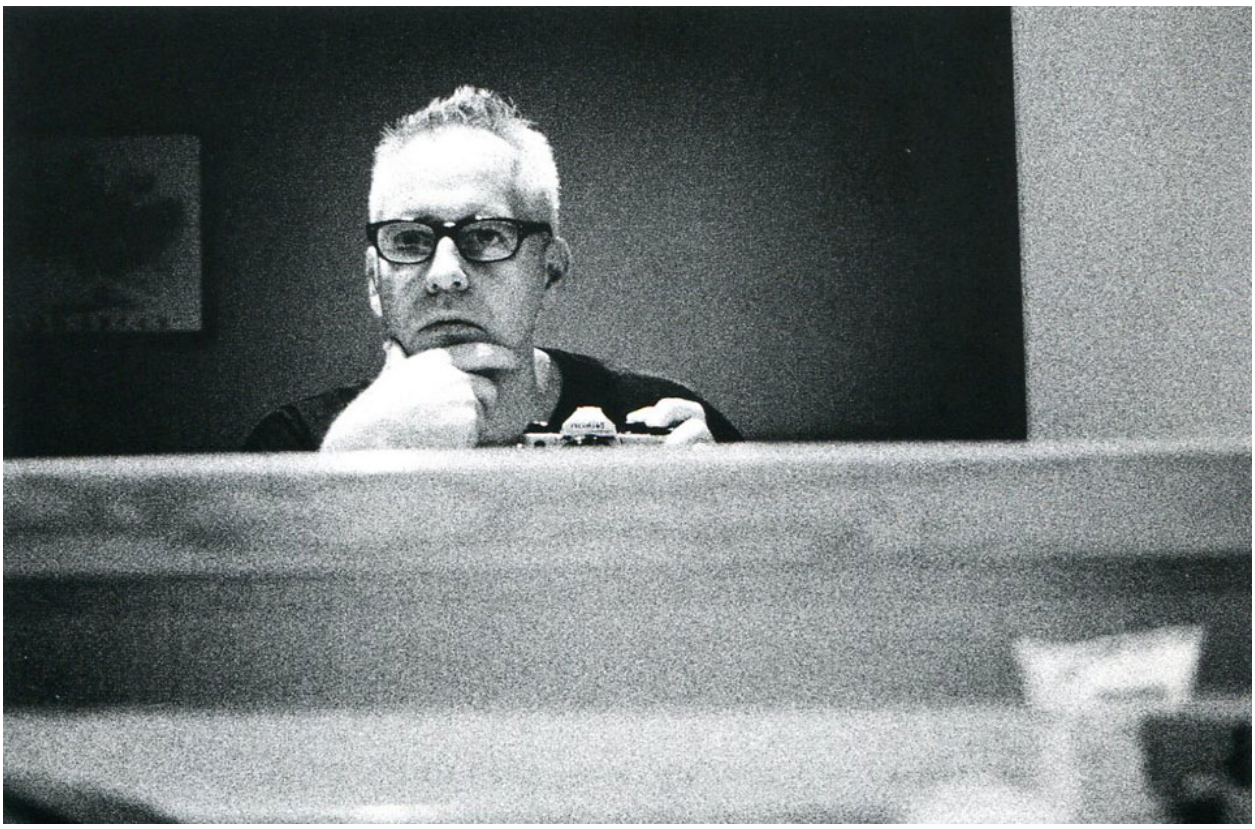
saint lucy

ALLEN FRAME

by Mark Alice Durant



Allen Frame, Self-portrait, Mexico City, 2000

I met Allen Frame at a photography auction at Sotheby's to benefit an arts education program in Afghanistan. While I shook his hand in greeting, I was holding under my arm Allen's photograph that I had bid on and purchased. The image was of a non-descript statue hovering over a frozen landscape in Russia viewed through an icicle-streaked window. Beyond its bleak beauty, the image crystallized my vague interest in public monuments; how long-forgotten figures in stone or bronze stand as sentinels to half-remembered histories. I was moved by the loneliness of figures unmoored from the narratives that gave them meaning. Even their often-intimidating scale served to underline the impotent attempts to inspire. Allen's image catalyzed the ideas that became an exhibition I curated at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2008, *Notes on Monumentality* and the subsequent related essay in *Aperture, Photography and Monumentality*.

Allen grew up in Mississippi, went to college at Harvard before moving to New York in 1977. Along with his accomplishments as a photographer, he has been an actor, director, writer, curator, and teacher. He has collaborated with numerous luminaries and art world cult figures such as Taylor Mead, Steve Buscemi, Nan Goldin, and Sue Williams. His book of photographs *Detour* was published in 2001. Allen does not describe his book in this manner yet this haunting and delicate collection of images seems to inhabit the space between two cataclysms, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and Sept. 11, 2001. Although AIDS is not addressed directly in *Detour*, I think these images are infused with a subtle grief and a quiet lust. His images are not decisive moments, they are not exactly portraits, or figure studies either. They exist interstitially. A quiet intimacy and muted staging share the proscenium, as friends, acquaintances, and strangers pause and proceed through the mostly nocturnal tableaux. Allen's photographs are unique in their elegant understatement, they observe without judgment, are melancholy but not sentimental, smolder without clamor.

Allen Frame, Jay, New York, 1996

This interview took place in a mid-town coffee shop on January 17, 2012.

MAD: Was there a first photo that you saw that rocked in your world in some way? An image that changed you or turned you towards photography?

AF: It was a show at the Fogg Art Museum when I was an art history student at Harvard. There was a group photo show in a small gallery, Emmet Gown, Diane Arbus, and Les Krims. I was seeing their work for the first time. And that did it. It was the psychological intensity of Arbus' and Gowin's work that impressed me, one photographing strangers

and one photographing family and neighbors. I like to explore this idea when I'm teaching, the distinction between photographing people you know and photographing strangers, and what it means to the photographer. Most photographers do one or the other but not both.

MAD: Did you know of Arbus at all before you saw the show?

AF: No. I was amazed because I thought the images were ugly, really crude, direct, and ugly but I thought they were fascinating. And then I devoured everything I could find by her after that. And Gowin, also, who was photographing his wife Edith and her family in Virginia, with those evocative southern backyards that were so familiar. His influence was part of the reason that I went back to Mississippi for a few years after college to photograph because he made me see value in my own origins. I was equally influenced by Arbus and had to work my way out of both their influences.

MAD: Gowin's photographs don't exhibit any kind of cruelty, they are gentler than Arbus's, but they are still very mysterious. Perhaps the mystery is of a different order but both Arbus's and Gowin's photographs of people suggest that people other than ourselves are somewhat unknowable, not quite easily discerned or something. But maybe that's true of all photographic portraits.

AF: Yes, I think that's true of both of them and part of what makes them so brilliant. The portraits I began doing in Mississippi were like a combination of the two photographers. I was photographing my own family and friends but also delving into a world that I hadn't known there before, a poor white, itinerant world that was part of the life of someone I came to know named David Kain, an amazing character who had been a crystal ball gazer on Royal St. in New Orleans and was living with his grandmother in Greenville, Miss., where I'm from.

MAD: You were studying to be an art historian?

AF: Yeah, totally finding a lot of inspiration in it, but not taking it so seriously academically. You had to be academic to get into Harvard, but once I got there I was more interested in the social part of it.

MAD: I grew up in Medford Massachusetts, two towns over from Cambridge and I hung around Harvard Square when I was basically a hippie high school dropout. So, we probably passed each other while you were strolling through Cambridge Common thinking about beautiful paintings. Or maybe we sat next to one another at Cafe Pamplona, the Middle East Cafe or the Orson Welles Cinema.

AF: Oh wow, haha. You know, because I was an Art History major and not a Visual Studies major, the studio art department, I couldn't get into Harvard's classes in photography and film. So, I found this class that Henry Horenstein, who was at the time a graduate student at RISD, was teaching in a little basement community center near Radcliffe.

And then, after that, I took some classes at Imageworks, a photo school in Kendall Square that was kind of like ICP, with a full-time program and continuing ed classes. And that's where I met Nan Goldin, who was full-time, and I was introduced to her world. We started going out to gay clubs in Boston, and Nan started coming over with her friends, like David Armstrong and Tommy Chesley, to hang out in my dorm suite. I lucked out and got this whole suite to myself in what, until that year, had been a residential hotel near Radcliffe because somebody didn't show up and the housing office never realized it.

MAD: Wow, there must be many stories there... movies to be made and books to be written from that situation.

AF: And I have photographs, in color, too.

MAD: Was she already at the Museum School then?

Allen Frame and Nan Goldin, Photo Booth picture c. 1978

Allen Frame photographing Nan Goldin, c.1984

AF: No, This is before. It was right after she lived with all the drag queens she had photographed. And she was at the tail end of that body of work. We were both taking a class in color photography with Bob Hower at Imageworks and just started hanging out, which was great for me because, you know, Harvard is so on-campus, so socially I just knew Harvard people. But I had also just come out so that Harvard was a straight world that I didn't fit into anymore, not in the same way. I was looking for something else, and along came Nan and her scene.

MAD: There were a lot of interesting people in Boston at the time, Nan and Mark Dirt – I mean Mark Morrisroe– who were at the Museum School, and at Mass Art where I studied, Jack Pierson, Steve Tashjian, Kathe Izzo and Christian Marclay were all there at the same time.

AF: Oh, wow, you still call him Mark Dirt! I've never met Christian Marclay. What a triumph that clock piece was.

MAD: Oh yeah, well he was good even then. He had this performance duo called *The Bachelors, Even* – and they were doing stuff with records and turntables – I think this was 1979 or so. There was an aura around Marclay at that early stage. Certain people, like Nan Goldin and Christian Marclay, there's just a kind of charm and a certain kind of charisma and ambition. And you just had a feeling about them, that they could do something significant.

AF: That's what I wanted to say about meeting Nan. You know, even then, when she was 18 or 19 years old, it was clear that she was going to be big. She was so charismatic. She already had this body of work that was amazing. And she was already mythologizing her story, so it was only a matter of time.

MAD: So, this is maybe jumping around a bit but I know that you've been involved in theater, as a director, yeah? You directed a David Wojnarowicz play.

AF: Yeah. I did a little bit of acting when I was a child and I might have done that in college, but I had an accent to lose and I was self-conscious about having such a strong southern accent. And so I didn't go anywhere near theater. But after moving to New York and being bored by the experience of my first solo show, I was lured into theater as an actor in two Gary Indiana plays. Then I started directing. So I co-directed, with Kirsten Bates, these monologues written by David Wojnarowicz called Sounds in the Distance in 1983 and 84.

MAD: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that.

AF: We did three different versions. The first was in the backyard of Bill Rice's apartment on 3rd street in the East Village. Bill Rice was from New England but had been a painter in New York since the 1950s. He started performing in a lot of off-off Broadway downtown productions around 1980, appearing notably in the work of Jim Neu. Bill had this amazing gaunt look, sort of like Klaus Kinski, and he was a regular at the main E. Village gay bar at that time, The Bar. He was a great painter, but he was such a personality that with those striking looks and a very original deadpan kind of delivery, he appealed to many directors and playwrights of that time.

Nan Goldin, Brian Burchill, still from Sounds in the Distance ("Turmoil in the Garden"), Bill Rice's backyard, NYC, '83

MAD: So you worked with him in the backyard?

AF: There were 8 of us performing, and I don't even know how many performances we did. There were maybe 20 seats so it was easy to have a full house. I remember David coming to see it a number of times, and people like Kiki Smith and Gary Indiana. And then we did it in a loft in Berlin. That was when Nan, not performing in that production but joining us in Berlin since she was already touring the Ballad in Europe, got attacked by Brian in the early morning at our pension and then did that famous portrait of herself with a black eye. It was a really serious injury and she had to have two operations on her eye afterwards.

MAD: So, is there a relationship between your years or experiences as a director and working in theater and being a photographer.

AF: Yeah, I think theater directing had a big impact on my photography.

MAD: And the idea of the sort of photographic frame as a proscenium. The way your photographs feel very choreographed in certain ways.

AF: It's the difference between my work in the early 80's and my later work. After that experience directing, my compositions became more stylized. They look really controlled, although they're not. I just became more adept at getting that result that looks like a film or theater still, as if I'd had the opportunity to pose actors, whereas they're not posed and not put into place. My photographic "capture" was like street photography brought inside with fast reflexes, shooting fast to get something that feels natural but is very composed looking at the same time.

Allen Frame, Florence, 1996

MAD: You are posing and controlling yourself as well to some extent, since you have to move around to get this certain kind of light or certain perspectives, getting it close to the ground or getting behind a door or whatever, all the different things that you do in your pictures to set the stage.

AF: Yes, all the things you have to do to put your subjects at ease, to get them used to your taking pictures, and not to feel self-conscious, so that it seems like you are disappearing into the work, when, of course, your point of view is enveloping the whole mise en scene. The thing that theater gave me was recognition of the importance of using space, the space of the room, the space between people, and between people and objects or walls. All those spaces create tension or rhythm, and also space is context, and more context helps build a stronger sense of narrative. The narrative remains implicit, though. I bring characters, mood, atmosphere, and location to the frame but try to suggest, rather than tell, a story, leaving the narrative somewhat abstract. When I sequence them and title them with captions that are the names of the people and places, and year, the narrative has diaristic connotations but hopefully, remains ambiguous. The most fun I had as a director was figuring out how to use the space in a surprising way, and in thinking about that, I was informed by a lot of experimental theater that I was seeing, first in New York, and then in London from ’85-’87, when I was directing and also writing a column about experimental theater for a Japanese magazine. How esoteric can you get? At the end of that, I decided I just wanted to direct my own material, but then it turned out I was not ready to write, so I moved back into photography. Now I’m writing again, after all these years. Also, I have to say that my sense of space was equally

influenced by films, having been a film buff since I was a child. I had these books called Screen World by Daniel Blum, annuals that he assembled with credits and stills from all the films released in a given year. I poured over the ones I had that were from the early 60's and since I was growing up in Mississippi, there were a lot of films that I never got to see there but experience in my imagination from the stills, like Fellini, Visconti, etc. When I got to Harvard, I spent more time in repertory theaters catching up with that film history than going to classes. The sense of mise en scene in these stills was a huge influence, and sensitized me to the work that I then saw in those years in Cambridge, particularly the work of the Italians, like Antonioni, Visconti, and Fellini.

Allen Frame, Paulita and Frank, St. Petersburg, 2001

MAD: Your photographs have this really delicate balance between intimacy and distance.

AF: That's the title of a class I teach at ICP and in Mexico City.

MAD: Really?

AF: Intimacy and Distance, yeah.

MAD: I didn't know that. Haha. Again, putting together your photography with the idea of theater. I think in some ways, theater is intimate, you're in this sort of environment with these bodies on stage who are emoting and speaking these things and yet, they're

ciphers too, right? But there's this relationship between the presence of the body and, even if it's sort of rhetorical or abstract, it's like a real voice, you know, vibrating the air around you. There's a kind of intimacy there, yet there's a kind of estrangement as well. I think that's sort of connected to your photographs somehow.

AF: I think there was this interesting tension for me in directing of trying to break the 4th wall with unexpected staging, but creating a satisfying sense of voyeurism that was equally surprising, and figuring out how to isolate certain characters or actions or speeches so they stood out, but then contrasting that with a rush of movement. My psychological experience as a child, as the youngest in my family, was as witness to the spectacle and performance of the narcissists in my family. There's a certain intimacy in being close to it, but also a detachment from being a witness rather than a participant. People in my family were iconic Southern types; the stakes were high. The intensity of my role as an onlooker conditioned my way of seeing.

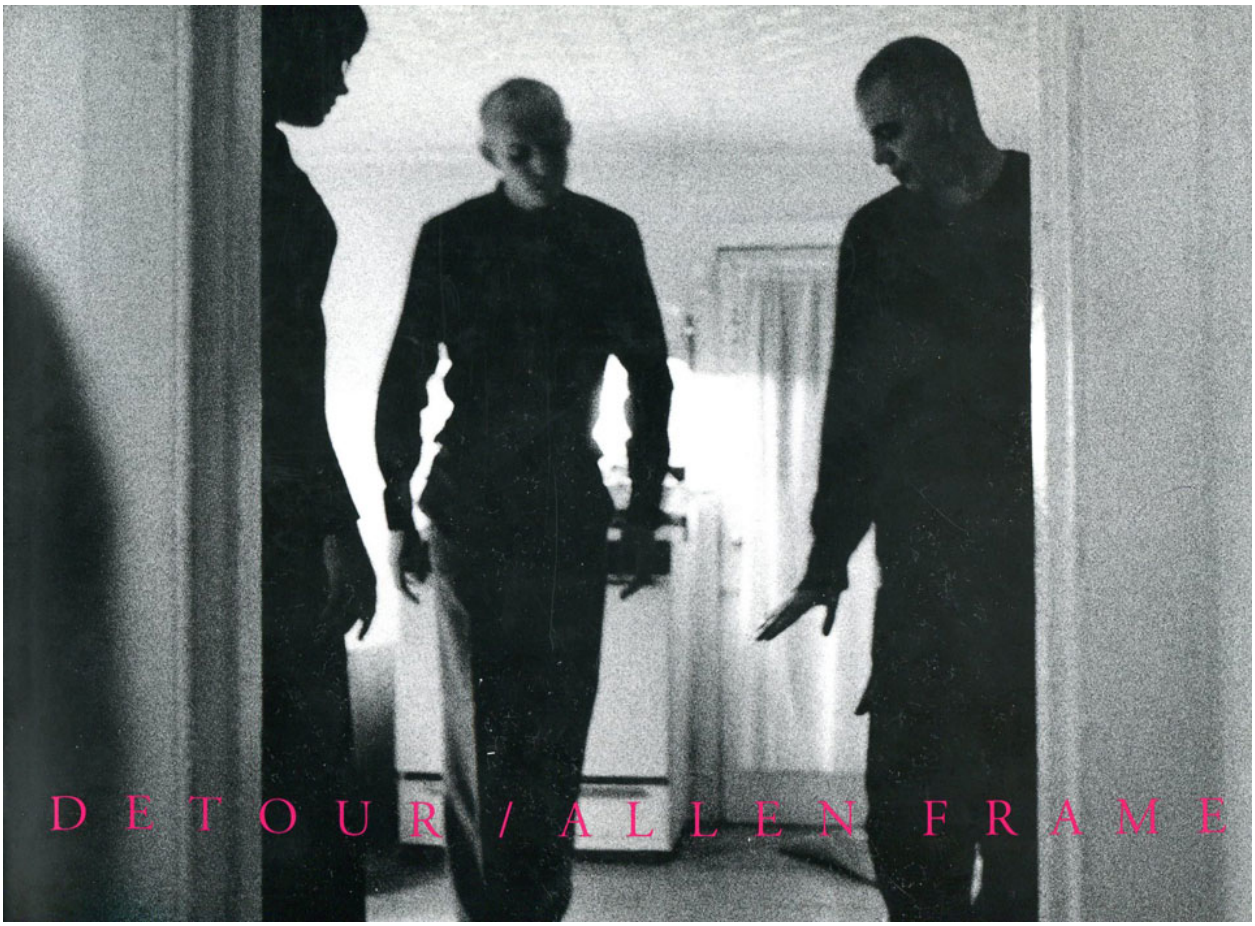
Allen Frame, Mississippi, 1997

MAD: I noticed that in the acknowledgements in your book *Detour,* you thank over a hundred people.

AF: Haha… right, well, you know…

MAD: What a gracious thing to do!

AF: I was fifty when that came out and had never had a book and had never had a chance to thank everybody like that for what felt like a major completion. So really, I did just put everybody in it. A lot of the people that are acknowledged are in my pictures and practically anybody that gave me a job or helped me in any way.



Allen Frame, Detour, published by Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2001

MAD: Besides being a really lovely thing to do, I think, points to the fact, that, you know, our careers and are not these solitary activities. We are helped and supported and we interact and collaborate with so many people along the way. And, especially in an art career it seems like some singular production. You know, you have a show and it's "Alan Frame Photographs 2010-2012," or whatever it is. And of course that's true, but it doesn't really reveal all of that stuff that happens behind the scenes and all the people that have helped you and all the people that were...

AF: Yeah, to be realistic it should be a long roll call, like film credits.

MAD: Lets talk about traveling and photography. In your book *Detour* there are photographs from Mexico and Russia and Brazil and a variety of other places. And, there are certainly clues to the place and a variety of things in the way the photographs witness the specificities of time and place. But they also feel very much like your photographs, like, you know, a certain sense of, again, this enclosed spaces where

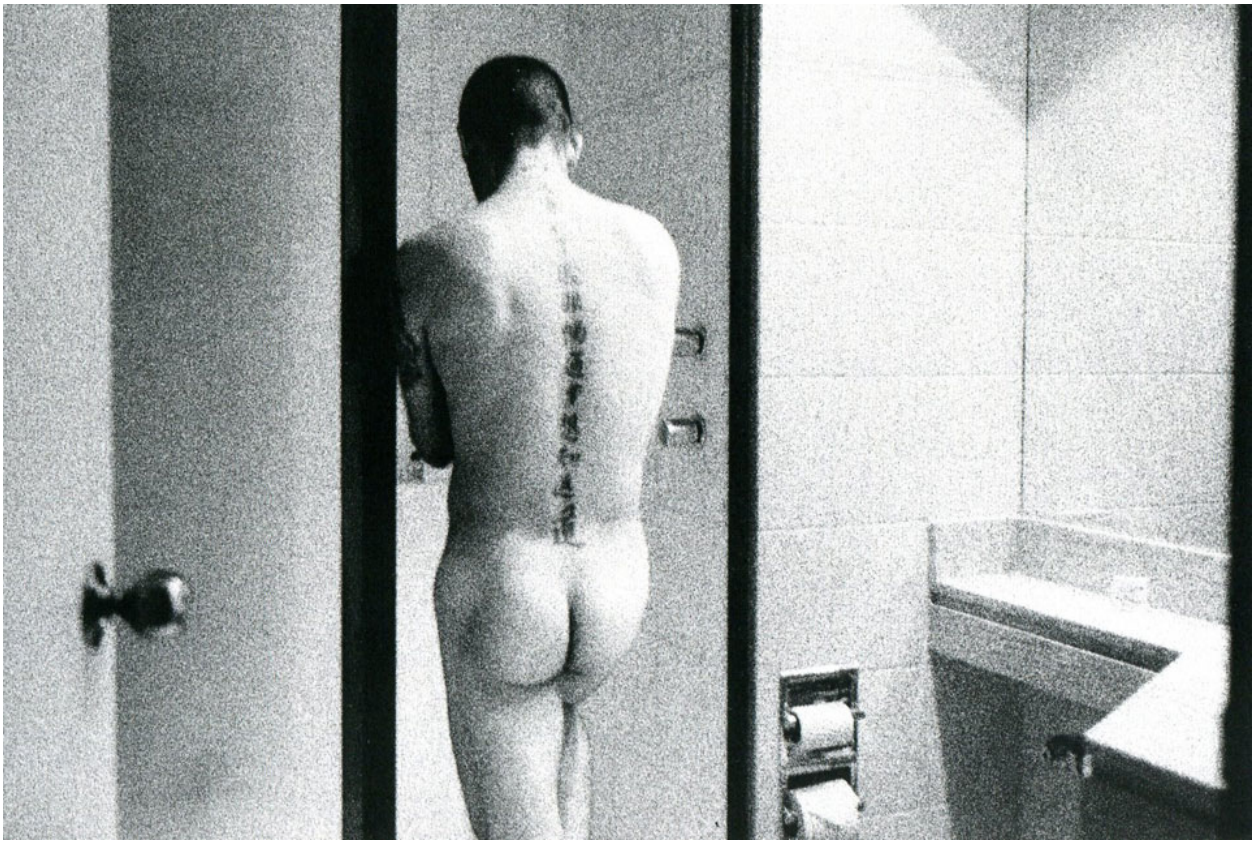
people are interacting. We don't know if they're strangers or friends, but they're in these domestic environments. It's sometimes just a one on one thing kind of thing; somebody's returning the gaze at you. It's just kind of these moments of your life, but then, they're going to have this sort of quality of sort of using the people of your life as actors, you know, for these scenarios that you're setting up.

Allen Frame, Bryon, New York, 1995

AF: Um, yes. Haha, I mean, I think teaching was the significant incentive for my making more and better work. It really helped me a lot because it made me think about photography more and grounded me in that medium, because my production has always been erratic, and still is. I'm very ambivalent about being a visual artist. Teaching grounds me in photography, but also a lot of people in my photographs since the 90's had been former students, rarely current students. As I got older, it was harder to put myself in these intense, intimate contexts. I just wouldn't have an easy access, especially, to a younger generation of friends, but teaching gives me that. Critique classes can be so intimate, and you get to know each other so well, that when you're finished, you have bonded, so that experience has given me an abundance of friends of generations that are not my own generation. And because I've taught at ICP for so many years, a lot of them are now scattered all over the world. When I travel, I get in touch with them.

But there's also a selection about whom I'm photographing that is like the casting process in filmmaking. There's that element of construction in the process that I acknowledge, combined with an aspect of documentary reality. There's this shaping that's always going on and casting and selecting to create a fictive look and element of

narrative. And some people I just photograph over and over. This one friend in Mexico, Paola Davila, whose own early work was self-portraits, so she was very used to being photographed. She's been somebody that I have loved photographing. And Alfredo Carillo, also a photographer, whom I've been photographing for 10 years.



Allen Frame, Alfredo, Mexico City, 2001

MAD: As photographers themselves, they are aware of what it means to make an image.
AF: Yeah.

MAD: Right, so they feel comfortable in that environment and understand something about the dynamic of being within the frame, occupying that space, animating that space.

AF: And I love photographing people where they live, not necessarily in their apartment, but in the culture that they grew up in. I've had a lot of ICP students that I was close with in the 90's whom I tried to photograph in New York, and it didn't work. But when I traveled to where they lived, in Sweden or Germany or Switzerland or Italy, I would finally get something. That also has to do with the difficulty of New York space, which can be so confined, cluttered, cramped, and now overly familiar for me through my own and my students' work.

MAD: There are a few images in *Detour* taken in Juchitan, Mexico. One of them shows a group of women on a street corner at night, a couple of the women seem to be brandishing tree branches. It's all very mysterious but also familiar as that is the town where Graciela Iturbide photographed extensively, she published a book in the late

1980s called Juchitan de las Mujeres. In fact one of the women in your image looks remarkably like one of the women Iturbide photographed. Were you aware of her work when you were there?

AF: No, I was not thinking of Iturbide at all. I didn't know about that book. I must have seen it sometime since but not sure I have. No, I became aware of it through my workshop student Marta Toledo, who is from one of those families that participates in those traditions, had a bar in Juchitan and now has one of the best restaurants in the city of Oaxaca and has, for some years now, been performing as a singer. Juchitan is a town in the southwest of the state of Oaxaca, about 30 miles from the Pacific. Historically, the men were fishermen and would leave the women behind in charge of the markets, so a matriarchy developed, and every year in May there are 10 balls on consecutive nights thrown by different family groups, celebrating the women. I was teaching in the city of Oaxaca, and one of my students, photographer and singer Marta Toledo, who is from that town, invited me to come to go to some balls. It was amazing. After the first one, there is this parade through the town in the early morning when it's still dark; two parts of the parade start in different places and wind their way to the center where they join. I joined the parade and photographed people who came out to greet us. This group in the photo looks as if they were encountered on some lonely walk at night, like a mirage, but in fact, this fast-moving, boisterous crowd was passing by.

Allen Frame, Juchitan, Mexico, 2000

MAD: I wanted to ask you about your images on that series of Robert Bolaño books.

AF: Oh yeah, that has been so satisfying.

MAD: Did you know Bolaño's works before?

AF: No, I didn't.

MAD: How did that happen that your works were chosen?

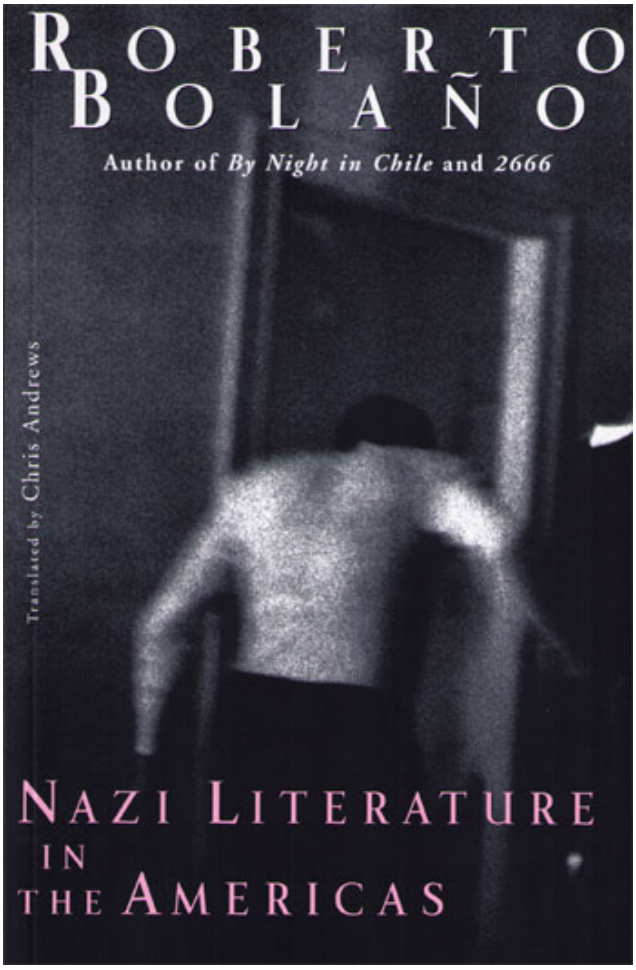
AF: Barbara Epler, the editor-in-chief of New Directions is a close friend of mine, and she's been supplying me with their books to read for a long time.

MAD: She knew your work.

AF: Yes, and when New Directions got the rights to do all those Bolaño books, she was looking for cover art and thought of me. The first one was a collection of stories, Last Evenings on Earth, and the New Directions sales reps loved it so they did seven more.

MAD: They look great together.

AF: Thanks. Well, I love his writing so it's just the biggest thrill for me. It's also fun because I never do commercial work. So to have a commercial context...



MAD: That's so nice that they didn't use stock imagery, you know, that they actually used these sort of really, these authentic moments of photographic art, you know. Really quite nice.

AF: Yeah, I'm so happy about that. And also, he was my age; also true of another New Directions author W.G. Sebald. We are the same generation, and both Bolaño and Sebald started getting published in the 90's, then died suddenly around the same time in their early 50's. They emerged in the last decade of the 20th century, a blast of brilliance, and then died. They had such brief careers as well-known writers but such great output and such an impact.

MAD: Yeah, in relatively short time. I became aware of Sebald maybe 10 years ago or so... I think Rings of Saturn was the first of his that I read.

AF: Yeah, which is when he began being translated into English.

MAD: So suddenly he was everywhere and everybody was like, have you read this? I haven't felt that kind of excitement in a long time. You know, people are saying to each other, have you read this? Have you checked this out? He became this sort of touchstone, you know. And then to die like that, sort of suddenly...

AF: I heard Sebald read on a program with Susan Sontag at the 92nd Street Y. It was amazing, right before he died. He was completely eloquent, as she was, even in the Q and A. They didn't miss a beat.

MAD: So are you photographing? Now? Are you mostly writing?

AF: No I'm not photographing, I'm writing, and every now and then I'll take a picture, but basically writing, since my last show two years ago.

MAD: It's time for something else?

AF: I got swept away by some material that called for writing. I made a video about my family, while my father was dying six years ago. Then I tried to revisit that material, and it wasn't working. Then something else happened and I started writing. I love doing it, but the hardest thing is not writing, it's changing my schedule to be a writer, changing the type of discipline that I need. To claim that kind of concentrated time at home to write, in the midst of my lifestyle, which has not been set up to do that, is challenging. Still, I'm doing it.

Allen Frame on NYC rooftop, photo by Frank Franca, c. 1983