

Behind the Scenes with Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Toni Frissell:

Alternative Views of Fashion Photography in Mid-Century America

BY REBECCA ARNOLD

<https://doi.org/10.38055/FS010110>

Abstract: This essay explores the process and labour involved in creating fashion editorials. It is focused on the work of Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Toni Frissell, as case studies of photographers who worked at America's two leading fashion magazines: *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. Images that show these women "backstage" form the basis of this analysis, to expose the images' compositions and the teams of people involved in their creation. Both photographers worked at a key moment in American fashion, as designers such

KEYWORDS

- Louise Dahl-Wolfe
- Toni Frissell
- Diana Vreeland
- fashion photography
- American fashion

as Claire McCardell created a simple, interchangeable wardrobe of readymade clothes that catered to the increasingly active lives of middle-class women. They were significant to the “Modern Sportswear Aesthetic” that emerged during this period and which exploited Kodachrome’s rich tones to compose alluring images that showed sportswear as adaptable and fashionable. Frequently shot outside, or using carefully contrived sets, their imagery provides a case study for the ways fashion’s creative workers collaborated to construct convincing visions of sportswear’s emergent style. Drawing upon Bruno Latour’s theories of organization, this article examines these networks of people, working to varied briefs and deadlines to create each magazine issue. From contact sheets and shots of fashion editors and models, to glimpses of the photographers’ efforts to find the right angle, this essay uses Dahl-Wolfe and Frissell’s photobooks and archival materials, including memos between *Bazaar* Editor-in-Chief Carmel Snow and Frissell, to challenge the idea of the seamless fashion page and look at the professional work and negotiations necessary to create a successful image.

Life magazine’s 1937 article “Reporting Paris Styles is a Business” showed the *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue* fashion teams at work. Carmel Snow and her editors are photographed at the shows and as they organize shoots of garments they have seen at couture salons. Illustrators Jean Cocteau and Christian Bérard are depicted drawing the latest fashions on live models, while Jean Moral photographs them out on the streets of Paris. Models are caught changing, and a sense of urgency and speed infuses every frame as each must enact her role quickly and efficiently.

The spread is self-reflexive: a magazine article that analyses magazine practice, but one that is also revelatory in its attention to fashion as a site of work. While *Life* magazine was a general interest magazine, its fashion pages and covers meant its visual analysis of the Paris collections related to its own reportage, as well as that of *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*’s. The article catalogues industry professionals’ activity, planning, and labour, as they see, digest, and represent a wealth of fashion information, working to tight deadlines. When seen in relation to other backstage fashion images of the period, these photographs provide a glimpse into fashion as process, and importantly, they also present fashion as

organization and collaboration. This essay focuses on editorial images, as published in magazines, as well as photographs that reveal the process of creating fashion shoots, to examine the hidden relationships between those working on fashion magazines and the labour and finances that go into their production.

These fashion pages represent designers' and magazine staff's collective imagination deployed in the creation, not just of images, but also of women, or at least their ideal.

This is a collective imagination that requires those working on a shoot to produce imagery that expresses their own creative ideas, in line with their given brief.

This analysis focuses on two photographers: Louise Dahl-Wolfe at *Harper's Bazaar* and Toni Frissell at *Vogue*. Their work is significant since their careers coincide with a key moment in the crystallization of American fashion photography and magazine aesthetics and culture. Each worked at a major fashion title as editors sought to establish new visual and graphic ideals in light of modern art, design, and popular culture, as well as technological change. When analyzed together, Dahl-Wolfe and Frissell's fashion editorials, and images of them working behind the scenes at shoots, expose fashion as a more complex, nuanced process than these images might imply. Importantly, they also reveal fashion as work, rather than just fantasy.

Bruno Latour's ideas on collaboration and institutions enable these images to be contextualized in relation to the fluid nature of creative organization that is intrinsic to fashion magazines. His essay, "What's the Story?" Organizing as a Mode of Existence" of 2011 forms the basis of this analysis, since it relates directly to organization as reality and idea. While Latour examines his university's attempts to rethink its meanings and structure, his

theories are equally applicable to fashion magazines' creative work, which also relies upon a nebulous idea of reputation, inherent qualities, and status. These values are hard to quantify, and in attempting to do so, Latour argues that institutions reveal far more fluidity and change than they perhaps understand themselves, or wish to show to the outside world. In particular, he observes that the nature of organizations, and of organizing, reveals that there are "many different characters inscribed into many contradictory scripts with different deadlines ... as to the structure it is never more than what has been inscribed in the script by various authors" (Latour 9). His emphasis on multiple authors, rather than a single auteur, is apt to fashion editorial planning and creation, and underscores fashion photography as a product of coordination and collaboration. This interpretation allows for a nuanced view of magazine work culture, since it reveals fashion creation within an organization as fluid and in movement, or in Latour's words, "the whole is always smaller than its parts — as long as we are in the act of organizing." His stress on "parts," in this case the individuals and their interpretations of each brief, allows us to think about a fashion magazine as reliant upon constellations of workers, each potentially as significant as the editor-in-chief and/or the magazine's brand. This reconfiguration of emphasis implies that rather than *Vogue*, for example, resting upon a stable idea of its brand, it is instead in constant flux: its status, aesthetic, and content continually reimagined by its many workers. This dynamic connects with Latour's insistence upon rethinking the common "individual versus the system dichotomy" and considering an organization, in this instance a fashion magazine, as a "rhythmic variation." In this way, the magazine can be conceived of as two interrelated elements: its workers' cyclical movements to create content, which is compiled into each individual issue, and, subsequently, each issue which becomes a material product that records the rhythmic, monthly reorganization of the whole (Latour 9). A case study, in this instance two photographers' backstage imagery, therefore highlights collective work and organization, with workers responding to a series of briefs and deadlines, to bring focus to editorial fashion's collective nature.

Editing American Fashion Magazines

Vogue was already established as a fashion authority in the 1930s, but *Harper's Bazaar* was to evolve during this period, as Carmel Snow assembled a team that could reinvent the title in line with contemporary mores. Snow, along with Fashion Editor Diana Vreeland and art director Alexey Brodovitch, "have often been described as a 'triumvirate.'" However, in actuality *Bazaar* functioned as a hierarchy, with Snow at the top. The art director's purism was a foil for the fashion editor's exuberance, but the editor-in-chief controlled the look and tone of the magazine (*Diana Vreeland: The Eye has to Travel* 34). Edna Woolman Chase, Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue*, and Carmel Snow at *Harper's Bazaar* needed to maintain their magazines' identities, despite myriad people working on each issue. The difficulties inherent in such a process are palpable in Chase's correspondence. In her role as Editor-in-Charge of *Vogue's* American, British, and French editions, Chase sent letters to assert policies for the brand as a whole. She was clear, for example about the use of costly techniques, and brought economic reality to her creative teams, writing in 1936:

Colour is frightfully expensive. A page of colour must justify itself on one of two counts and preferably on both. Either it must be such a lovely thing in itself that it gives you great pleasure to look at it or it should be so full of actual fashion information that it fulfils in a practical sense what it may lack in decorative beauty. (Chase and Chase 260)

She was conscious of the magazine's role as fashion informant for its readers and, significantly, its need to continue good relations with fashion houses and advertisers, concerns that prompted memos to contributors, including Bérard, to complain if their imagery lacked attention to a garment's details (Chase and Chase 260).

Fashion magazines constantly balanced between fantasy and reality in their aesthetic and content, and therefore editors had to choose carefully the constellations of artists, writers, and editors that worked on each issue.

For Chase, as for Snow, it was crucial to keep a constant check on all aspects of the process to ensure a coherent end result. It was, of course, also essential that every element of each shot, each editorial, each layout would contribute to individual and overall editors' visions. *Vogue's* Editor-in-Chief from 1952–63, Jessica Daves, described this balance in relation to those involved in the process of production: "Good teamwork is vital. At the same time, each person in the studio is concentrating on his separate problem," and this involved the varied, sometimes conflicting concerns of photographer, editor, and model as they focused on each outfit and its representation (Daves 150-1).

Such comments reflect the fluid and sometimes unpredictable structures and practices that underpin fashion magazine production. Latour noted his university colleagues' discussions of the institution's "DNA" or "essence," as though there was a solid core of elements "that should 'dictate' our present choice[s]," for new projects and approaches.

However, he found that this “essence” is not as clear or fixed as it might seem, and meant different things to each member of staff. It was also interpreted in relation to varied points within an organization’s evolution, as though a specific moment in its history embodied its definitive state and meaning, which prompted Latour to ask “which past to inherit?” (3-4). This suggests that the very idea of organizational “essence” is a mythic ideal of stability that masks constant movement, and multiple interpretations. This complexity reflects the ways each fashion editorial is a product of a different set of workers’ ideas of what the magazine represents and what it will become with each new issue. It also speaks to fashion’s inherent need to look backwards and forwards simultaneously. Fashion magazines must also grapple with this apparent contradiction, as editors have to. As Latour notes, they must continually “reorganize” to maintain an identity that seems constant, yet is always in flux. While institutions, such as fashion magazines, may look to their heritage to imagine their own present and future, there are so many people and projects involved in this process that a single, stable “essence” is not achievable, or in reality desirable. What Latour instead described is a sequential interpretation of each brief and deadline as various team members respond, often acting in different ways on separate assignments. His description of this process as “rhythmic” is apt to fashion magazines, as it reflects their constant reorganization into monthly issues (Latour 9). It also relates to the ways art directors plan layout; for example, Alexey Brodovitch’s practice of placing all the pages sequentially on the floor, so that he could “see” each issue’s rhythmic progression between advertising and editorials and text and image. His design practice embedded organization into the magazine aesthetically and materially. Like his peers, including *Vogue*’s Dr. Mehemed Fehmy Agha, he planned each issue’s visual pace, and the rate at which a reader might turn pages. A reader may pause over slower editorials that used more white space, for instance, and speed up over a quick succession of bright advertisements. However, readers are unlikely to consider the ways this interaction has been guided.

Photographers Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Toni Frissell both captured those hidden moments that awaken us from the fashionable dream that magazines produce, since they allowed themselves to be photographed at work.

In so doing, they provided glimpses of Latour's discussion of constant reorganization, at micro and macro levels within a magazine's planning and execution. They slipped between the hidden moments of fashion work and the public, visible fashion product. In both women's photobooks, *Louise Dahl-Wolfe: A Photographer's Scrapbook* (1984) and *Toni Frissell Photographs, 1933–67* (1994), there are a range of such images, juxtaposed with outtakes and shots that were chosen for publication in magazines. It is significant that in each case, they chose to include backstage scenes to assert their working practice, alongside the final product. Fashion magazines occasionally published such photographs, too, usually as a tiny image sequestered in the "Editor's Guest Book" page, for example, which often functioned more as an introduction to the individual photographer than as a demonstration of the work put into each editorial. Patrizia Di Bello and Shamooun Zamir describe photographs as being like songs, in that they have various existences and incarnations: as prints, reproduced in magazines, in photobooks on an individual photographer, in compilations

of images from the period, from a particular magazine, and as artworks collected and exhibited in museums (Di Bello and Zamir 9-11). In each incarnation we experience them differently, guided by the medium and the environment in which they are presented and aware of their varied visual impact and materiality.

This article develops Di Bello and Zamir's analysis of how context impacts meaning and, importantly, how viewing these photographs across varied environments exposes the work and organization that goes into their creation, by focusing on Dahl-Wolfe and Frissell's work, as seen in magazines, photobooks, and as archive material. Photobooks foreground the individual as subject, even though in the examples discussed here they simultaneously reveal process and collaboration and thus provide a counter-narrative to straightforward auteurist readings. In contrast, fashion magazines rarely disrupt the myth of artist-creator, and at this time only the photographer was named on each fashion spread. Di Bello and Zamir's idea of "tactical reading" allows these photographers' work to be analyzed through a strategic selection of their images across varied media. They characterize this approach as: "disrupting or subverting the [photo]book's sequential development, but as we close the book, all the photographs leap 'back in again so there should be no disorder'" (Di Bello and Zamir 12). By relating "tactical reading" to the range of contexts identified for photographs in Di Bello and Zamir's essay, images from Dahl-Wolfe and Frissell's photobooks, backstage photographs, and portraits of the photographers themselves can be "disrupted" to examine their interrelated meanings.

Backstage Images as Portraits

In 1984, Louise Dahl-Wolfe reminisced about her early days at *Harper's Bazaar* in an interview with *The New York Times*, stating: "The *Bazaar* was terrible back then — you never read it ... But Carmel Snow had become editor, so I went. There was nobody, nobody ever like Carmel. She hired Munkácsi, the first photographer to photograph fashion outdoors. She brought the best fiction into the magazine. We were like a family there" (Duka 6). Dahl-Wolfe's words highlight two themes that are important to this essay: fashion magazines' shift in design and visual sensibilities from the 1930s, as editors sought to remake magazines in relation to modern aesthetics and attitudes, and the significance of major fashion magazines' editorial teams, which commissioned fashion photography that more closely reflected women's lifestyles.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the American Modern style was crystallized in terms of clothes, look (that is, in terms of editorial styling and self-fashioning), and as a form of taste that shaped consumers' choices. This style extended to design, graphics, photography, and art direction to construct magazines' identities, as well as those of viewers and wearers. Louise Dahl-Wolfe's photographs represented a new incursion into high fashion magazines, a fresh, sportswear based style that would come to be called "The American Look," and it is notable how this coincided with fashion promotion in relation to individuals. Publicist Eleanor Lambert, who worked first with artists before she shifted focus to fashion and film stars, saw personality as central to good publicity (Lambert). She worked with several leading American sportswear designers, including Claire McCardell and Clare Potter, and her approach was crucial to New York ready-made designers' increased fame and success during this period. In conjunction with this, as fashion grew and became more professionalized in the interwar period, many women, Diana Vreeland included, were

employed by virtue of their own style, with the idea that this could be recreated on a larger, commercial scale. These developments were part of wider shifts within visual and popular culture, as the line between public and private was blurred. This was expressed through fashion editorials' adoption of documentary aesthetics, which seemed to depict "real" life. Allied to this was the growth of photograph-based magazines, such as *Life*, whose very name implied exposure of all facets of experience. Personality as an expression of private self was used to promote professionals from stars to photographers. Behind-the-scenes imagery was part of this simultaneous revelation of work and character, as fashion made connections between its professional ideals and those of contemporary women.

Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Toni Frissell are examples of two different ways in which photographers were represented in images and interviews. Frissell was shown to embody her photographs' aesthetic in her physique and lifestyle, and to construct an interrelationship between her sense of self and the American Look through her imagery. Dahl-Wolfe was shown as removed from her imagery's style, with portraits focused on her professionalism, and thus her ability to create the American Look through her gaze rather than in relation to her sense of self. It was not an identity she inhabited, but rather one that she envisioned in collaboration with editors, models, and assistants. However, this is not to say that she was not interested in fashionable clothes; she often went to the collections in Paris, and would buy herself one outfit each season. She thus aligned herself with couture clients, albeit as a professional turned consumer and, therefore, linked to the other side of the equation, wearing fashion herself (Dahl-Wolfe).



FIGURE 1

Portrait of Louise Dahl-Wolfe © Abe Frajndlich, 2017.
 Abe Frajndlich, 1988, photograph. "Reporting Paris Styles is a Business: Vogue & Harper's Bazaar Cover Openings," *Life* (6 September 1937), pp. 32-9.

Abe Frajndlich's 1988 photograph of Louise Dahl-Wolfe for *Life* magazine shows her peering from a clothes rack, sternly assessing her view, camera in hand, the suitcases that frame her suggesting she could take off at any minute on another photographic mission (**see fig. 1**). Her leopard print dress and the multi-tone and texture sleeves that push in on her connect her with fashion and style even in old age, and assign her status and occupation in a spread on 150 years of photographic history. Although the photograph is staged, it is notable that it aims to look like a backstage shot, which uses clothes, cases, and camera as attributes to illuminate her profession. It is a portrait that seeks not just to expose her likeness and character, but also to encourage viewers to imagine her practice and past.

Dahl-Wolfe studied fine art in San Francisco and interior and architectural design in New York in the mid-teens, before completing her education by travelling through Europe. Her interest in surface patterns and form was honed through this combination of technical training and observations made during her travels. From early on she photographed friends, and was fascinated by the ways bodies moved and formed gestures. She came to fashion after food photography, portraiture, and department store commissions. She went on to work prolifically for *Snow*, completing eighty-six covers and a multitude of spreads.



FIGURE 2

Unknown photographer, Toni Frissell sitting, holding camera on her lap, with several children standing around her, somewhere in Europe. 1945, photograph, Toni Frissell Collection at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/item/2008680192/>.

In contrast to Dahl-Wolfe, Toni Frissell was always depicted as active and athletic, a double to the models she photographed. In this image, she is captured showing children her camera while on assignment as war photographer for the American Red Cross in Europe in 1945 (see fig. 2). In 1930, she had started as caption writer for *Vogue*, although she did not last the full year, since, as she said, “They finally fired me because I couldn’t spell ... undaunted, I bought a camera and took pictures during the summer at Newport.”

As *The Christian Science Monitor* noted in 1943, “She now counts it a happy day when she was discharged: for it was then that the idea came to her of photographing fashions out doors in their logical settings — an innovation. No one apparently had thought of it before ... Experimenting continually, she developed an eye for blending together naturally both model and landscape” (Foster). While she was not necessarily the first to photograph fashion outdoors, she was part of an important cadre of photographers who were rethinking the way modern dress was represented, which also included Dahl-Wolfe, Martin Munkácsi, and Jean Moral. Frissell’s first fashion spread, “Beauties at Newport,” was published in *Town and Country* in 1931, and this free style of shooting that brought personal, holiday imagery into the public sphere was to continue throughout her career, lending her work warmth and intimacy. Her later work is infused with a sense of immediacy and adventure and demonstrates her commitment to depicting movement, of the body but also through travel, which connects her work both to photo-reportage and documentary film of the period.

Frissell signed a contract with *Vogue* in 1933, and her photographic style, based on natural light and an outdoors aesthetic, became increasingly significant to fashion’s contemporary ideals. It is important therefore to consider the series of relationships and ideas that link fashion photography’s creators and viewers, and to acknowledge the sequence of collaborations that enable this network of imagery and objects to be formed.

Dahl-Wolfe and Frissell approached their subjects differently. Dahl-Wolfe reveled in the potential of natural light and balanced compositions, but tended to show models carefully arranged in static poses, in contrast to Frissell’s more naturalistic and dynamic imagery. This can be seen in each photographer’s editorial work. Dahl-Wolfe’s poignant September 1943 *Harper’s Bazaar* cover,

for example, viewed the model from behind and contrasted her glowing skin with icy silk, to focus on her tanned back while she inspects her reflection. In combination with a snapshot of her “boyfriend” slipped into the mirror’s frame, Dahl-Wolfe encouraged viewers to look at the model looking. As so often in Dahl-Wolfe’s work, the magazine’s readers are invited to share a moment of stillness and thought, while their eyes are subtly guided to key elements of dress, accessories, and beauty through lighting and colour.

In contrast, for Frissell it was the relationship between sitter and location, activity and emotion that was most compelling. Her first *Vogue* cover in June 1937 deployed a snapshot style and dynamic sense of movement, as a swimsuit-clad model reacts to the waves frothing around her, in an image that showed how daydreams of holidays and escape could be conveyed through simple set-ups and minimal props.

These covers demonstrate the ways that the two photographers’ own images connected with their editorials, and thus blurred private and public, life and work, with Dahl-Wolfe as a distanced observer, and Frissell as part of the action she depicted.

In turn, both types of imagery were part of the magazines’ identity construction, which was brought together in their shoots, and the personalities involved in their creation.

On Set: Louise Dahl-Wolfe

Both photographers travelled widely, re-contextualizing American design within exoticized locales. Such trips needed to be planned carefully, with garments and accessories assembled from designers and manufacturers and locations scouted for suitability. In this photograph, Dahl-Wolfe is shown with Fashion Editor Babs Simpson and two models during a trip to Brazil (**see fig. 3**).

Both Simpson and the models wear Claire McCardell dresses, and thus represent the ideals of beauty and taste that were to be formulated in the editorial. It is significant that both editor and models wear the style, which links them visually for what may well be a publicity shot of the impending fashion pages, their pared-back look only enhanced by the grand setting. Dahl-Wolfe always sought to develop a strong relationship with her models during sittings and aimed to get a performance from them that would illuminate the outfit in relation to the location or set, as well as work on the magazine page.

McCardell's aesthetic dominates the photograph, despite her absence from the image. This is a reminder that these are photographs of another's creation, but a design form that needs bodies (and, arguably, space and place) to animate, complete, and realize its potential. Louise Dahl-Wolfe understood and acknowledged the discipline needed to develop this collaboration, albeit unspoken, between the designer and photographer's visions of femininity. As she said, "A fashion photographer is not a free agent — you must try to express in the photograph what the designer is saying without being literal, corny or unnatural" (Dahl-Wolfe 39). This focus can be seen in the range of annotated images on her contact sheets, where she placed emphasis on organic pose and gesture, with hand-written notes scattered across the page.

Bruno Latour described how this way of working, or rather organizing, within a larger structure means that team members, such as Dahl-Wolfe, are "*sequentially* fabricators and fabricated, and ... shift roles at specific *deadlines* that are themselves scripted" (Latour 7). Dahl-Wolfe therefore acts first as *fabricator*, while subject to a brief from Snow, later negotiating in relation to her own interpretations and in relation to her direct collaborators.



FIGURE 3

Babs Simpson, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, and two models, Brazil © Estate of Babs Simpson. 1947, photograph. *A Photographer's Scrapbook*, Louise Dahl Wolfe (Quintet Books, 1984).

The images produced are then returned to the magazine for editing and art direction from Brodovitch, at which point Dahl-Wolfe is *fabricated*: made into a component of the magazine, with her work recreated in relation to the rest of its content. The series of relationships that build a successful sequence of fashion interchanges has to be organized by Snow, but moves between a complex series of “fabricators/fabricated” that work from brief to deadline, from initial design to consumption, whether visual or literal. This recalls Latour’s idea of a rhythmic process to such work, as the magazine gives control of each brief to its employees, before reincorporating work created into the final product. As discussed above, each issue is as much about its parts as it is the whole, since each are inscribed in this fluid organizational process.



FIGURE 4

Louise Dahl-Wolfe photographing Christian Bérard. 1946, photograph. A Photographer’s Scrapbook, Louise Dahl-Wolfe (Quintet Books, 1984).

The work and logistics that go into this formation are largely hidden from magazine readers' view. However, Dahl-Wolfe's photobook contains numerous views into this part of her work, from images of assistants sewing sofa cushions to make a set, to this photograph of her shooting Christian Bérard (see fig. 4). She is shown balanced atop a table, bent in concentration, as she strains to find the perfect angle. Readers may suspect the difficulties involved in an image's creation, but they are usually excluded from fashion magazines' apparently seamless realm.

Collaboration underpinned these women's success, and Dahl-Wolfe's work with Diana Vreeland was to produce some of *Harper's Bazaar's* most celebrated images. A strong element that united them was their shared interest in colour. Carmel Snow stated that Dahl-Wolfe took colour photography "to its ultimate" (*The World of Carmel Snow* 98). This connected back to her training, both in fine arts and interior design, and to her fascination with colour theory. At the San Francisco Institute of Art she was taught by colourism pioneer, Rudolph Schaeffer. As Frances McFadden, *Harper's Bazaar's* Managing Editor, noted, "when not faced with a deadline, she worked with her little camera on experiments with Kodachrome, experiments that were to set a new standard in colour" (Dahl-Wolfe xii).

Colour was significant in a number of ways during this period, both technically and aesthetically. The 1930s and 1940s saw great strides in manufacturers' ability to dye different fabrics the same colour, which enabled greater coordination of separates, one of the growing dress categories for modern women. Film stock producers worked on truer representations of varied hues in still and moving film, and printers sought ways to reproduce this on magazine pages (Jacob 119). For creators and consumers, this implied exciting possibilities and turned Dahl-Wolfe's photographic imaginings into rich, polychrome visions.

Colour pages added to magazines' visual luxury and the number in each edition began to grow. This added another dimension to their look and feel, and required further skills from photographer and fashion editor, who now needed to be aware of how colour worked within an outfit, on a model, in relation to the setting, as well as in the photograph and the eventual impact on the printed page. In her biography of Diana Vreeland, Amanda

McKenzie Stuart described the process of shaping a fashion editorial and the significance of colour within the choices made:

The colour photographs in each issue were expensive, and were allocated to clothes by advertisers and designers whom Snow and Diana agreed were important. Snow and Brodovitch, meanwhile, deliberated on how the images should be placed in the issue. Once Diana had selected the pieces, and Snow approved, Diana and Dahl-Wolfe agreed between them what the mood of the image should be. (Stuart 132)

Dahl-Wolfe, who published her first colour photograph for *Harper's Bazaar* in 1937, always acknowledged Vreeland's importance to her fashion spreads, and stated that:

No one knew color, no one could pull a sitting together like Diana. At *Bazaar*, we had to photograph clothes we called "pearls of little price." That meant they were from manufacturers who advertised. The more they spent on advertising, the bigger the picture ... Sometimes, you'd get these clothes and you just wouldn't know what to do. But Diana always managed to make it work, and Carmel would say, "Just hide as much as you can." (Duka 6)

Vreeland's understanding of the ways an ensemble's various elements worked on the body was crucial to Dahl-Wolfe's visual style as a whole. It was also significant to the emergence of the American Look as a fashion style and as a guide to American women and their international peers. Vreeland embodied this ideal of good taste, although she preferred to wear French couture herself. It is perhaps most accurate to say that she embraced hybridity. She was widely travelled and constantly inspired to copy and adapt what she saw, whether sandals from Pompeii or taking note of the way Elsie de Wolfe arranged her flowers (D.V.). Vreeland's ingenuity and flexibility were crucial to her vision.

Photographer Lillian Bassman remembers her standing in front of the mirror and “becoming the model”; Vreeland thus embodied what she wanted to then project on set, while Dahl-Wolfe was able to translate this into something visual (Vreeland, Jorgen-Permutt, and Tcheng).

Vreeland saw fashion in purely aesthetic terms and was quick to learn the power of imagery to create new ideas of what fashion was and could be.

Her ability to style even the “pearls of little price” and present them to viewers as part of an aspirational portfolio of fashion demonstrated her skill and the dynamic she established with Dahl-Wolfe.

As McFadden said, “In Diana Vreeland she found the perfect teammate. When faced by an outfit that seemed utterly hopeless to Louise, Diana would save the day by redoing a coiffure, twisting a scarf a new way, adding the gleam of an earring” (Dahl-Wolfe xiii).

The *Harper’s Bazaar* team thus helped to shape the ways women might wear readymade garments, and furnished them with visual cues for their own approach to shopping and dressing. Collaborative thinking transferred from behind the scenes at a sitting, onto the fashion page, and, potentially, into the readers’ own self-fashioning. For a multi-page shoot set in Arizona published in January 1942, Vreeland combined department store sportswear’s simple, clean silhouettes with rich, earthy tones, punctuated with dark separates and bright accessories that harmonized with Frank Lloyd Wright’s use of organic materials at Taliesin West and Arizona’s parched landscape. Indeed, Vreeland’s embodiment of the stylistic ideal was made manifest in the final

spread, when she modelled for one of the shots herself. She is pictured against a stonewall, with a scarf wrapped around her hair, a decorative touch she frequently used when styling professional models.

One of Vreeland's most well-known model discoveries was Lauren Bacall, who, describing her experience of working with the editor and Dahl-Wolfe, noted how their approaches complimented each other's to create a harmonious set and productive work environment:

It was fun working with these two ladies. Diana would be there through the sitting, making sure the clothes were on straight, that the hair was the way she wanted it. Louise would snap away. They worked perfectly together. I'd say almost anything that came into my head ... A lot of it made them laugh — though all through it, Dahl-Wolfe never looked up from the camera, never really took her mind off what she was doing. A total professional. (Bacall 95)

Dahl-Wolfe was thus able to capture the atmosphere conjured by Vreeland for her model in her images. In contrast, Bacall described working with photographer Baron George Hoyningen-Huene as difficult, since "he posed me like a statue" (Bacall 95). Such formality is again evident in his photographs, which demonstrate precision and stylized gestures, even when photographing sportswear. Snow could shape the results of each editorial brief through her choice of creative team, to produce a more classical, contemplative mood with Hoyningen-Huene, or a more relaxed, though still carefully composed, image with Dahl-Wolfe. Her recognition of each employee's difference in approach to collaboration is again part of the delicate balance of people and ideas that was continually reconfigured for each issue. Her discernment was crucial in organizing editorial shoots that had to conform sufficiently to the magazine's outlook, yet continue to evolve, like fashion itself.

The full extent of the Arizona shoot by Dahl-Wolfe and Vreeland demonstrated this. Although contained in a single portfolio, varied moods, locations, and models produced images that displayed contemporary ready-to-wear within a Western theme, with pictures that ranged from bright butterfly-scattered dresses to stark black and white shots of tailored coats. Vreeland and Dahl-Wolfe's use of line and texture, colour and light invigorated the magazine's pages and appealed to viewers through such subtle shifts in settings and fashions. Brodovitch then carefully laid out the spread, collecting some images together and allowing others to fill full pages to organize the reader's experience.

On Set: Toni Frissell



FIGURE 5

A fashion model underwater with a diver in a dolphin tank at Marineland, Florida, 1939 © Estate of Toni Frissell. Toni Frissell, *Model Underwater*, 1939, photograph. Granger Historical Picture Archive/Alamy Stock Photo, <https://c7.alamy.com/zooms/3/af438e0e-ead8-4495-b03e-167e8fa5db39/ffrx09.jpg>.

As her body plunges into dark waters, the model twists slightly, curving to turn her face away from the camera, to emphasize the contrast between her pale clothes and waterlogged hair (**see fig. 5**). Taken at Marineland in Florida in 1939, Toni Frissell's image emphasizes the magazine viewer's experience of entering fashion's glossy realm. Readers are required to suspend their sense of disbelief and escape onto a plane of shared imaginings and desires. Frissell's image is simultaneously realistic and fantastical; we can feel the sensation of cool water on our skin, the lightness as it supports the body's weight, the dreamlike shimmer of sunlight on the pool's surface. And yet this illusion is broken. In the corner of the frame, hovering beneath this mermaid vision is a diver. His heavy suit and shadowy presence tells us that this is a construction, and that the model needs air, and safety precautions must be taken on set.

This "backstage" element was included in the final spread and breaks the fourth wall. It provides an alienation effect as jarring as when a film actor stares directly into the camera. In this print, this is furthered by the photograph's visible edges; it is possible to see beyond the frame, outside the crop that eventually made it onto the published page. Chinagraph pencil markings show the archivist's work, and the colour and shade bands alert the viewer to the effort that goes into printing and correcting. This image illuminates fashion photography's existence in several media and locations: as a photographer's vision, as negatives, as print, its destiny on the magazine page, and, ultimately, its acquisition into the archive, in this case Toni Frissell's collection at the Library of Congress. Thus, the contradiction between fashion's apparent ephemerality and the photograph's longevity are made visible. Importantly, the dual presence of model and diver also suggests process, the work that goes into these imaginings, and the hidden network of creators, performers, viewers, and archivists that create and preserve fashion works.

Frissell also shows these contradictory moments in her photobook, as a counterpoint to her fashion images' usual sense of finish. In this image, she is seen photographing a skiwear scene, while her husband and daughter lie in the grass in a moment of downtime (**see fig. 6**).



FIGURE 6

Frances McLaughlin-Gill, Toni Frissell, her husband Mac, and daughter Sidney © Estate of Frances McLaughlin-Gill. Frances McLaughlin-Gill, photograph. Toni Frissell Photographs, 1933–67, George Plimpton and Sidney Frissell Stafford (Doubleday, 1994).

This family snapshot was taken by her assistant Frances McLaughlin-Gill and encroaches on fashion's fantasy, as it heightens the sense of absurdity at building a set in a summery field in order to shoot winter sportswear in natural light. Readers' sensual experience of the final fashion image elides such discrepancies and the hidden industry they represent. There is a tacit agreement by all members of an organization: all must believe in this seamlessness.

Despite Frissell's careful planning and organization of each shoot, she still allowed for spontaneity on set, which might reveal accidental gestures and configurations of people, animals, and landscape. This led to slippage between home and work, in terms both of relationships, lifestyle, and aesthetics, even to the extent that *The Christian Science Monitor* noted that Frissell often took props from shoots home with her and integrated them into her everyday life (Foster).

While Dahl-Wolfe's collaboration with Vreeland is well-documented, it is more difficult to trace Frissell's work with specific editors. However, it is interesting to read Bettina Ballard's description of *Vogue* Fashion Editor Sally Kirkland in light of Frissell's work for the magazine. It reveals the stable of editorial signatures each magazine strove to acquire and, once again, how personal style could potentially translate from designers, editors, and photographers onto the magazine page. Ballard began with a sketch of Kirkland's physical presence: "She had a wonderful, loose-jointed, slapstick quality to her lanky long-legged college-girl figure that was ... exaggerated by Claire McCardell's jersey sheathes worn with a wide Phelps belt covered with silver motifs" (Ballard 159-60). This description relates closely to many of the models used by Frissell in her shoots, and to the way her spreads were styled to encapsulate the low-key fashions that emerged from Seventh Avenue at the time.

In contrast to Vreeland, who embodied a European style, "No figure ever looked more completely removed from Paris [than Kirkland]. She had her own distinct kind of chic, an un-*Vogue* look that was like a strong, fresh breeze blowing through the *Vogue* corridors as she walked" (Ballard 160). This mirrors comments on Frissell and, indeed, sportswear designers such as McCardell. A *Vogue* profile on Frissell, then aged sixty-six,

commented on her “slender, racy build” (McClellan 144). In contemporary profiles and memoirs, these women were written about in relation to mid-century ideals of American femininity. This network of women, images, and words drew a portrait of modern life that echoed through the magazine pages, and was recreated not just through dress, styling, and composition, but by pose: “The reflection of this fresh viewpoint could be seen in the pictures she produced that turned the out-of-doors and motion into important elements of every page she worked on. Girls stood with their legs wide apart, their mouths open, happily yelling at someone, in what Edna Chase must have thought ‘Vulgar’ stances, but which brought life into *Vogue*” (Ballard 160). Both Chase and Snow, though the former with more reluctance, employed editors and commissioned photographers who could bring visions of newness to magazines built on a more static couture style. While this was new to editorial pages, it had been a growing strand within society pages, where the international elite was shown at leisure. Editors had to reflect the shift to more active lifestyles, but simultaneously maintain the “Old World” style of studio-bound shots. Frissell’s nonchalant approach was ideal; from the start of her career, she had combined athletic poses and bodies with elite resorts and monumental landscapes that developed *Vogue*’s existing aesthetic into outdoors settings.

FIGURE 7

Contact sheet from photoshoot by Toni Frissell in Bermuda. 1945, contact sheet, Toni Frissell Collection at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Her personal approach to models was also important to this vision, and is reflected in contact sheets from her shoots that show her sitters chatting with her, as she puts them at ease and photographs their movements and expressions as they talk to her. In these examples, it is possible to see a model, photographed in Bermuda in 1946, running through a series of gestures that reveal a bathing costume's sinuous lines as her body moves against an expansive beach location (see fig. 7).

Yet such idyllic scenes mask the realities of building a career in the highly competitive fashion world. In 1944, after mounting tensions with management, Frissell resigned from *Vogue* and went on to work at *Harper's Bazaar*, although in a restricted capacity, since Louise Dahl-Wolfe would not countenance her producing fashion pages for the magazine. This rivalry further illuminates Latour's point that an organization is continually subject to collaborators' tensions and potentially conflicting aims and ideas.

The editors-in-chief had to maintain equilibrium between employees to ensure that the magazine was open to new creative input, without disrupting its existing staff.

In Latour's vision of the organization, individuals, and the magazine as a whole, must be continually balanced and reconfigured, without such conflicts disrupting its progress. Letters in Frissell's archives at the Library of Congress attest to varied issues, including problems with Dahl-Wolfe, which Snow had to negotiate diplomatically to ensure new editorials for her magazine without upsetting her established team. In a letter to Frissell dated July 6th, 1945, Snow acknowledges that "Louise refused to take any September pictures ... unless I assured her I

would not use you" ("Letter to Toni Frissell" 1945). She suggests that Frissell could create fashion editorials for the new magazine *Junior Bazaar*, since Dahl-Wolfe was too associated with *Harper's Bazaar's* identity to work for its younger title.

Once Frissell did start to contribute there were more mundane issues to discuss, which reflect photographers' ongoing need to finance trips and editors' concerns about keeping to budget and balancing a particular edition's content.

In a letter of April 7th, 1947, for example, Snow painstakingly recounts a previous verbal agreement with Frissell about costs for a shoot in St. Moritz and states that the magazine will pay "... \$225 per page instead of the usual \$200, and that the extra money was to cover such things as excess weight, car rentals etc." This was clearly in response to Frissell's request for further budget to cover such expenses, and also to try to secure her stake in that month's issue, as Snow goes on to say, "Please remember, Toni, I never asked you to take this trip to St. Moritz, but told you that naturally we would be delighted to use some of your pictures. However, no number of pages was agreed." Money, exclusivity, and status were constantly negotiated to facilitate shoots and gain commissions, as Snow remarked at the end of her letter, "... we must be very careful and clear in our business relations and commitments" ("Letter to Toni Frissell" 1947). As with fashion photography itself, commercial concerns and the magazine's agenda were a constant concern for image-makers, whose ability to create was militated by the need to finance trips, cope with the sheer bulk of travelling with camera equipment, and by the demands of designers and editors.

Dahl-Wolfe and Frissell's photographs brought images of women's lives to the fashion pages; if not how they actually lived them, then at least an attainable imagining of modern existence.

Each had to negotiate the increasingly competitive and crowded world of fashion photography to create images that met individual assignment briefs, as well as the magazines' overall aims. Jessica Daves noted the skill required to create powerful photographs within the environment of a fashion magazine: "To find a personal way of photographing these repetitious subjects is an accomplishment limited to a photographer who can combine his [sic] technique with his [sic] own point of view and can establish rapport with the model" (Daves 194). While for Dahl-Wolfe this was more about control of the image's elements, for Frissell improvisation brought fresh perspective to each shoot.

Behind the Scenes

Edna Woolman Chase recognized the pressures placed on her magazine staff, but said that “Because of human rivalries or jealousies of incompatible temperaments, we were not always a *happy* family on *Vogue*, but we were always a family curiously united” (Chase and Chase 311-2). Her emphasis on the close ties between her magazines’ staff reinforces the idea of an organization built by individuals, who were focused on a common idea, and yet could interpret and reinvent this while maintaining *Vogue’s* identity. The same was true at *Harper’s Bazaar*, as Carmel Snow said upon seeing Louise Dahl-Wolfe’s work: “From the moment I saw her first color photograph, I knew that *Bazaar* was at last going to look the way I had instinctively wanted my magazine to look’” (Schwiegershausen). Snow’s ability to project towards the magazine as a whole through the work of each individual was crucial to *Harper’s Bazaar’s* success. Snow reconciled Bruno Latour’s description of organizations, where “What passes is not a stable fixture but a whole moving assemblages of disconnected parts” (Latour 11). Nancy McDonnell recognized this talent when she praised Snow’s ability to maintain *Harper’s Bazaar’s* sense of “continuity” and identity across issues and years, crediting her understanding that “you can’t force collaboration. These women worked together really well because they had talents that dovetailed and they respected each other’s talent” (Rowlands).

Talent was supported by efficient organization, a facet of machine production and mass communication, both of which grew enormously during this period. The camera’s technology, the photographer’s skill, and, later, that of the dark room and printers were combined with the editor and assistants’ crafts of styling, sewing, and adjusting to make the image itself “work.” Technology is present but usually removed, and the image’s surface disguises the labour, time, money, and thought that went into every shot. Latour’s theory of a fluid set of practices, instigated by varied groups of people, underscores the institutional rhythms at the heart of fashion magazines’ existence. A “tactical reading” of Dahl-Wolfe and Frissell’s imagery across different contexts exposes the hidden organization that facilitates fashion representation. Each person, each brief, each element had to cohere yet suggest new possibilities, to represent the photographers discussed here, their editors, and models, and, by extension, the magazines and fashion itself in constant motion: the same, but always different.

Works Cited

- Bacall, Lauren. *By Myself*. Coronet, 1980.
- Ballard, Bettina. *In My Fashion*. Secker & Warburg, 1960.
- Chase, Edna Woolman, and Ilka Chase. *Always In Vogue*. Victor Gollanz, 1954.
- Dahl-Wolfe, Louise. *A Photographer's Scrapbook*. Quintet Books, 1984.
- Daves, Jessica. *Ready-Made Miracle: The Story of American Fashion for the Millions*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967.
- Di Bello, Patrizia, et al., editors. Introduction. *The Photobook: From Talbot to Ruscha and Beyond*, by Patrizia Di Bello and Shamoan Zamir, I.B. Tauris, 2011, pp. 1-16.
- Duka, John. "A Chronicler of Fashion, at 88, Reflects on Change." *The New York Times*, 28 September 1984, pp. 6.
- Foster, Inez Whiteley. "Pictures Keep Toni Frissell On the Move." *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 July 1943, pp. 8.
- Jacob, John P. "Louise Dahl-Wolfe: Photographer of her Time." *Louise Dahl-Wolfe: A Style of Her Own*, edited by Olivia Maria Rubio, La Fabrica, 2016, pp. 119.
- Lambert, Eleanor. Personal interview. 22 April 2002.
- Latour, Bruno. "'What's the Story?'" Organizing as a Mode of Existence." *Agency without Actors? New Approaches to Collective Action*, edited by Jan H. Passoth, Birgit Peuker and Michael Schillmeier, Routledge, 2011.
- "Reporting Paris Styles is a Business: *Vogue* & *Harper's Bazaar* Cover Openings." *Life*, 6 September 1937, pp. 32-9.
- Plimpton, George, and Sidney Frissell Stafford. *Toni Frissell Photographs, 1933-67*. Doubleday, 1994.
- McClellan, Lydia. "Now I'm Sixty-Six and I Love It." *Vogue*, 1 June 1973, pp.140-5.
- McDonnell, Nancy. "A Conversation with Penelope Rowlands." *The Museum at FIT*, 21 February 2016, exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/women-of-harpers-bazaar/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2016/02/Penelope-Rowlands-conversation-2016-Museum-at-FIT.pdf.
- Schwiegershausen, Erica. "A Legendary Fashion Photographer, Revisited." *Nytimes.com*, 20 April 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/20/t-magazine/fashion/fashion-photographer-louise-dahl-wolfe-book.html>.

Snow, Carmel. Letter to Toni Frissell. 6 July 1945. Toni Frissell Collection. Prints and Drawings Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

---. Letter to Toni Frissell. 8 April 1947. Toni Frissell Collection. Prints and Drawings Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Snow, Carmel with Mary Louise Aswell. *The World of Carmel Snow*. McGraw-Hill, 1962.

Stuart, Amanda McKenzie. *Empress of Fashion: A Life of Diana Vreeland*. Harper Perennial, 2013.

Vreeland, Diana D.V. Da Capo Press, 1997.

Vreeland, Lisa Immordino. *Diana Vreeland: The Eye has to Travel*. Abrams, 2011.

Diana Vreeland: The Eye has to Travel. Directed by Lisa Immordino Vreeland, Bent Jorgen-Permutt, and Frederic Tcheng, 2011.

Author Biography



Rebecca Arnold

COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART

Rebecca Arnold is Senior Lecturer in History of Dress and Textiles at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London.

She has lectured internationally and set up the first undergraduate course in the BA (Hons) Fashion History & Theory at Central Saint Martins in 2001. Her books include *The American Look: Fashion, Sportswear and Images of Women in New York in the 1930s and 1940s* (I.B. Tauris, 2008), *Fashion: A Short Introduction* (OUP, 2009), and the edited volume, *30 Second Fashion* (The Ivy Press, 2016). She also contributes regularly to journals and compilations, including the article "Fashion in Ruins: Photography, Luxury and Dereliction in 1940s London" in *Fashion Theory* (2016). She is currently working on a new book, entitled *Documenting Fashion: Image and Modernity in America, 1920–60*. She also works as a consultant and in journalism and digital media (Blog: Documenting Fashion, Instagram: @documentingfashion_courtauld, Podcast: "Bande à part").

Article Citation

Arnold, Rebecca. "Behind the Scenes with Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Toni Frissell: Alternative Views of Fashion Photography in Mid-Century America." *Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-35, www.fashionstudies.ca/behind-the-scenes/, <https://doi.org/10.38055/FS010110>.

Copyright © 2018 Fashion Studies - All Rights Reserved
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license (see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)