

**“WE ARE ALL  
CONTINUALLY  
EXPOSED TO  
THE FLASHBULB  
OF DEATH”**

The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg (1953-1996)

PRESENTATION HOUSE GALLERY

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Wandering Motel Room 9.F. Portland Seattle Poetry Readings,  
 book signings, interviews sometime September 1991 I snapped  
 self-portraits in closet/bath/bathroom mirrors wherever I  
 saw doubled reflections or full length views.  
 Allen Ginsberg

Fig. 1 Allen Ginsberg nude self-portrait, 1991.

# “We are Continually Exposed to the Flashbulb of Death”:

An Introductory Meditation On  
Allen Ginsberg’s Photographic Poetics

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On March 15, 1988, Allen Ginsberg was invited to give a lecture as part of the series “Focus on Photography” at Harvard University. The talk was entitled “Photographic Poetics,” and it brought Ginsberg’s two major artistic passions into dialogue with one another. The lecture also accompanied an exhibition in the print room of the Fogg Art Museum (Cambridge, MA) of Ginsberg’s photographic portraits consisting of numerous “Beat memories” that featured his literary friends and comrades from the 1950s and early-60s. Both the lecture and exhibition marked the trajectory and elevation of this countercultural poet outsider and spiritual seeker into the hallowed halls of the Ivy League institution in the span of thirty some odd years. A man who was often (self) identified

at the margins whether as poet, homosexual, Jew, Buddhist, druggie, or peacenik—and this list of outsider epithets could go on—was now being honoured for his literary and photographic achievements by the academic and artistic establishment. What a long and strange trip it had been for this recently appointed Distinguished Professor of English at Brooklyn College, who was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1926.

Reviewing the only published account of this lecture by an anonymous writer in *The Harvard Crimson* the next day, one is particularly struck by the first citation attributed to the bard with the camera—“we are continually exposed to the flashbulb of death.”<sup>1</sup> In this single lyrical line that reads like an epigram, Ginsberg

proffered a theory of photography and poetry (and their intersection) in a succinct and profound way. The visionary writer saw photography as a ceaseless practice of illumination, but one in which every snap and flash always brought death in its wake. For Ginsberg, photographic exposure poses us in exteriority or in a relationship to the outside. Coincidentally, the French writer Roland Barthes (who was homo-erotically inclined himself) had reached similar conclusions in his last book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980). Barthes talked about the act of posing for a photograph this way: “I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter.”<sup>2</sup> Ginsberg snapped many self-portraits as spectral reflections throughout his life thereby exposing himself “to the flashbulb of death” including this sagging nude from September 1991, while “wandering motel rooms” on a book tour across the American West Coast (Fig. 1). He scribbled below the print offering further context to the making of this self-portrait as a *mise-en-abyme* image: “I snapped self-portraits in clothes closet & bathroom mirrors wherever I saw doubled reflections or full length views.” Ginsberg considered both photography and poetry as poignant practices in that they reminded the viewer of mortality and the transience of our existence. As he wrote elsewhere, “The poignancy of the photograph comes from looking back to a

fleeting moment in a floating world.”<sup>3</sup> For this ever-budding Buddhist, photography thereby exposed the ephemerality of both space and time.

Starting from these transitory and mortal assumptions, it is easy to see why Ginsberg bestowed a sacred or a “sacramental quality” to photography. Taking a photograph of a friend or a lover possessed an air of urgency that affirmed this “one and only occasion” of being-together, thereby recording the fleeting encounter and leaving a photographic trace. Ginsberg elaborated upon this religious point of reference in the epilogue (“A Commentary on Sacramental Companions”) to the first American publication of his photographs in 1990. To Ginsberg’s eclectic way of thinking, British Romantic poetry and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy are at one in illuminating photography as a sacred practice. “The sacramental quality comes from an awareness of the transitory nature of the world, an awareness that it’s a mortal world, where our brief time together is limited and it’s the one and only occasion when we’ll be together. This is what makes it sacred, the awareness of mortality, which comes from a Romantic conception (John Keats’s) as well as a Buddhist understanding (as in the *Shambhala* teachings of Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche).”<sup>4</sup>

In an interview on the subject of visual culture, the intellectual historian Martin Jay remembers



Tokdhan Rinpoche from Eastern Tibet had given oral transmission of whole tantric collection of three lineages "of original Buddhist texts twice or thrice in India." Tokdhan Rinpoche's annual summer retreat he visited to transmit Prajnaparamita Sutra, Chanting short one volume version for several days to a hundred or so of his students; Highest Chanting Wisdom Sutra ("Gata Gate Paragate Parasangate Bodhi In the"). We'd rowed out across nearby lake to bathe, he sat and watched, Yankee Spring State Park, Michigan, August 27, 1993. Allen Ginsberg

Fig. 2 Tokdhan Rinpoche, Yankee Spring Retreat, 1993.

Ginsberg in light of "the gaze of the Buddha." "I remember very well a conversation I had in the mid-nineties in Berlin with the poet Allen Ginsberg about the 'gaze of the Buddha', in which he demonstrated for me the non-dominating, benign way in which looking takes place in that religion."<sup>5</sup> This approach is very different from the Western view of the camera and its gaze as linked to a violent rhetoric of capture and shooting that exemplifies the logic of domination. With the gaze of the benign Buddha hovering over him, Ginsberg sought to bring a number of his sacred teachings to photographic perception (Fig. 2). For instance, he valued the emphasis on "ordinary mind as Buddha mind,"

and the idea of allowing ordinary life to be magical, which runs through Zen and Tibetan Buddhist practices. In touching upon the work of his friend and photographic mentor Robert Frank, and his ability to let chance into his snapshots of everyday life, Ginsberg saw many parallels. "The idea of ordinary chance or ordinary magic is the same as bohemian Beat, Buddhist poetics."<sup>6</sup> But there is another primary photographic source of which he was not aware that echoes this same sentiment. Ginsberg would have been pleased to know that co-inventor William Henry Fox Talbot had this to say about photography at its birth: "It is a little bit of magic, realized: of natural magic."<sup>7</sup>

A few months before the Harvard lecture, Ginsberg had teamed up with Frank to teach a course on "Photographic Poetics, or the Poetics of Photography" at the Camera Obscura School of Art in Tel Aviv, Israel. Frank's photographic vision became a role model for Ginsberg, and he even bought a Leica C3 camera to better copy the fleeting look of Frank's images on the road that constituted the subjective documentary style of his classic book, *The Americans*. When Ginsberg praised Frank's photographs in an interview in 1991, for their close and meticulous attention to the mundane and for their glorification of vernacular culture, he was also talking about his own aesthetic and his overarching goal of heightening consciousness by whatever means necessary (whether photography or poetry, drugs or meditation). "An unnoticed corner of the world suddenly becomes noticed, and when you notice something clearly and see it vividly, it becomes sacred."<sup>8</sup> This act of taking notice via the camera eye was a further explication and application of the Beat mantra that serve as a "Footnote to Howl" (1955), with its exclamatory invocation that "everything is holy"<sup>9</sup> if, and when, it is framed as such through the poet-photographer's awareness and attention so that the visual is converted into the visionary.

But before one gets too ethereal here, it should also be recalled that Ginsberg's camera is also

infused by his homo-erotic desires as he laid down his strong libidinal attachments on photo-paper. This is the lover's longing gaze in the space of sharing, whether snapping his Beat co-conspirators or his life and love partner Peter Orlovsky for the sake of passionate keepsakes. Later, the poet set to work on supplementing these images with the heartfelt captions that serve as descriptive commentaries filling out the space-time of these photographic encounters with their back-stories. There are also the images of the hip and famous that he encountered along his many travels given his own status as a celebrity poet who mingled with others of the same star-studded class. However, Ginsberg's homo-social lens has little in common with the gay dandy and the voyeurism that one finds in the Polaroids of Andy Warhol, and its mechanistic refusal to go beyond the surface. Instead, Ginsberg's depth perceptions are charged by a Buddhist sense of the sacred, an existential expressionism, and a utopian sense of idealism, and these factors cast his queerly inflected Beat photographs in a very different light than Warhol's Pop image duplications.

We should not forget that Ginsberg's Beat memories are Jewish memories as well. While he always maintained some distance from Judaism, what the poet-photographer took from his conflicted relationship to his inherited religion was its injunction

to remember—*Zachor!*—and he transferred it to photography. The importance that Judaism places upon memory and memorialization is staged in its rites of mourning, and specifically in the prayer for the dead recited by children for their deceased parents. In this context, Allen Ginsberg composed his beautiful poem “Kaddish” in the late 1950s, to honour the memory of his mentally ill mother, Naomi Ginsberg, who passed away in 1956. It is possible to see Ginsberg’s photography through the Jewish lens of the *Kaddish* prayer so that his pictures honour in the present, and remember for the future the ones whom he loves, respects, desires.<sup>10</sup> Using the direct address of the second person to his deceased mother and a photographic metaphor in the mind’s eye, the poet glimpses “your memory in my head three years after—And read Adonai’s last triumphant stanzas aloud—wept, realizing how we suffer— And how Death is that remedy all singers dream of, sing, remember, prophesy as in the Hebrew Anthem, or the Buddhist Book of Answers.”<sup>11</sup> To interpret this stanza in a photographic light, the “JuBu” photographer who follows the spiritually syncretistic path of the Hebrew mourner’s prayer and the Buddhist meditation chant becomes the aural singer and visual dreamer who remembers and prophesizes the presence of death in his every snapshot. In this sacramental fashion, *Ginsberg shares the portraits of his friends, and*

*offers his appended commentaries. For even though he wanted nothing to do with the orthodox God of his forefathers, Allen Ginsberg lived by the social injunction of the Jewish shtetl (as well as the hippie commune) that “life is with people.”*

To take a closer look at just one example amid the thousands of social snaps, it is August 1961 in Tangiers, and the already notorious Beat poet has brought along *his trusty Kodak Retina camera that he bought for thirteen dollars in 1953*. The image captures three of his luminous avant-garde literary friends—Gregory Corso, Paul Bowles, and William Burroughs at the Villa Muneria. *Ginsberg would refer later to this series of images as inducing flashes of insight and as a religious high. “The pictures I took in Tangier in ’57 and ’61 still have the character of occasional and intermittent epiphanies for me.”*<sup>12</sup> The high also appears to be drug-induced if one focuses on the bleary-eyed and stoned-faced Burroughs who has returned to the site where he composed *Naked Lunch* a few years earlier. In his caption at the bottom of the image, Ginsberg comments on something peculiar that signals a shift in technological media. “All took cameras out beneath blue sky, bright sunny day.”<sup>13</sup> These four icons of Beat literature turn to their cameras for some sacramental sun prints with no pens or pencils in sight. This action also serves as a premonition of Ginsberg’s later artistic practice

when photography replaced the notebook as his primary means of denotation and reportage. As he wrote in *Snapshot Poetics*, “As a matter of habit I carry a camera where I used to carry a notebook. I’m finding that I write less and less in my notebooks now—I do my sketching and observing with the camera instead. It’s beginning to displace writing a bit—not the poetry, though, but the peripatetic notes I used to take.”<sup>14</sup> Here, Ginsberg remembers the importance of “light writing.” While it would not supplant poetic inscription and its figural connotations, it assumes an important role in its own right—sketching, observing, describing.

We are also told in the *Crimson* review of Ginsberg’s Harvard lecture in 1988 that “cameras flashed away and a roar of laughter rose from the crowd of nearly 200 people” when the poet pronounced his epigram about our ongoing exposure to the flashbulb of death. One assumes that the audience was laughing because of the irony of the situation—as the paparazzi in the crowd forced Ginsberg to respond in this poetic manner to their flashpoints. But there is also the possibility that Ginsberg had struck an even darker chord of humour with his audience who were responding to this exposure of photographic mortality by laughing—whether anxiously or courageously—in the face of death.

#### NOTES

1 This anonymous article dated March 16, 1988, can be found on-line at the *Harvard Crimson* website at: <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1988/3/16/poet-allen-ginsberg-discusses-photography-pas/>

2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 13-14.

3 Allen Ginsberg, “A Commentary on Sacramental Companions,” in *Allen Ginsberg: Photographs* (Pasadena, CA: Twelvetreets Press, 1990).

4 Ibid.

5 See Marquard Smith, *Visual Culture Studies: Conversations with Key Thinkers* (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2008), 184.

6 “Ginsberg on Ginsberg,” interview with Thomas Gladysz (June 1991), reproduced in Sarah Greenough, *Beat Memories: The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2010), 121.

7 William Henry Fox Talbot, “The New Art,” *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Science, and Art* 1150, February 2, 1839, 73.

8 “Ginsberg on Ginsberg,” *Beat Memories*, 116.

9 “Footnote to Howl” was included in the groundbreaking publication, Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956).

10 Ginsberg concludes the Harvard lecture with “Slogans for Focus,” and the dictum: “And remember the future.” Quoted in Sarah Greenough, “Seeing with the Eyes of the Angels: The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg,” *Beat Memories*, 17.

11 This passage is found in Part I. The complete poem can be found on the website of The Poetry Foundation at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179391>.

12 Allen Ginsberg, in ed. Michael Köhler, *Snapshot Poetics: A Photographic Memoir of the Beat Era* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 11.

13 This image is numbered AG-3804 in the University of Toronto Collection.

14 Ginsberg, *Snapshot Poetics*, 11.

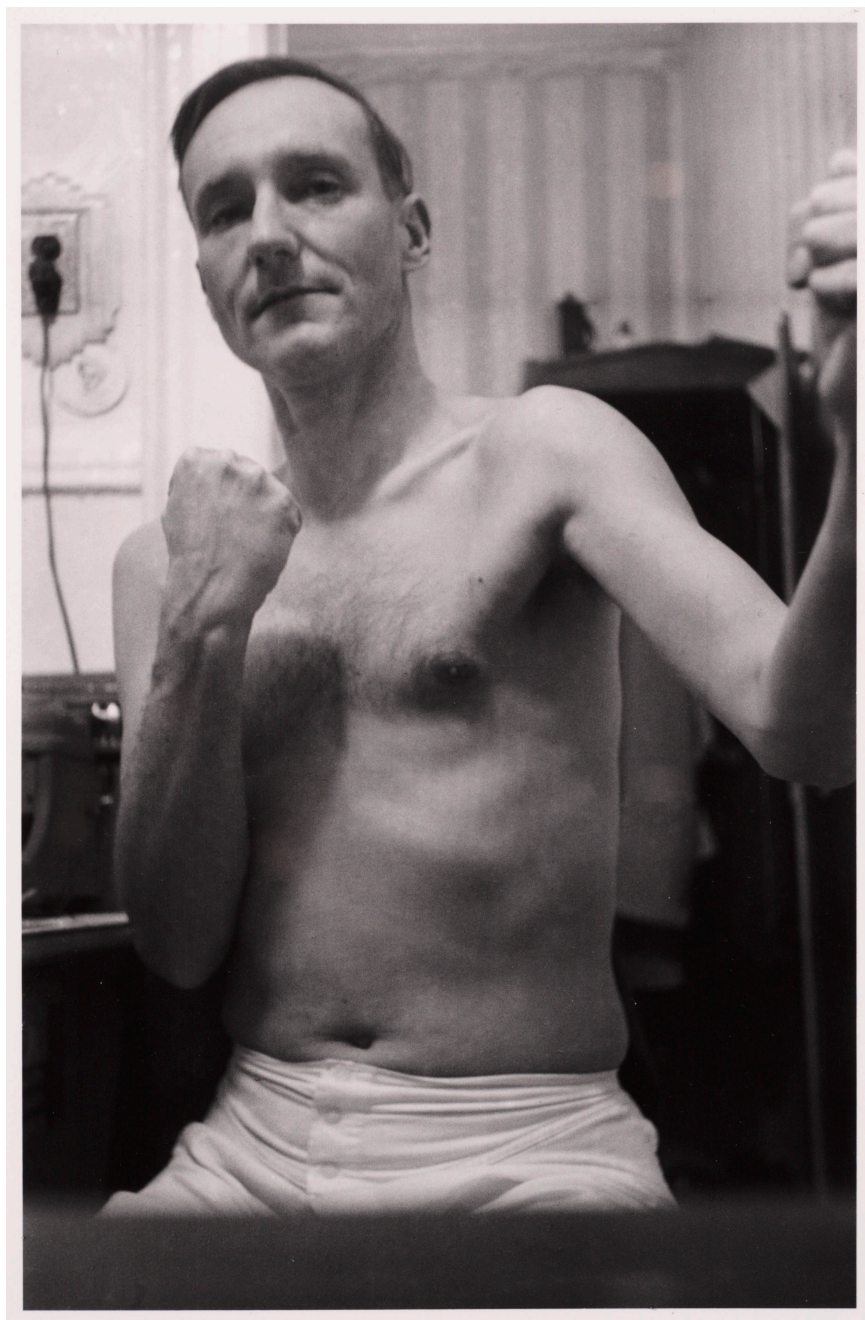


Fig. 3 William S. Burroughs, New York City, 1953.

# Whichever lens one looks through, one can find Allen Ginsberg

JOHN SHOESMITH, THOMAS FISHER RARE BOOK  
LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

To most, Ginsberg is one of the great American poets of the twentieth century, with seminal poetic works, “Howl” and “Kaddish,” helping to define and legitimize the literary movement that came to be popularized as “Beat.” Despite the controversy that swirled around his early work—“Howl” was famously tried, and acquitted, in court under obscenity laws—his writing eventually found public and critical recognition. His book *Fall of America*, published in 1972, won the National Book Award for Poetry, and in 1973 he was elected a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Ginsberg is among the last of the household-name poets in the United States.

Because of the court fight around “Howl,” Ginsberg was also a champion of artistic freedom.

His work pushed boundaries and challenged censors throughout his career. He was a true iconoclast and a lifelong political activist. He is also a hero to the queer community, living an openly gay lifestyle with his partner of over forty years, Peter Olovsky. Ginsberg is one of the original bohemians, in the truest and most positive sense, and the lifestyle espoused by Ginsberg and the Beats helped to usher in the counterculture age. (The word “hipster” even appears early on in “Howl.”) Ginsberg lived a rich and varied life, and we may never see the likes of him again. He was the poet as celebrity, but also the poet as conscience.

Now, of course, we recognize Allen Ginsberg, photographer. Since the 1950s, when Ginsberg was finding his literary voice and befriending many of the writers who helped to lay

the literary foundation of the Beat movement, including Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg's camera was a near-constant presence that helped to capture much of that period and its key individuals. Through his camera, in fact, Ginsberg is not just one of the key figures of the Beat Generation, he is also one of its vital chroniclers. While he abandoned photography for a number of years beginning in the early 1960s, he rediscovered the form by the early 1980s. His photographs are wide ranging in their subjects—and as the years passed, and encouraged through his friendship with noted American photographer Robert Frank, he began to take the art of photography more seriously, resulting in work that displayed a greater artistic confidence.

When examining Ginsberg's photographic oeuvre, however, to help define and better understand it, it is helpful to go back to his poetry, particularly his early Beat work. What characterizes the Beat's literary ethos, at least for this reader, is its feeling of freedom and spontaneity, the idea that anything can, and most likely will, happen. These works resonate with young readers of subsequent generations owing to their romance and glamourization of the possibilities of the open road (literally and metaphorically). They suggest rebellion, they hint at danger. The writing itself is fresh with an

improvisational looseness that feels like the best of jazz. This should not come as a surprise: bebop was in its full flowering in New York City in the early 1950s when Ginsberg and Kerouac were finding their voices. They were all known to haunt the jazz clubs, so they could not help but be influenced by the spirit of the music.

Listening to Ginsberg read from "Howl," especially the poem's beautiful tone-setting first sentence—"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked"—one is seduced by the natural, free flowing cadence and rhythm of Ginsberg's poetics. The philosophy behind Ginsberg's process can be found in a phrase that he used to describe this technique: "First thought, best thought." It is in full flight in "Howl."

These same characteristics that inform his poetry, particularly the sense of intuitive expression, are found in Ginsberg's photographs. Many of the photos snapped by Ginsberg, particularly those that captured the Beat writers such as Kerouac and Burroughs, were wonderfully candid, and captured the general spirit and ethos of the Beats and that period of history. "I'm not a photographer," Ginsberg once said, "but I was aware of the sacredness and the poignance of the pictures. It's kind of a poignance of the moment, like an appreciation of the color in the sky, the blue of the blue and the face of the face

and the Jack Kerouac of the Jack Kerouac.”<sup>1</sup> Particularly affecting are the dozens of images that Ginsberg took of his lifelong friend William S. Burroughs that capture the full breadth of his life: beginning with a young Burroughs from 1953, fit and shirtless with his arms held up defiantly in a boxing stance, to a photo of the writer from 1986, looking frail and leaning on a cane, and up through the early 1990s. Ginsberg was a loyal friend to Burroughs, as these photographs plainly attest.

Along with the spontaneity, there is also a generosity about Ginsberg, which is evoked in his photographs; not just in the “celebrity” photos of Ginsberg’s numerous friends and acquaintances—musicians such as Philip Glass, Bob Dylan, Iggy Pop, and Marianne Faithfull, and writers such as Arthur Miller, Josef Škvorecký, Gary Snyder—but from everyday scenes captured by Ginsberg on the streets of his beloved New York City. His treatment of the male human body—particularly younger men—is startling in its frankness. These are some of Ginsberg’s most beautiful images.

Most startling of all is Ginsberg’s generosity to himself: he is well represented in his collection via the self-portraits, which visually record him through the years, from young poet to aged sage of the Beat generation. (He died in 1997, at the age of 71, of liver cancer.) He was doing “selfies” long before iPhones

made the term ubiquitous (Fig. 3). The many nudes also attest to the openness and freedom he felt about his own body.

Ginsberg’s legacy—as a poet, a social advocate, even as a personality—is secure. Fascination with the Beat Generation continues a full half century after the publication of “Howl,” and Ginsberg’s message of peace and tolerance still resonates. All of Ginsberg’s facets are fully on display in his photographic work. His photos are full of life and vigour, and capture the spirit of the man behind—and sometimes in front of—the camera. It is poetry on silver gelatin.

#### NOTES

1 Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 522.

#### LECTURE

Nude Ghosts, by art historian,  
Jonathan D. Katz  
The exhibition will be introduced  
by co-curator Barbara Fischer.  
Monday, March 16, 7:30 pm  
at Presentation House Gallery

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