



ROBERT FRANK IN CONVERSATION WITH HOWARD NORMAN

BEIRUT

September 30, 2006

Celeste Bartos Forum

New York Public Library

WWW.NYPL.ORG/LIVE

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm Paul Holdengräber and I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, known as LIVE from the New York Public Library and, as all of you know, my motto is simply to make the lions roar. To live for such moments as tonight really gives me a sense of purpose. It tells me why I continue to invite people that will illuminate our lives. Friends of mine have once said—a friend of mine once said to me, “Soon, you will have invited everyone.” Well, this is obviously not true. Tonight we have invited two extraordinary people. I've had such moments in my life as inviting Tim Robbins and Studs Terkel in Los Angeles, or Maira Kalman, who did an opera in our sacrosanct Reading Room. A reading room is usually used for reading and for silence. Well, Maira Kalman did an opera there based on *The Elements of Style*. And much in the spirit of this evening tonight, we had R. Crumb and Robert Hughes here. And tonight, you all know, we have Robert Frank and Howard Norman.

I invite you all to join our e-mail list, so that you may find out about events coming up. Anybody who joins tonight will get two free tickets. We have Bill Moyers next week and Jan Morris coming soon, who I will interview, one of the great travel writers, who's turning eighty. Great travel writer. She also is

known for something else, and Jan Morris on the phone recently said to me, “It will be fine if we have a conversation together, as long as we don’t talk about travel and sex.” **(laughter)** It will be hard to find a subject, **(laughter)** but I hope to be able to in the next two weeks. We will have the Moth here again for the fourth time, with Carl Bernstein that night, David Rockwell, Julie Taymor, Alberto Manguel talking about the library at night—what happens when all of you disappear, strange things happen. We will have the former Director—President, I should say—of the New York Public Library, Vartan Gregorian, here talking about Carnegie, Daniel Mendelsohn talking about the similarity between the fall of the Roman Empire and our present administration. **(laughter)** This is his subject, not mine.

And, tonight, Howard Norman and Robert Frank. Recently I joined a board, the board of the Sun Valley Conference, Writers’ Conference, I’m the only board member there with negative capital. But I was there for a few days, and I heard Howard Norman give a talk, an impassioned talk about his forthcoming book called *Devotion*, a story of unrequit—unrequited, I was told to say—unrequited love. And he mentioned, really en passant that the most important influence in his life had been the work of Robert Frank. That he had, by his table, a few photographs of Robert Frank and this inspired him. And he said this very quickly and I went up to him afterwards and said, “I want you to interview Robert Frank,” and he said, “This can’t be true.” Well, sometimes these dreams do become realities, and it’s wonderful to have Howard Frank here—Howard Norman here, excuse me. Howard Frank, Howard Norman, excuse me.

Robert Frank has said something that I find most amazing. In his desire to be renewed for a Guggenheim, he wrote this statement to the Guggenheim Foundation, where he literally talks to them and asks them to renew this Guggenheim, and this is what he says in 1958: “I am grateful to the Guggenheim Foundation for their confidence and the provisions they made for me to work freely in my medium over a protracted period. When I applied for the Guggenheim Fellowship, I wrote, ‘To produce an authentic contemporary document the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation.’ I have been frequently accused,” he continues, “of deliberately twisting subject matter to my point of view. Above all, I know that life, for a photographer, cannot be a matter of indifference. Opinion often consists of a kind of criticism. But criticism can come out of *love*. It is important to see what is invisible to others. Perhaps the look of hope or the look of sadness. Also it is always the instantaneous reaction to oneself that produces a photograph.” And he finishes his statement, “The work of two contemporary

photographers, Bill Brandt, of England, and the American Walker Evans, have influenced me. When I first looked at Walker Evans's photographs, I thought of something Malraux wrote: 'To transform destiny into awareness.' One is embarrassed to want so much for oneself, but how else are you going to justify your failure and your effort?" I find it particularly telling that he doesn't say "success," but "effort."

It is now my pleasure to introduce to you Robert Frank's extraordinary publisher, Gerhard Steidl, who is not only a publisher, but also a printer, one of the last, perhaps the very last printer/publisher, who collaborates with his artists and with the designer and Ute Eskidsen, the editorial advisor of this Robert Frank publication that is now *en cours*. Let them come up to the stage. Thank you very much.

(applause)

GERHARD STEIDL: Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to this event tonight. Thank you for coming. There are two reasons for this evening tonight. The one is to introduce to you the publishing schedule Robert Frank, Ute Eskidsen, and I had developed within the last months and the second is the arrival of Robert's new book *Come Again* in New York and in the bookshops of the United States. We are very proud that first time all of Robert Frank's movies and films will be available on DVD within the next years, together with really new books and very well reprinted books. Ute Eskidsen, Director of the Department of Photography of the Museum Folkwang in Germany, will give to you more details about this publishing adventure.

(applause)

UTE ESKIDSEN: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to be here this evening, and I have to tell you that I was very honored when Gert and Robert asked me to consult this very ambitious publishing project. And I'm happy to do so, because I've worked with both of them for quite a long time and I'm enjoying working with Robert and with Gerhard. I think we know in the field of literature this kind of long-term publishing project, but not in the visual field. I guess it's, or I think it's, really wise of both of them to get into this adventure. It is an adventure because it has to stay—at least it's scheduled for four years. So in 2010, we will have, as Gerhard mentioned before, we will have all Robert Frank's

films in an eight-volume DVD package. This DVD section is quite unusual for a book publisher, but in the case of Robert Frank, I think there's no way to divide this. Robert's work is related to both media, so it's very logical to do not only the books but as well the films.

Regarding the books—and I don't want to go—I think you have on your seat the program. I just wanted to mention that this will be a mixture of reprinting already reprinted books, so we will have some reprints, which Robert's going to revise, to modify. We will have reprints which never got reprinted, like *Zero Mostel Reads a Book*, very nice little book, which very few people know, and we also will have surprises—we will have new books. For example, we will do a book on his early Paris photographs, which, some of them got included in some of his retrospective catalogs, but there hasn't been a book worked out on these very atmospheric images of postwar Paris. We also will do a book, for example, on Peru, on books which exist as an original book, so it's just **(inaudible)** a unique book and we will print this and maybe Robert will do some changes. Altogether, as I said, it's a very ambitious project, I'm looking forward to this cooperation, and I hope we all will enjoy it. Thank you very much.

(applause)

HOWARD NORMAN: Okay. **(applause)**

ROBERT FRANK: This is Howard. **(laughter)** Howard Norman, and I'm very glad he's here to help me, because he's a good helper, and a good writer, and we've become friends, and I'm sorry that the publisher of this book, *Come Again*, no, the person who is responsible for it is a writer from France named Dominique Edde, and she was instrumental in getting me to Beirut and to photograph what is it 1901, or— **(laughter)** well, '91. Okay. And, so, well now we begin to talk.

(laughter)

HOWARD NORMAN: So, we've been talking for a couple straight days, so it's been very wonderful. Robert, before dinner on Thursday, you told me a little about the circumstances of your visit to Beirut, the Lebanese woman, Dominique Edde, whom you became friends with, the book *The Beirut City Centre Project*, which was published in 1992, so I thought before we talk about the actual new book

itself, this beautiful, powerful collection, I think the audience would be very interested in the background to how you got to Beirut to begin with, and where you made the Polaroid photographs that ended up in *Come Again*. So, maybe you would just tell us some of the circumstances about your invitation and this woman in particular, but also some of the anecdotes we talked about earlier—your chauffeur.

ROBERT FRANK: Well, *Come Again* is—we live in Nova Scotia part time and there's a little town called Mulgrave before you get to Cape Breton, so Mulgrave is on the mainland, and I go there sometimes, and they have a sign there and it says "Welcome" and the other side it says "Come again," and that's made the title the book of Beirut, so . . . Well, I like very much the place we have in Nova Scotia, because it gives me peace, instead of the life in New York, which is interesting, but too stressful and not too good for older people, but—so the woman from France called me. She didn't know me, and she said, "I would like you to come to Beirut and photograph there for three or five days. I've asked other photographers." There was Koudelka, and an Italian photographer, and Burri, a Swiss photographer, I think five—and one Lebanese photographer, Fouad—so I said, "Fine." She arranged everything and I remember getting there on the plane, and as soon as I stepped off the plane, I heard that voice, "Robert! Robert!" and she came running out on the ground and she got me through without customs, so it was an interesting experience. And she got me a—I think he was a chauffeur of the president, or one of the chauffeurs, who drove a big limousine, and I sat next to him. It was a Lincoln, a big American car, and on the side he had a big gun, a big revolver. And he was a wonderful driver, and so we drove through the streets, and I said, "Stop here," and sometimes she came with us, the editor, and she was always afraid there would be a mine somewhere—it was right after the civil war.

But it was a very good experience. I kept water for the Polaroids, to develop the Polaroids, in the back of the trunk, and so that's how I did this and I think as a photographer if you—it was a risk, really, that it would come out with these primitive facilities, really, to get the negatives dried and all that, and so I think it's very important to take risks, especially in, well, if you are an artist, I think it's normal to take risks, for, you can't take risks if you work for the telephone company, but, **(laughter)**, I think. Well, it was important for me, anyhow, to take risks, and this was sort of a risk that it would work out, and I kept a notebook of this pretty much like that and when Gerhard Steidl came to see me, he saw that notebook and he said, "I'll copy it," so this is how the book came about. He copied it very well and he made a

very simple and, I think, wonderful book for me to have it published. And I don't work that much anymore because I have a pension (**laughter**), although I don't work for the telephone company, (**laughter**) but I always like to come to New York, because I like the city very much. I think it would be my favorite city of all the cities I know. Besides, I like America (**inaudible**), and well, so now Howard will help me (**laughter**) make that first step.

HOWARD NORMAN: Robert, you don't really need my help. You mentioned yesterday that they didn't really want you to photograph signs, and they didn't really want you to photograph people, but the third to the last photograph in this book has this man pushing a cart, just like it was almost any day in any day of the year, without these haunting bombed-out buildings behind him. But there he is, you photographed a person, and just like on a normal day, and I wondered if there's—it's a very powerful photograph to me, very powerful, and considering what they wanted and didn't want you to do, it's a real gift that it's in the book at all, I think. Do you remember that particular photograph and what—

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah, I remember it very well. I think it was a guy that was selling ices or something, but—

HOWARD NORMAN: Ice cart? An ice cart?

ROBERT FRANK: What?

HOWARD NORMAN: It was an ice cart? A cart with ice in it?

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah. Well, the political situation there, I think, at that time, was the publisher of the book, or the government, didn't want to see the faces of all the people who worked there, or any faces, because these were people from—Saudis and Syrians—to try to rebuild something and I don't know what the reason was, nor did they want any signs sprayed on the walls, which I couldn't read, but they didn't want these pictures in it, and I think it didn't hurt the book so much. It's somehow—it's—I think it was a good idea to use the Polaroids and put them together so it made more of the destroyed city, of the ruins. So, yeah.

HOWARD NORMAN: It just has the feel of a notebook you carried with you, everyday kind of journal. Some of the photographs are taped in, almost like—it looks like almost bandages taping them down, and very much beautiful. It strikes me as really wonderful the way that, on the one hand, it seems like a notebook, it *was* a notebook, on the other hand, it's such a beautiful aesthetic object, this book, and the location of the photographs on the page. Did you have input into that, was that an ongoing discussion?

ROBERT FRANK: No, the publisher, Gerhard Steidl, just saw the notebook and published it as it was and I think when you use that Polaroid, it's sort of delicate material, you can lose the photographs, you know, and would have to reprint it from the negative, because I use film that produces a negative *and* a print, so I try to always keep the original print. Sometimes that print would get lost and then I had to reprint it and put it later in the notebook. I think it's really—it helps the book to have that original, first, you know, idea of seeing the photograph and printing it. It's vastly different from this digital photography, where the people, you know, go like this, and then turn it around and look at it. I mean, that's—I think something's changed in photography since I did this book, with the arrival of digital photography, which I don't do, because I don't like to—at this state in my life, to try something new. Before, I always liked the new things. I mean, when video came around, I did video, and once I did *The Americans*, which was all 35mm work, then I really stopped 35mm work, more or less, and used Polaroid, that was in 1960, or Polaroid came around maybe in the '70s, and well, that was, you know, I think, photography is very good for the memory. I got tired of so many pictures. It changed a little bit now, I got again more interested in looking at photographs, but I don't get really inspired by photography. But, it might be battle fatigue, something like that.

(laughter)

HOWARD NORMAN: At dinner, I had mentioned that, years ago, I had sold one of my—I had sold a car to be able to purchase one of your photographs and you said, “Well, I hope it wasn't too good of a car.” **(laughter)** And it really was the best car I had **(laughter)**, and what I want to tell you, what we already talked about, Robert, but what I want to tell you again, and June, is that that photograph, amongst others of yours, but that one, that first one, has been on my wall for many years, and our

daughter Emma was raised around that photograph, and now she has reproductions of your work on her walls at college, being a photography student.

You're now—I hope you don't mind me saying—about the age that Edward Steichen was when he dedicated his last show at the Museum of Modern Art to you. You weren't quite thirty, I think, at the time. Perhaps—and I don't know if this is true or not—but perhaps, maybe as time goes on, and you talked about memory, all of that might have a deeper meaning, and I'm thinking here of the influences you have on young photographers, not just young photographers, many photographers, and you yourself probably would never speak of this, but you must know your influences, and that you are a great inspiration, and sitting with you today in the apartment, I was thinking it must do your heart good. And is there gratification for you in this? Not speaking just about my daughter being influenced but—it's a little too obvious—but, you know, is it—it must be gratifying to you on some level, that you know you've had these influences and I guess this is how art continues, through these influences, and I thought maybe you might want to just respond to that, or we can move on.

(laughter)

ROBERT FRANK: Well, I'm happy about that the book *The Americans* made an impression on the photography world and the public after many years—when it first came out, there was no reaction to it at all, or if there was a reaction, there was a very negative reaction, thinking the book is anti-American. It's just a book of eighty photographs that I did traveling on a Guggenheim fellowship through the country, and I simply watched the people, and the people I photographed I felt—with almost all of them, I felt really a sympathy, or I just liked the people. I thought—you know, I—well, I think it would be very hard to photograph people that you don't have feeling for it, or you do it because you have to do a reportage and you have to satisfy an editor. I didn't have to satisfy anybody, and it took me quite a while to get it published in America. It was published first in '59 or '60 in France and only with a weird text at the side of the photographs that was just writings about America by more historical writers. And I then had to fight to get it published just without any comment on the side, and just with a foreword by Kerouac, who then became a friend of mine, I mean, he liked the photographs, so he would write the foreword.

I think, when I came to America in 1947, and then sometimes I went back to Europe for six months, and then I had a family here, but I think the influence, the biggest influence for me being in America, just finding out what a big country it was, and *is*, and how free you were to travel and to do whatever you wanted to do as you could get by on. The biggest influence were really the so-called Beats. I mean, to get to know these people—people like Kerouac or Ginsberg or Huncke. You know, that was a very wonderful period because you—in the '60s you had—you had some hope or dreams what you could do. It was a good period, so that's when I photographed, and these people had a big influence on me. Maybe not so much as a—in photography, but in a lifestyle and be courageous and take risks, yeah, that's what it was. Because I come from a country—I was educated there and I left when I was twenty-two—which, you know, you weren't supposed to take risks, you were just supposed to do what your parents did, and just not rock the boat in any way. The country is Switzerland. So it was good to, you know, become an American. I think when you come to America you just stay here in a way. I mean, at that time. Maybe now, people will go back to wherever they come from before. You automatically become an American.

HOWARD NORMAN: You spend a lot of time in Nova Scotia. One of the things that you've written that moves me so deeply is on your Nova Scotia photograph—Story A and Story B—and on that photograph there's quite a bit of writing but the passages that I keep returning to are—I quote: “The voyage of an old man with important memories, still looking for desire,” and I think about that a lot and leaving home, coming home, I think of your life now, largely between Nova Scotia and New York, and maybe all artists, people in the arts, actors—there's many here tonight—feel to some extent that duality between the past and present, those are emotional places, but I thought maybe you could talk a little bit about a place we both spend a lot of time, your feelings for both places, Nova Scotia, in Mabou, and of course New York and this going back and forth and what that has meant. I feel, amongst other things, I don't have the art criticism, photography criticism, language to describe it, but just personally I really feel that you have invented a kind of elegiac landscape in Nova Scotia, and these photographs are very, very powerful, but I thought maybe we could talk a little bit, or you could talk a little bit, about the going back and forth, and what your life with June in Nova Scotia and New York, those two worlds separately, personally or as a photographer, or both. I guess they're both the same.

ROBERT FRANK: I didn't understand—both the same—what do you mean?

HOWARD NORMAN: Well, I mean, your life and your work together.

ROBERT FRANK: Yea. Well, when we first went to Canada and bought the house there, that was '69, so I was—it was time to slow down, and it was time to, you know, maybe *reflect* a little bit more than to just rush to what's excitement, which that was really the life I had in New York up to, you know, that time, and so it relieved a lot of stress looking at that line of ocean there. We were lucky to find that old house there, just looking out at the Bay of St. Lawrence. Yeah, it contributed to peace and the possibility of getting old with—what do you say, getting old with generosity or, well, yeah. Yeah, it's wonderful to live there, because it's—there's a lot of room. People are, you know, they don't ask you much. You just live in peace there and you can think, and you can look out at the ocean, you can watch the trees grow. I've planted trees there. It's just very simple. A simple life. And it's very fortunate to have that. And it helps you survive the hardships of life, or the sadness of what life can bring you, so it creates a balance where you survive, you don't go crazy, which I would have probably gone in New York, it's just too much, too much stress on you, and so—

HOWARD NORMAN: Just this week there was a lot of people here to see you—Japanese came in, and many people find you here.

ROBERT FRANK: Well, photography is magnetic for many people. I mean, it brings them to you maybe more—well, not more than writing, because you must get a lot of letters, and all that, **(laughter)** but with photography, people just show up at the house, knock on the door. On the one hand, that's very nice, because I do like people, but sometimes it gets too much. **(laughter)** But I did publish once a book where I said “thank you.”

HOWARD NORMAN: Yeah, *Postcards*.

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah, and so a lot of people knew my address because I published the postcards. **(laughter)** So I couldn't complain.

HOWARD NORMAN: That's a wonderful collection, if you don't know it, of postcards that people had sent to Robert from all over. I noticed one thing about that book, a collection of postcards, is that

there were—and maybe it was unconscious in people’s minds, but a good deal of those postcards have a certain amazing resemblance to some of your own work, some of the collages, and it’s quite a collection, and I imagine you had to edit down from several thousand.

ROBERT FRANK: No, there were not *that* many. **(laughter)** But I was amazed that we got postcards that said, “To Robert. Mabou,” and that’s all it said and they got to me.

HOWARD NORMAN: And Nova Scotia. You just sometimes had to say the name and Nova Scotia and they’ll find you. **(laughter)** That photograph I mentioned is the Old Snapper one, with that writing on it.

ROBERT FRANK: The Old Snapper, yeah. Well, what can we talk about?

HOWARD NORMAN: There’s many things. We can keep talking about any of the photographs, we can go back to Beirut, we—all the things we talked about the last couple days. I think people would just like to hear, really, anything. We talked about Allen Ginsberg a lot at dinner. That was really lovely and really wonderful, at least for me to hear. And you mentioned him just now, his generosity and his influence, but, as I mentioned, at the Stanford University Archive, that all of Ginsberg’s work is—I mean, boxes and boxes and boxes, thousands of boxes really—of his work is all at Stanford and I went out there and I was looking at first at the correspondence he’d had with Bob Dylan, as we’d talked about at dinner, which was just really remarkable, where Ginsberg was in a sense teaching Dylan how to read Joseph Conrad, and that was just really a wonderful thing to see. But then I noticed that a lot of Ginsberg’s letters refer to you, and talked about that period in which he was—as he said, you saved his life at a period of time—giving him some work. I think it was the writing of that—was it *Kaddish*, the film script he was writing at one point?

ROBERT FRANK: He tried to make a film script.

HOWARD NORMAN: And that—I don’t know if you gave him photography lessons or not, but he sort of spoke of you that way, as a teacher of photography, and I think he published a book, if I remember right, of some of his photographs—

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah, he wrote about it. But all I told him is it's nice to keep the hands in the frame when you photograph somebody. **(laughter)** So he was very serious about that. He thought that that was absolutely wonderful advice. Well, he was an absolutely wonderful teacher, Ginsberg. He was wonderful. He could explain it. He would—I think he explained a poem to somebody and he would just go and describe the flowers and then the pot of water and the glass and the envelope and the paper and another paper, and the way he explained it to this young poet, it was wonderful, because he just made a poem out of it. He was—I like to think about him. He became a pretty good friend, and I'm still friends with Peter Orlovsky. I haven't seen him for a while. I don't know if the public here knows about Peter Orlovsky, he was his companion until the end of his life. And he was a very free guy. I mean he was far out, **(laughter)** you know, the way, his language and everything, and Allen learned a lot from that. So—but I do, I never, I met him once or twice. Dylan, I like a lot. I think he's an absolutely astonishing artist in everything he does and I think that I admire Dylan more than, you know, any American artist and I think he's very important, what he's done, and what he—yeah, what he has done, so.

HOWARD NORMAN: Did you see him here in New York?

ROBERT FRANK: I never see him. I don't know. He lives in New York? I don't know.

HOWARD NORMAN: No, I think California, now.

ROBERT FRANK: So I have great admiration for him. I used to be influenced by the people living around Ninth Street and Third Avenue at that time. The painters—Resnick and de Kooning—that was a very, as I said before, wonderful atmosphere then. You know, I mean, living in America made me what I am, because I often think what would have happened to me living in Switzerland. I wouldn't be the man I am now if it wouldn't have happened, so I have reason to be thankful to this country, and, you know, I married June, who is certainly a plus **(laughter)**, because she is an American and I learned a lot from her. It's a very big difference not to have been born here. To come as an immigrant, it's made a big difference. I can't really explain it. But I've found out by living with June, I've found out about that, and it's absolutely positive. This is a big place. Many people.

(laughter)

HOWARD NORMAN: I have to say that over the last couple days, we have really talked about very, very many things and going back to *The Americans*, but back earlier than that, and we talked about—with June about some of the people that were here, and some of the painters, and some of the writers, and now, the life you have now and still down on Bleecker, and all that kind of thing and going on to that French restaurant the other night, and wandering around. And with all that life around, I just realized that I was starting—yet again as I often do see the world, if you will, through your eyes, and the way that only really truly great artists change peoples' perspectives and reshape how you think and even the quality of one's thinking, and it's really just been a great pleasure to talk to you about many, many subjects, perhaps especially this very powerful new Beirut book. It's just been great. And I was thinking of—the other day, reading a quote of Virginia Woolf's in which she says—if I can remember it—"a masterpiece is not the result of sudden inspiration but the product of a lifetime of thought." And I just feel like I'll be opportunistic and take the opportunity to thank you, and I think for many people here, for so much thought and so many masterpieces, and thanks for spending the time this evening talking with me.

ROBERT FRANK: Well, it's nice to have you here, I mean to—I reading the other day, it was lying around, the book, this Fitzgerald book, *The Last Tycoon*, and I was really moved by the writing of the man, the sensitivity, and I don't know. I don't read that much anymore. I used to read a lot. But just seeing that book. I was really moved by that.

HOWARD NORMAN: And we talked about Thomas Bernhard quite a bit the other night.

ROBERT FRANK: Well, he's not an American.

HOWARD NORMAN: No, no. Certainly. *The Loser* book about Glenn Gould and all that.

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah, reading is wonderful, reading good books. I think there is a—when you come from Europe, there's a—more tradition to accept literature that is very hard here for the public to

accept. So I was lucky that way that I was really—it was available in Europe. Well, it's available if you look for it, anyhow. Bernhard. Yeah, I like it. It inspires me, but so does, you know . . .

Well, usually I say, "Are there any questions?" But Howard, I don't think he—

HOWARD NORMAN: I'll step off. I think there probably are many questions that people have.

ROBERT FRANK: Well, they can ask *you*!

(laughter)

HOWARD NORMAN: Oh, no, no, I'm going to step out.

ROBERT FRANK: No, you help me!

HOWARD NORMAN: I can't see, but maybe—

Q: Thank you very much. I'm over on your—over here. It's really an honor for us to have an opportunity to listen to you speak, and I wondered, as you have the floor, so to speak, is there—what would you like us to know? (laughter) You have all of our ears, what would you like us to know before you go back where your next journey takes you?

(laughter)

ROBERT FRANK: That's a very big question. I'd like you to have open eyes, you know. I mean, I think it's very important to look around carefully, and knowing. I got to know by reading and by looking—that's your choice what you—how you find it, you know? I always—when I used to lecture or to go to schools, you know, I said to them, "All you have to do is look at me. Look at this wreck of a man, or look at me as an inspired something." I mean that's how you learn something, from looking at the guy, and, "Boy, it's too hard," that's what you learn from him or from me. And that's wonderful.

You can be in New York and see many different people that to come to present themselves. How do you learn?

HOWARD NORMAN: Same way, Robert. Read, read, read, just sit and stare at people. **(laughter)** Something happens.

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah, I saw that film on Andy Warhol. And it's very good, when he says he just stared at something for a long time and then he really came up with the answer. **(laughter)** Well, there are different ways to find out. For me it was a lot about looking, you know. I mean, it was moving and looking or standing still. I think there was a book of mine, *Hold Still, Keep Moving*, yeah.

(laughter)

HOWARD NORMAN: That was it. "Hold still, keep moving," is very good advice. I think there's a question over here, Robert, somewhere.

Q: My question had a lot to do with that same balance. You said when you were making *The Americans* that you spent a lot of time watching the people, and I was wondering how that balance between contemplation and sort of instantaneous execution has changed throughout your career?

ROBERT FRANK: Translate.

HOWARD NORMAN: You want me to answer that? **(laughter)** Well, not the "decisive moment" stuff.

ROBERT FRANK: What was the question?

HOWARD NORMAN: I think it had to do with contemplating, thinking about something for a long time and suddenly finding yourself in a situation where you see something.

ROBERT FRANK: Oh, that's a good question. **(laughter)**

HOWARD NORMAN: I hope I summarized that—

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah, it's not my style to think too much. **(laughter)** No, it comes—it comes—it's an impulse, and you *seize* that moment, and you act on it. It's not a decisive moment, but it's—it's a—I think when I was younger, you know, it just kept coming, but now it's not that way anymore, and that means it would be good. It should show if you produce work, then that change should show, that, maybe, lack of spontaneity. That it takes longer to develop the picture, and especially now, with the digital photography, it makes me hesitate, I mean it makes me think more before I do something. Lie on the couch a long time, **(laughter)** look at the ceiling, yeah.

HOWARD NORMAN: You have very comfortable cots in your house. I wanted to rest on one of those today, very comfortable.

ROBERT FRANK: Oh yeah?

HOWARD NORMAN: Yeah. **(laughter)**

Q: I just wanted to ask a very specific question about your friend who is Ginsberg's friend, Carl Solomon.

HOWARD NORMAN: Carl Solomon? Did you know Carl?

ROBERT FRANK: Carl Solomon? Was that the tall guy, the tall man?

(laughter)

Q: Yes, the tall man who was the close friend of Allen Ginsberg.

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah. I know a good friend of Ginsberg, and I'm not sure if it was Carl Solomon, he died a few years ago?

Q: Yeah, that's him.

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah.

Q: You said that he wrote beautiful letters.

ROBERT FRANK: He said what?

Q: You said he wrote beautiful letters.

ROBERT FRANK: Right.

Q: And he helped Ginsberg write.

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah, he, I remember, he said in one letter, "la belle monde," did you know him that you ask that question?

Q: Yes. You introduced me to him.

(laughter)

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah.

Q: And then you told me to do something simple and make you happy and I thank you for that words that you gave me. So that's it.

ROBERT FRANK: Thank you.

HOWARD NORMAN: Two more questions I think.

Q: This may be a bit of an unfair to ask someone who has spoken about the ineffable quality of photographs, but I wonder if you could say a few words about what it is you think makes a really great photograph, and whether or not you think those are qualities that might be universal, or whether you think they continually change.

HOWARD NORMAN: Did you hear it, Robert?

ROBERT FRANK: Yeah. Well, I don't really know how to answer that question. I don't think about this question, really. Maybe it takes a while to make something universal, or, I don't know. I don't think about this, I don't know . . .

Q: Yeah, I had a pretty straightforward question. You talked a lot about—or you talked a bit about the influence that the Beats had on you and your work and your lifestyle, particularly Allen and Peter Orlovsky, and I wonder if you could say a little bit about making the film *Pull Your Daisy*, which is obviously a great cult classic, and used many of those people as actors.

ROBERT FRANK: *Pull My Daisy*? Well, I think that the narration that Kerouac did for the film—I think that is absolutely wonderful and he did it very quick. He did it—he looked at fifteen minutes of the film, no, ten minutes of the film, in a studio, and then he made it up, I mean, he listened to some music, some jazz, and then he just talked the narration like this, with the film going on, so this is one thing I like about the film and it was all these people who knew each other and had a good time together and we filmed for about—Alfred Leslie and I—we filmed for about I think three or four days in the studio with a 16mm camera, mostly on a tripod, and then it was a silent black-and-white camera and we edited the film, I think it was a twenty-eight minute film, ten minutes each. And then Kerouac came to the studio. He never was there when we filmed. Which I regret, because it was the fear that I had he would disrupt it with drinking, and so, and I'm sorry about that decision—I should have taken that risk, so. And he narrated the thing once. He never repeated it. He made no correction, and I think that's what I like about the film.

Q: Just a tiny little thing about the painters that were in it—Orlovsky and Alice Neel, and so on. They weren't actors, can you talk a little bit about just having them be themselves and act as a family. I mean,

she played his father, and it was—they were visiting a wife and her children. These people weren't actors. Larry Rivers wasn't really an actor. Can you talk about directing nonactors in this work?

ROBERT FRANK: Well, it was based on one page that Allen Ginsberg wrote of that evening when the preacher came to visit these beatniks, so it was not a detailed script, and it was just explained to them, you know, the poet comes in and says hello, I mean, it was a very—some was very spontaneous that the camera caught how they watched each other or waited around and some was by the direction given to them according to what the situation was, when Larry Rivers, who played the brakeman from the railroad, related that story of the dusty old road or something like that. It was a mixture of Ginsberg and Kerouac's words, sort of.

Q: For many years I wanted to ask you about this rumor that you had come to India in the '60s and made a film. And I always wondered if that were true, would we ever see the material? And what your impressions might have been, if that were true?

ROBERT FRANK: I couldn't hear it all.

HOWARD NORMAN: She asked if—she'd heard a rumor that you had come to India in the 1960s and made a film, in India.

ROBERT FRANK: In the '60s a man named Conrad Rooks asked me to be a cameraman because he was making a film in India. Actually he hired a big French cameraman with a big crew, but he couldn't function with a big crew, and then I took over, just with a 16mm Aeroflex and made a film. Was that that question?

Q: I wondered about your impressions and if you'd made photographs at that time as well?

ROBERT FRANK: I didn't do any photographs at that time. No, when you make a film, you can't do photographs, it's—no.

Q: Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I would like to, first of all, thank Gerhard Steidl so very much for bringing us Robert Frank. **(applause)** And then I would like to thank Howard Norman for having done such a wonderful job. **(applause)** And then Robert Frank will be signing a few books—only the book *Beirut*, please—and I would like to thank Robert Frank so very much.

(applause)