My wife had a good job with a good salary. I could afford to be freelance, so I decided that I wouldn't give my rights to anybody. I got my daily fee and they paid by the page and I preserved my rights. Since the very beginning, I decided that I didn't want to disintegrate my patrimony. It had to stay together to make an impact, and it did make an impact—106,964 pictures."

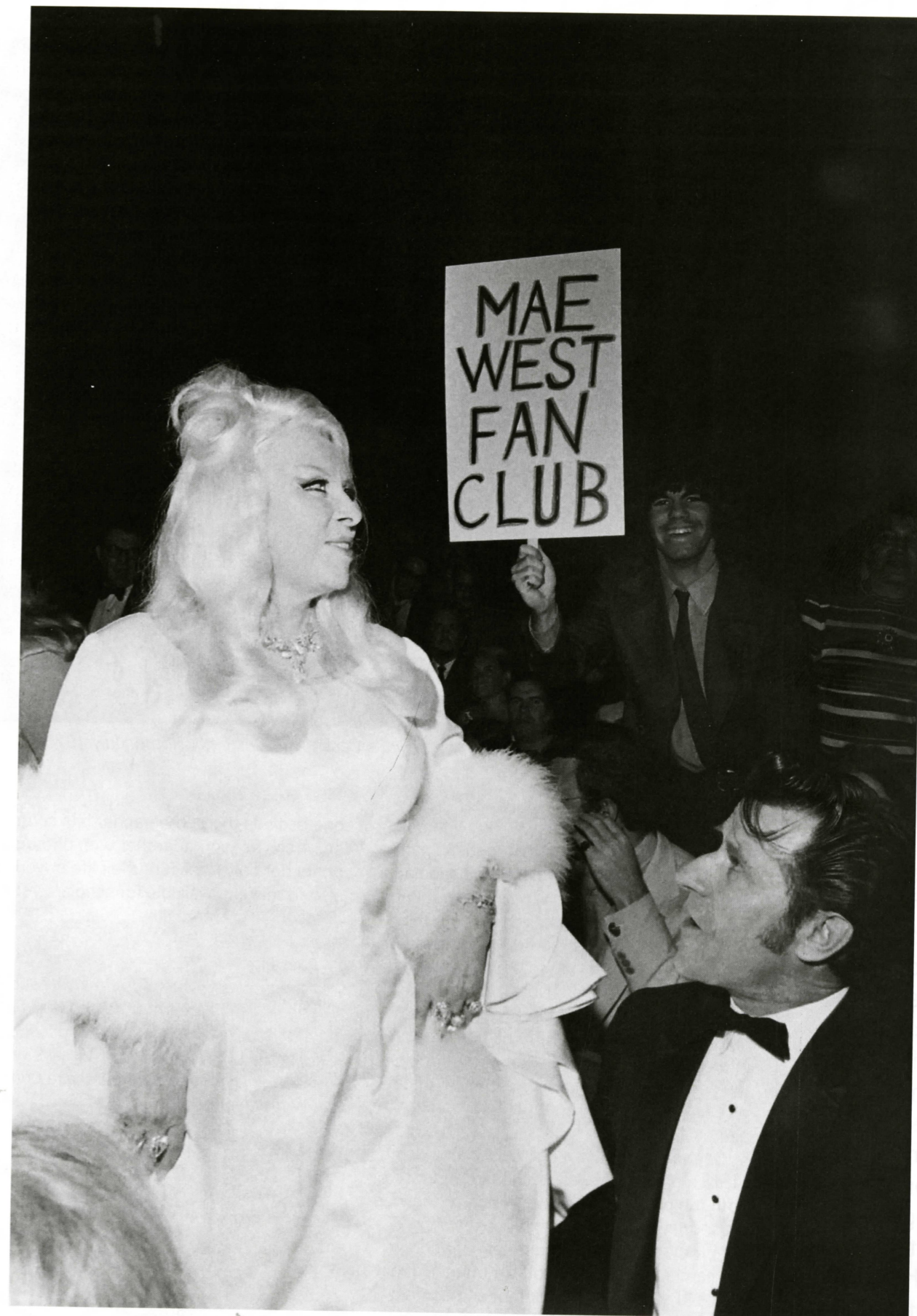
This decision was made with the goal that the bulk of his work would be placed in an archive. When the Photoreporters partnership dissolved in 1979 Visalli began to work with the stock photo agency ImageBank, which was bought by Getty Images and which markets 3,200 of his photographs. In 1998 Visalli retired from shooting for news outlets and began work on a number of books featuring the architecture of various American cities, an activity he still pursues at the age of 84.

Encountering Visalli's archive, one notes not only the variety of imagery, but also the ephemera included in each file. Once again, this was something that he realized would make his body of work important and desirable to an institution. His proof sheets have the requisite circled images with crop marks and cross-outs, but also written on the back of many are interesting notes. There are also tear sheets, magazine covers and articles, illustrated by Visalli's photographs, which help give researchers context and information surrounding the importance of the image.

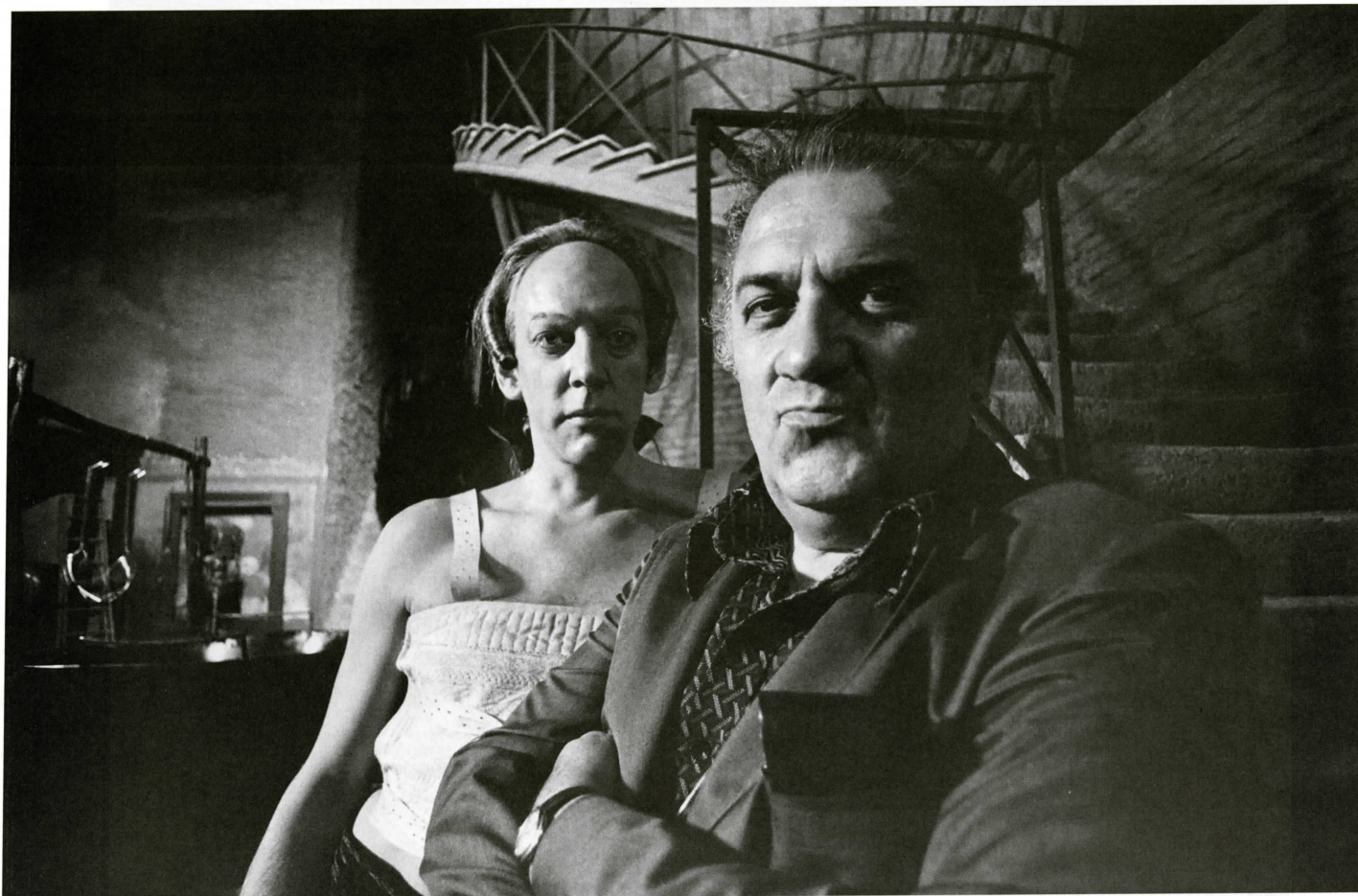
For example, in the file of actress Liv Ullman is a copy letter saying, "Dear Ms. Ullman, I finally found these contact sheets that we discussed more than a year ago, when I ran into you at the showing of *The Last Emperor*. They are photos that I took for the *New York Times* several years ago. If you remember, you had one black eye and I had to do a profile. Please mark any that you like and return them to me. I will have my lab make prints for you. Cordially, Santi Visalli."

Looking at the proof sheets, one is struck by the curious fact that all the images are in profile. Without the inclusion of the letter, a researcher would be perplexed by Visalli's arbitrary choice of photographing her in that manner.

In another folder marked, "Norman Mailer runs for Mayor of New York at the Village Gate nightclub, April 1969," one is struck not only by Visalli's images of Mailer and his running mate Jimmy Breslin, which are terrific shots of the maverick candidates, but also by



Mae West at the opening reception for "Myra Breckenridge," NYC, June 24, 1970.



Donald Sutherland and Federico Fellini on the London tavern set of "Fellini's Casanova," Cinecittà, Rome, July 1975.

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the inclusion of an article, written by famed columnist Sidney E. Zion, that reads in part: "Mr. Mailer, a glass of whiskey in hand and a slight southern accent on the tongue, told the audience that he was not interested in their 'ego trips' and that he did not want their help unless they were willing to do 'the drudge work.' 'We're with you, Norman,' said one man in the front row of the Bleecker Street nightclub. 'If you were with me you wouldn't interrupt me,' Mr. Mailer shot back, beginning the sentence with a familiar expletive that he was to repeat throughout the half-hour address."

Spending time with a collection like Santi Visalli's makes one realize the importance of both the photographer's work and of the institution that makes her or his images and ephemera available. It's through interaction with archives and their notable materials that we have access to the content and context of history. It doesn't take long to be captivated by the images and elements that perhaps no

one besides the photographer has contemplated. Archives work together with photographers not only to secure their life's work, but also to make it available for scholars yet to come.

Fact File

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Reserve Mining Company polluting Lake Superior, Duluth, MN, 1974.



Shanty town image taken for NY Times Magazine story on Communism in Italy, c. 1974.



Coronation of Suzette Somers, Miss Topless America 1968, Crystal Ballroom, NYC, May 16, 1968.



Porn star Harry Reems in front of an adult theater, NYC, June 21, 1976.



East Village Story, June 30, 1969.