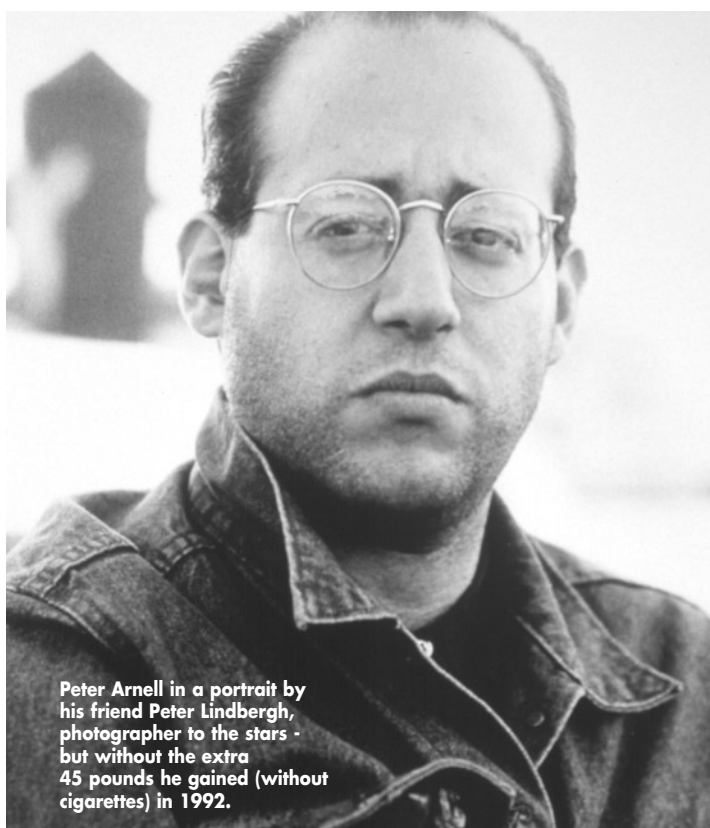


VOGUE

Interview

the belly of the photographer

New Yorker Peter Arnell has reinvented advertising: The product embodies an idea. The agency head and photographer is the guiding force behind intelligent images. And a difficult person!



Peter Arnell in a portrait by his friend Peter Lindbergh, photographer to the stars - but without the extra 45 pounds he gained (without cigarettes) in 1992.

One person in New York has it especially tough: Peter Arnell. When I mention that I'm doing an interview with Arnell, each person I talk to can only report the worst possible things about him: He's a lunatic, a crazy man, an idiot, an a... That sounds good, thinks the critical journalist, and looks at the fantastic Donna Karan campaigns of Peter Arnell, which have spread his fame throughout the world.

A woman is President. She is wearing Donna Karan, and has a horde of rugged bodyguards and an irresistibly charming smile. This woman President is the purest form of career woman: Powerful, attractive, and unique. That no one came upon the idea before Arnell says a great deal about the timidity of other advertisers, who either showed the career woman in a poetic, dreamy way, or else placed her pseudo-realistically in an everyday office setting. None of them trusted themselves to express what gnaws deepest at the insides of a career woman: The hunger for power. Arnell expressed the secret, and became famous. That was last year.

Since then, the densely packed schedules have gotten even fuller, and night shifts have increased. So it really is no surprise that the journalist has to wait for over an hour at the reception desk. "They still work like crazy people," explains the young woman at the reception desk, "sometimes until dawn." Dozens of urban natives in denim shirts, khaki pants, and sneakers dart through the fabric hall, which is divided into little plots, in the border region between Soho, Little Italy, and Chinatown. Outside, the homeless rummage through garbage looking for usable cardboard tents, while behind the spotlessly clean window panes, images for the

Nineties are being constructed.

When the doors are finally opened, you look into a square room, a little over 250 square feet in size, in the center of which stands a large, square wooden desk. On all sides, the walls are obscured all the way to the ceiling by bookshelves on which thousands of books are crowded in painful confinement. In between, photos of the family, Arnell's wife, a beautiful little daughter, Lucy, and a collection



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of architectural masterpieces in the form of inexpensive little models made for tourists – Eiffel Towers, Milanese cathedrals, and Empire State Buildings. The room of a professor of art history and architectural theory.

Arnell looks into the room briefly, blinks in embarrassment, and rushes out again. Ten minutes later he pops up again, and shakes my hand in order to immediately take his leave again. You can hear his screaming through the closed glass door, and see his employees, hanging their heads, slink back to their places.

A quarter of an hour later he remembers the journalist and is ready for the interview. He tells his life story as matter-of-factly as if it were a school assignment – how he studied architecture at Princeton, how he came to know his associate, Ted Bickford, how he gave up his studies in order to work with Michael Graves, the high priest of post-modern architecture, how he quit there in order to study architecture in Rome, and how he put together an exhibition and catalog on American architects while there. During this description of his life story, Arnell removes my diving watch and inspects it, only to toss it back to me again.

Having returned to America, Arnell and Bickford wrote books about architectural history and art. In 1983, Arnell and Bickford finally founded a marketing company. An advertising agency that today operates internationally, employs more than 55 people, and sees to the needs of clients such as Christian Lacroix and Emanuel Ungaro.

An unusual life story, even for an occupation that draws unusual life stories to it almost like magic. “With architecture, I learned to think in an orderly fashion,” explains Arnell. “Everything has its foundation, its pillars, and its top. Just like every story has an introduction, a plot, and a conclusion. And it is just as important to proportion these things correctly in advertising as it is in architecture. Besides that, you learn to create spaces in which people can live. I try to implement that in advertising as well.” That is very important to Arnell. “Do you see that? I don’t furnish the spaces, I don’t show people how they should live. That is deception, that is bad advertising. I give people space to involve themselves with images. The right questions are being asked . . . perhaps that has to do with morality.”

For Arnell, the definition of advertising is not deception, but

communication. “Very simple. You explain to people: I have a product, and here I am. Plain and simple.” And this message can then be carried out artfully, elegantly, or in any way whatsoever. “Advertising in America today usually says ‘Buy me!’ before it says ‘Here I am’. That’s, the problem in America. That’s why I also had problems finding the right clients.” Arnell’s favorite thing is when he can co-design companies right from the start. When he designs them visually and conceptually on the drawing board, and then does the advertising as well, “as the final step after much, much work,” as he explains. He was able to demonstrate that in exemplary fashion for his friend Donna Karan, the New York fashion czar. The ascent of Donna Karan is not least of all the ascent of Arnell, who saw to her needs right from the beginning.

For her, he designed a revolutionary ad, which he photographed himself. He advertised her shoes with a pedestrian light on which “DKNY” (Donna Karan New York) was written instead of “Walk”. He advertised for pantyhose by showing beautiful, naked legs. Arnell: “I believe that people are smarter than they used to be. They’ve learned to understand media messages more quickly and more clearly. Advertising today must be strong and precise.”

After half an hour, Arnell breaks off the interview. “There’s a bunch of people waiting out there because of the Donna Karan catalog for Nieman Marcus.” The “bunch” comes in and remains silent. A big bag of goodies from Burger King is distributed while Arnell takes a report from the printer, the stylist, and his assistant. Arnell interrupts them again and again, requesting brevity and concentration. After three quarters of an hour, the Danish stylist is near tears; Arnell cracks a joke and hugs her. Then he rushes from the room, dictating something to his secretary who writes it in her pad. Two limousines are waiting outside for Arnell and his assis-

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tants. It’s a little after eight, and Arnell is beginning his second job.

Arnell calls home from the limousine. He wishes his wife Sara a good night, and explains to his daughter Lucy that she won’t get to see Dad this evening. “Ciao, sweetheart, sleep tight.” Arnell relaxes. As he arrives at the photo studio, a Finnish model with makeup artist is waiting for him. Arnell eats a few grapes, and cheerfully slaps his photo assistant on the fanny. “Is everything ready?” He begins the shoot just before nine. This evening, the stocking catalog is being photographed for Donna Karan. With camera in hand, Arnell skips around the studio. He jokes with his assistants, flirts with the model, and warbles Italian hits.

No question. Peter Arnell is a nice guy.

ULF POSCHARDT



The most famous Arnell campaign: Career woman as President. (Photo: Peter Lindbergh)
From left to right: Photographs by Peter Arnell. A coolly erotic leg composition that advertises stockings without using stockings. Arnell shot a portrait of the American weight lifter Mark Henry for his book on the 1992 Olympics. A file photo from Peter Arnell's photo book Sonia.