

Allen Ginsberg & Gregory Corso, modest & immodest portraits, we weren't lovers, but Peter Facknaped, smiling & serious in turn, landed facing Kodak Actina lens delayed action snap, camera perched on bar table, other end of small whitewashed room of floor of Hotel Anson, a block away from Burroughs' Villa Arsenia, Tanager August, 1961.
Allen Ginsberg

"WE ARE CONTINUALLY EXPOSED TO THE FLASHBULB OF DEATH": THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALLEN GINSBERG (1953-1996)

ALLEN GINSBERG

University of Toronto Art Centre

15 King's College Circle, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7, Canada

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ALLEN GINSBERG'S PHOTOGRAPHS: THE UNFORGIVABLE PASSAGE OF TIME

BY YOLI (YOANNA) TERZIYSKA

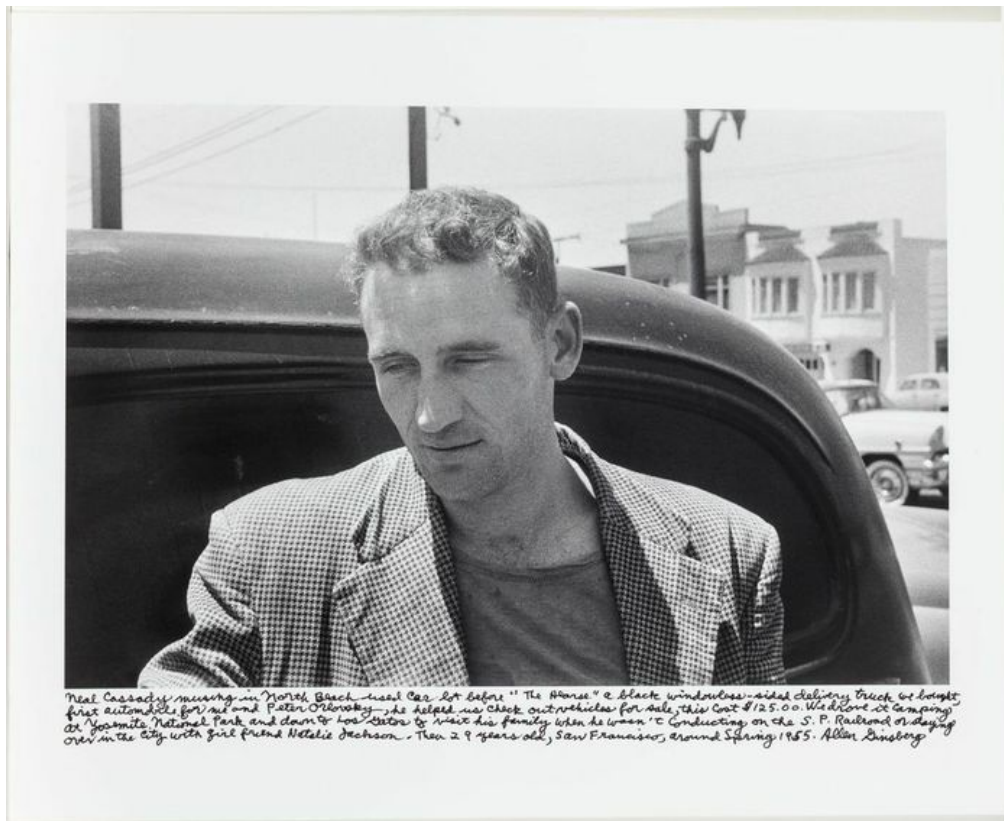
An exhibition of Allen Ginsberg's photographs, currently on view at the University of Toronto's Art Centre, presents its audience with a large volume of stills taken by the poet between 1953 and 1996. Approximately 150 images hang on the walls of *We are Continually Exposed to the Flashbulb of Death: The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg (1953-1996)*, representing some of Ginsberg's most intimate documented moments that capture and immortalize an instance in time. The viewer's relationship to the work, like a gesture of paying homage, shifts between the dual role of exhibitionism and voyeurism with the subjects in the photographs. A number of artists consistently appear in the photographs—William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso. They're both symbols of twentieth century Americana and significant participants in literary history—the Beat Generation—it is at once eerie and fascinating to observe their images snapped by Ginsberg throughout the years.



Jack Kerouac looking out the window apartment 206 E 7th street, 1953

The exhibit unfolds in three parts: the photographs, a looped audio piece of Ginsberg's voice reciting a number of poems, and a variety of objects—book editions, notes, images, drawings, etc.—that connect to Ginsberg and the Beat Generation. The photographs included are all black and white and contain meticulous descriptions added by Ginsberg in his own handwriting. The images share a lot in common besides the recurring figures photographed, namely, the manner in which they convey intimacy, eroticism, friendship, and, most importantly, the unforgiving passage of time. Faces begin to wrinkle and fade with age; we become more aware of the subjects' proximity to death (and therefore, mortality). While testimonial, the particular homage that Ginsberg provides does not carry a quality of glorification. Rather, it is delicate, melancholic, and somber—a glimpse into the poet and his friends' intimate lives.

We perhaps feels like voyeurs of the author's private memories. Some pictures are so intimate and erotic that we begin to experience the satisfaction and fascination of having the ability to observe a stranger's private moments inconsequentially. However, in a number of photographs, the subjects pointedly invite us into the image, like exhibitionists. This is seen in the number of nude pictures taken by Ginsberg of himself; unashamed of his body, the author too presents himself to time—capturing and suspending a spontaneous moment where the photograph begins to act a sign of history. Each picture contains a world within itself. As a whole, we see these intensely familiar yet unknown subjects age, begin to gray, eventually disappearing altogether.



Neal Cassady at North Beach used car lot, San Francisco, (frontal image/looking down and left), 1955

Underscoring these more subdued themes is an audio piece—Ginsberg’s own nervous voice reciting three poems on a loop: *Howl*, *Kaddish* and *Three Poems from “Don’t Grow Old.”* The unavoidable sensory presence of the work, loudly installed at the entrance, fading but ever-present as you move toward the rest of the exhibition, makes us feel less like intruders. While feeling *welcomed* to watch would not exactly be the right sentiment, due to tension in his confrontational speech, being aware that it is *okay to look*, and that Ginsberg *wants you to look*, is perhaps a better description of the affect—he is present along the way. By the time we near the exhibit’s end, a palpable chilling and empty feeling occurs—the voice that followed you dulls, and the author’s presence becomes distant and ghostly. The people in the images have become old. Their faces and bodies have aged. Some are dead. The images, however, retain their intimate magic.

These moments, snapped and suspended by Ginsberg and the people he was close with, pay homage to a modern time, a Beat time, a romantic time, and a time of writing—writing in the name of writing, death, and life.

—Yoanna Terziyska

(Image at top: **Allen Ginsberg**, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, nude, two images (covered, then uncovered), 1961. **All images: Allen Ginsberg**, Black and white silver gelatin prints with ink; University of Toronto Collection. Gift of the Larry and Cookie Rossy Family Foundation, 2012; Copyright of the Estate of Allen Ginsberg)

Posted by Yoli (Yoanna) Terziyska on 10/24/14

Tags: Allen Ginsberg, Beat Generation, beat photography, 1960s, portraiture, poetry, figurative, photography

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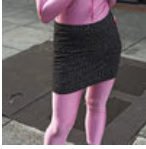
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Allen Ginsberg

I have seen the exhibition in New York at the NYU Student center. Great "Blast from the Past" Lots of friends, faces, and a wonderful look at the 60's in NYC (If you weren't there at that time). Marc Morrel

Comment by: Marc Morrel on Wednesday 10/29/14 at 6:54 AM

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