

ACADÉMIE DES BEAUX-ARTS
ADMISSION OF ANNIE LEIBOVITZ
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MARCH 20, 2024

Ladies and gentlemen, dear fellow members, dear friends, in the name of all the members of our Academy, I want to thank you for being here in such large numbers on this occasion. Today I have the privilege of talking about someone who is very dear to my heart and who needs no introduction, such is the appreciation and recognition that her remarkable work has earned her across the globe. Nevertheless, I *will* present her. And I will do so to the best of my ability because perhaps not everyone here knows the broad span of her life and the exceptional contribution made to art by this extraordinary photographer, Annie Leibovitz. She honors us today by becoming a foreign associate member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts.

Thank you for joining us, dear Annie.

Vocations enter peoples' lives in different ways, sometimes even mysteriously. For Annie Leibovitz, photography became a need in 1969 right here in Paris. And not just in Paris, but just a few meters from this Academy's cupola. But to tell you that story, I must turn back the clock.

Once upon a time, in 1949, an American girl was born in Waterbury in the state of Connecticut. A few years later, in 1967, young Annie, now all of 17 years of age, began to study at the prestigious San Francisco Art Institute in California with the aim of becoming an art teacher. Then, imagine, after six months she was told she could not become an art teacher without first becoming an artist. But she also quickly understood that painting was not for her. So, the following

summer, 1968, she visited her father, Sam Leibovitz, who at the time was a lieutenant-colonel in the largest American air base outside the United States, the Clark Air Base in the Philippines. Annie jumped at the chance of visiting Japan with her mother, Marylin, who was attending a scientific conference, and went along with her brother Philip and sisters Paula and Barbara. It was on this journey that Annie bought her first camera – it was close to an epiphany for her – and, on her return to San Francisco, she signed up for night classes in photography.

But to be the daughter of an American military officer and a student in San Francisco at the height of the Vietnam war, well, as you can imagine, was not easy. At the time, almost all young Americans were opposed to the bloody Asian conflict and Annie was no different. At the same time, she worried that her father risked his life on his frequent missions over Vietnam. Faced with these conflicting feelings and in order to flee worries about her father and the rising tensions on campus, in 1969 she spent five months in the Amir kibbutz in northern Israel, on the banks of the River Jordan, near the border with Lebanon. During this time, Annie traveled with a team of archeologists who discovered the remains of the Temple of King Solomon and she took a few photographs. Excited by this first experience, she first imagined settling in the kibbutz, then decided to return to the United States.

On her journey back home, she stopped over in Paris. It was the first time she had set foot in this city. As she was crossing the Pont des Arts, something strange happened to her. Suddenly the photographs taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson at that precise spot reappeared in her mind's eye. They are magnificent photographs; I'm sure you know them. And it was then that Annie had the sensation of being inside one of these photographs. As she recalls that instant today, it was a strong and fleeting sensation.

From that instant, her “decisive moment,” Annie began to take photographs as hurriedly as she could in order to recapture that instant: the river flowing under the bridge, the people surrounding her. For her, that moment on the Pont des Arts, just meters from here, acted as a trigger. It was there that photography entered the soul of young Annie Leibovitz, inspired by the eye of Cartier-Bresson, one of her main influences at the time, along with the Swiss Robert Frank.

Paris was also to be very important in Annie’s life many years later when she bought an apartment here with Susan Sontag, her partner and the love of her life. Thanks to Susan, Annie began to approach her work as a photographer with greater seriousness. And it goes without saying that his three daughters, Sarah, Samuelle and Susan, played a major role in his personal and, consequently, professional life.

But let’s look back a bit more. As a student in San Francisco, Annie was an impatient young woman. Drawn towards painting, she nonetheless realized that, as an art form, it isolates you, while photography leads you closer to others. She showed no interest in abstract art but only in the purest form of reality. It was then that she understood that, far more than technique, the most important thing for a young photographer was to learn to see.

When she returned to San Francisco after her Parisian sojourn, the movement against the war in Vietnam was intensifying and Annie began to take photographs of student anti-war demonstrations being violently repressed by the police. One day she took some of her images to a small magazine in the Bay Area founded in 1967, Rolling Stone. One of these photos was used. And in November 1970, at the age of 21, she was given her first assignment for the magazine, a portrait of Grace Slick, the lead singer of the Jefferson Airplane rock group. Her photo made the cover, and it launched a career lasting 13 years

with Rolling Stone, a magazine which would become and remains a reference point in the history of American counterculture.

Annie soon made her mark with her distinct style and with her deep engagement with the topics and personalities she was photographing. In these reportages, Annie felt no limits. Rolling Stone gave her total freedom: things passed before her and she decided, in the light of what was possible at that moment, when and where to aim her camera. And for her this is the most fascinating and most mysterious aspect of photography. Her images are the result of both a profound intimacy with the object to be photographed and a unique, quite exceptional way of looking. AN IMMENSE PHOTOGRAPHER IS BORN!

With Rolling Stone, the photograph is as important as the text – at times, even more important. Annie did stories with some of the finest talents of American literature. In 1972, with the writer Tom Wolfe, inventor of so-called “new journalism” and author of *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Annie covered the launching of Apollo 17 from Florida, the last NASA flight to carry humans to the moon. In 1974, with the infamous “gonzo” journalist Hunter Stockton Thompson, she was sent to photograph the departure of Richard Nixon from the White House after the Watergate scandal. Her images of this historic moment are very different from those of her colleagues. One even became “viral” – long before the word became popular with social media. Nixon had just entered the helicopter on the White House garden, its doors were closed and most photographers had turned away. But Annie stayed and photographed: with the helicopter in the background, still just a few meters off the ground, in the foreground soldiers of the presidential guard, with their white gloves, were already rolling up the red carpet as the fierce wind of the helicopter’s rotor blades wrapped the fabric around their bodies. It is the kind of image that reveals the singular talent and sensitivity of the photographer. Annie’s reportage made the cover and filled

eight inside pages of the magazine. Hunter Thompson's report was published a month later, the shock of the image preceding the weight of the words.

In providing successive cover images for Rolling Stone – she did 142 of them! – Annie learned to shoot vertical photographs even though this was not her strength. You may or may not know that it is natural for photographers to work with horizontal images which mirror the very structure of cameras. The horizon is evidently horizontal, as are rivers, roads and the great majority of planes. In illustrating the covers of Rolling Stone, Annie adopted an extraordinary discipline that came close to distortion, almost a deformation of her photography. But she did so with phenomenal talent.

She has always liked to stand back a bit, to observe the subjects of her portraits in their context, and it took her years to get closer. She acknowledges that a portrait cannot reveal everything about a person. “We are complex beings,” she has rightly pointed out. When she takes a photograph, she says she captures only ten percent of what she sees. How can one achieve more? That's her job. It's a difficult exercise, she notes, “to try to express the way that one perceives the personality of a person.” But her photographs reveal many things that our eyes do not see.

Every photo has its history. There's one that deserves to be retold. It is one of Annie's most iconic. Taken in 1980, it's an image with a global reach that personally touches me immensely, as I imagine it does many others, because it can make us cry. On Monday December 8, 1980, I was in Mexico, working with the photographer Graciela Iturbide at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the days prior to the country's most important annual religious festival. I remember I had just taken a photograph of Graciela photographing a woman with a crown of thorns on her head and a baby in her arms. For me, that photograph has a special place in Graciela's work because it symbolizes fragility. On that same day, Annie Leibovitz was in New York, in the apartment

of John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono to take some photos, as always for Rolling Stone, of what would prove to be the final images of the musician alive. She asked Lennon and his wife to undress and embrace on the floor, but Yoko Ono refused to undress. The resulting image, taken in the late afternoon, showing a naked John Lennon, curled up and embracing a dressed Yoko Ono, has become a symbol of love and intimacy, but also of fragility. What astonishes me is that these two great photographers, Annie and Graciela, took two powerful photographs on the same day, perhaps even at the same moment, each epitomizing human fragility. Astonishing. And moving.

When news reached me in Mexico that John Lennon had been assassinated by an unbalanced fan outside the Dakota building on Central Park where he lived, I was deeply shocked. As well as being a great musician, Lennon has become a symbolic leader of the youth of the 1970's, to whom my wife Lélia and I belonged. The German magazine Stern asked me not to return to Paris, but to head to New York to cover the mass gathering planned for Central Park on December 14 in honor of John Lennon.

It was one of the saddest days of my life... to see the mourners congregated in front of John Lennon's building, to record a hippie counterculture generation with which I identified: believe me, in those days, I was very different from what I am today. I had a bushy beard and long hair. In the vast crowd, many people were crying, others were singing songs by the murdered Beatle. I felt at that moment that I was witnessing the end of an era that defined the youth of many parts of the world. And that photo of Annie Leibovitz, taken on December 8, 1980, is the stunning bookend for a marvelous epoch. Few are the photographers whose photographs, perhaps just one, will enter history. Annie is one such photographer.

This image also reveals a different side of Annie Leibovitz. As she herself observed, it was the fruit of ten years' work. The first photograph she ever took

of John Lennon was on her first important assignment for Rolling Stone in 1970. She had begged the magazine's editor to allow her to accompany him when he went to New York to interview John Lennon, arguing that she would cost far less than an experienced photographer. She bought the cheapest flight available and slept at a friend's place. And when the day came, she was there. Lennon and Yoko, accustomed to being photographed by big names, were taken aback to see this young woman with a camera in her hand. But Lennon treated her as a professional and made her feel at home. For Annie, this shoot marked a turning-point in the way she worked with celebrities. She knows how to win the confidence of even the most famous.

Her long list of portraits for Rolling Stone includes such luminaries as Ray Charles, Tina Turner, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Norman Mailer, Tennessee Williams, Muhammed Ali, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Springsteen, Andy Warhol and... Patti Smith, who is with us here today and whom I welcome warmly and whose music we will have the privilege of hearing in a few moments.

In the 1970s, Annie photographed several rock groups on tour, including the Rolling Stones. She traveled with them by bus, stayed in the same hotels, and almost became part of the group. Mick Jagger had liked the first photos she had taken, and he called her to invite her to join the group on tour. He wanted her to be their "Cartier-Bresson," even though at the time she wasn't too sure what that implied. One of the outstanding images from this period shows Jagger in an elevator with a towel on his head. She took that one in 1975. At the end of each concert, after the final encore, the singer had the practice of pouring several jugs of water over his head and then wrapping it in towels., The photo was taken in the hotel as he headed back to his room.

Annie Leibovitz was without doubt one of the driving forces that transformed Rolling Stone to the point that in 1977 it left the Bay Area to New York's Sixth

Avenue, one of the most sought-after locations on the planet, becoming one of the main American magazines.

Rolling Stone was created by an incredible couple, Jane and Jann Wenner, great friends of Annie's and of mine too. I too have been on contract with the magazine. While Annie worked with contemporary American culture, I photographed around the world. Apart from running a marvelous magazine, it is always delightful to spend time with Jane and Jann, an exceptional couple with a magnificent openness of spirit who recognized the value of photography as an important part of information, a unique means of telling stories without the need for words. Jann has even admitted that when Annie returned from an assignment – and it was time to pick the photos – he often discovered that they conveyed a narrative notably different and frequent better and richer than the very text.

In 1983, Annie decided to change direction in her life and career, and she began working for such magazines as Vanity Fair and Vogue. During this period, she took scores of photographs that have become iconic. Who can forget the cover photo of Vanity Fair showing a naked and heavily pregnant Demi Moore? This image shook up public opinion, stirred up scandal and controversy and was viewed by some as morally shocking and unacceptable. It was of course sublime. In some regions of the United States, that edition of the magazine was even sold with special wrapping as if it were a pornographic magazine. In celebrating the beauty of pregnancy, Annie helped women to feel better about their bodies during pregnancy.

When in 2016 Annie was invited for a second time to illustrate the traditional Pirelli calendar, which normally glamorizes nudity and stereotypical beauty, Annie once again went against the stream. Her dossier, called "Histories of Women," dwelt on women who had succeeded in a wide range of areas, such as the tennis star Serena Williams, the actress Amy Schumer, the artist Yoko Ono,

the writer Fran Lebowitz, the movie director Ava DuVernay, the producer Kathleen Jennery and, again, Patti Smith.

Every portrait taken by Annie Leibovitz is a unique creation, keeping alive a certain image of a person in photo archives across the globe. Many of you will remember her portrait of Queen Elizabeth II in which she captures both the royalty and the human side of the British monarch. Or of the actress Whoopi Goldberg, lying in a bath full of milk.

One of my favorite photos by Annie is of Donald Trump and his wife Melania on the tarmac of Palm Beach Airport in 2006. Trump is sitting in a sports car and a heavily pregnant Melania in on the steps of the couple's private jet, wearing a golden bikini. At the time, no one could have imagined that Trump would become president of the United States. This photograph, which is exceptional and totally unorthodox, made me admire Annie's work. She has always had the ability to understand the subjects she is photographing and to create something magical around them. In studying her photos, I have often asked myself, what will she do next, can it be just as impressive? And what has always astonished me is that she does just that: the next photos are as good or even better than the previous ones.

If I were to list the prizes that Annie has received during her career, I can assure you that we'd be under this cupola all evening. Among the most important, let me mention: the Lifetime Achievement Award of the International Center of Photography; the Centenary Medal of the Royal Photographic Society; the Library of Congress Lifetime Achievement Award, the Excellence Prize of the American Society of Magazine Editors and of course the Photography Prize of the Académie des beaux-arts - William Klein, two years before the same award was given a few months ago to Graciela Iturbide.

Along with her work as a portraitist, Annie has also reported on global events. In 1982, she provided Rolling Stone with its first-ever official cover image of a

military operation: the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, when she crossed the war zone all the way to Beirut. In 1993, she reached Sarajevo which had been under siege for over a year, under constant bombardment, at the mercy of snipers, without running water or electricity or sufficient food. She was not a war correspondent, but she refused to be a “tourist photographer” and decided there and then to shoot portraits in the middle of this tragic war. At the start of 1994, she returned to Sarajevo and then flew to Rwanda where, in little over three months, close to one million people were killed. Hutu militias massacred Tutsi civilians in a genocide that was not immediately recognized by the international community. The violence had stopped one month before Annie’s arrival, but she still had a mission: to bear witness.

That’s Annie. Just one person yet a multiple photographer. During her Rolling Stone years, she became known as the “rock and roll photographer.” At Vanity Fair, she became the “celebrity photographer.” Brushing off such labels, she says quite simply, “I’m just a photographer.” In that, all is said. Today, she defines herself as a conceptual artist who uses photography. And if you look closely at her work, you’ll see how appropriate the description is.

Her advice to young photographers? “You have to be foolish, obsessed, to be ready to live and devour this profession.” And that’s what she has done from the very beginning. She understood early on that you cannot stop yourself from being moved by something that happens in front of you. She doesn’t believe in photographic “objectivity.” “Everyone has a point of view.”

I see Annie Leibovitz’s work as that of someone who profoundly loves what she does. In her youth, she was enormously identified with historic moments that transformed her country, such as the counterculture movement, women’s liberation, the fight for civil rights and campaigns against racism and the violence of wars. Through her photographs, she has lived a thousand lives,

crossing this important historic period with professional, moral, and intellectual stature.

“As one grows older,” Annie says, “one knows more of less what one is doing, but that doesn’t mean your photos are better.” And she adds: “One simply knows when a photograph is good and when it isn’t.” For our infinite joy, Annie, you have created and continue to create incredible images.

You are a great photographer coming from a country with an enormous tradition of portraiture, personified by Irving Penn or Richard Avedon. But with one major difference. These two great names in the history of American photography now live in the paradise of photographers, they are no longer with us. But you, you are very much here. Annie Leibovitz is here with us and will belong to our family forever. Welcome, Annie, to the Académie des beaux-arts!