

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Annie Leibovitz and Me

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, February 20th, 2019

In the mid 1970s, when I started my career as a photo-journalist, I was inspired by [Annie Leibovitz](#) because she was a young woman my age photographing for *Rolling Stone* magazine, which was cool.

I continued to follow her work through the years, I bought her 1983 book, with Meryl Streep on the cover and an introduction by Tom Wolfe, in 2004 I was saddened by the death of her romantic companion since 1989, writer [Susan Sontag](#). I still have Sontag's 1977 book *On Photography* on my shelf, and watched the documentary her son made about her life, *Regarding Susan Sontag*.



Annie Leibovitz (c) 1983

I first met Annie in person in 1994, when she lead us on a tour of her photo exhibit at LACMA, and I wrote [an article for VENICE](#), the Los Angeles arts and entertainment magazine.

So I was excited by the invitation to a press preview at [Hauser & Wirth](#) gallery in DTLA, where Annie Leibovitz would speak about an exhibit of photographs from her early years, 1970-1983.

I found her as passionate as she was 25 years ago. She lead us through the large exhibit of B&W work prints, organized in chronological order, and told us about her youth, when she was studying painting at San Francisco's Arts Institute, but then chose photography, which she found a more immediate art form. "I was looking for something to grab onto that was more realistic," she said. Robert Frank was her hero.

In 1975, Mick Jagger asked her to go on tour with the Rolling Stones, and she agreed, thinking that "if you were like a chameleon and became part of a scene, you could take good pictures." She also participated in the drug-taking and came out damaged by the experience. "It took me a while to get off the tour."

She admired comedians like Richard Pryor and Lily Tomlin. In 1974, she photographed Lily with an arm lifted to show a hairy armpit. In 1977, I took the self-portrait below. It was a feminist statement, like not wearing a bra. We never did burn our bras.



Annie photographed Arnold Schwarzenegger early on, at the [Elisa Leonelli \(c\) 1977](#) time of the documentary *Pumping Iron*. I photographed him for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1979.

In 1976, *Rolling Stone*'s editor Jann Wenner asked Annie to photograph her favorite photographers, such as Ansel Adams, Helmut Newton, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Andy Warhol. When she arrived in Paris to meet her idol, Henry Cartier-Bresson, he invited her to his home to have lunch with his wife, but refused to be photographed. So the following day Annie positioned herself where he was going to walk by. When he saw her, he was furious, but eventually said, "If you are going to take my picture, take a good one."

Cartier-Bresson was an inspiration for my own 1970s street photography. You may [read my talk at LA Central Library](#).

When *Rolling Stone* moved their offices from San Francisco to New York in 1977, Annie moved too, which was tough, she says, because she was leaving behind her sisters, Laura and Paula. (Younger sister Barbara would make the 2008 documentary *Annie Leibovitz: Life Through a Lens*). There she met Richard Avedon and became influenced by Diane Arbus. "She was photographing people we weren't looking at." I also was inspired by Diane Arbus and recently [wrote about an exhibit of her photographs at MOCA](#).

It was a sad coincidence that Annie photographed John Lennon in his New York apartment on December 8, 1980, a few hours before he was killed by a deranged fan. The photo of his naked body curled up around a fully clothed Yoko Ono made the cover of *Rolling Stone* on January 22, 1981, after Annie insisted that she had promised John that he would be with Yoko. "Yoko was very supportive of me as an artist, because she believes that you take your life and put it in your work. That's life, we live and we die."



Rolling Stone (c) 1981

When I ask Annie if she teaches photography to her teenage daughters, she replies, "I have a 17-year-old (Sarah) and two 14-year-olds (Susan and Samuelle), and they take pictures with their phones, so we don't talk but we send pictures to each other, and they are not interested in being photographed by me."

She claims that being a woman never stood in her way. "I was fortunate to grow up in a family where my mom said we could do everything. And being Jewish we grew up questioning everything, always feeling on the outside. But I liked it, I did not want to be inside. I can stand outside myself, now that I'm older, and see the drive and insanity that I had as a young person. And you come out of it, but I realize how obsessed you have to be to become a good photographer. I lived with my camera, every day was about photography. And I'm still a working photographer today."

If you haven't had the opportunity to meet Annie in person, you may [watch her on video](#) talking about her online class Master Class.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, February 20th, 2019 at 4:37 pm and is filed under [Photography](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.

