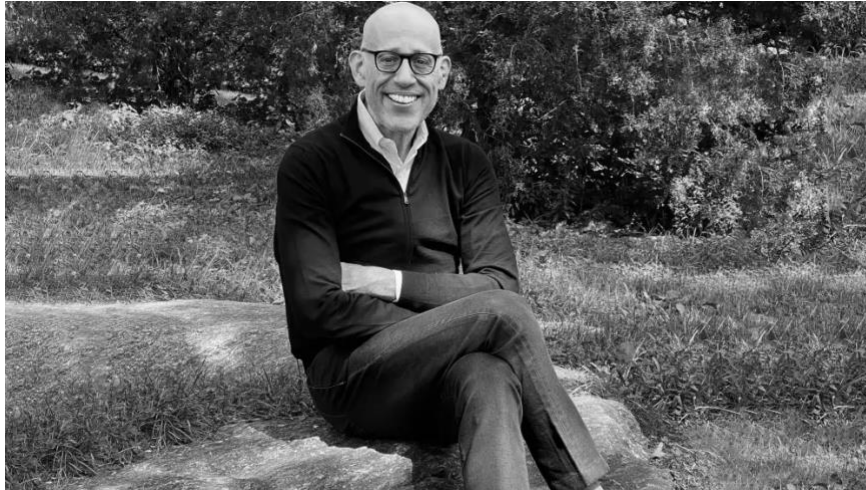


BUSINESS / MEDIA

Media People: Peter Arnell Talks About His Career, How Branding Has Changed, and His Most Memorable Campaigns

Arnell has written a two-volume book tracing his career from 1980 to 2020.

By [LISA LOCKWOOD](#)  MARCH 15, 2023, 12:01AM



Peter Arnell, who in the past has created groundbreaking campaigns for [Donna Karan](#), DKNY, Hanes, [Reebok](#), PepsiCo, Samsung, Gucci and Chanel, has a lot to say about fashion [advertising](#), then and now.

And in his opinion, fashion advertising today doesn't do much to serve the imagination.

He has published a two-volume book, titled "Peter Arnell Portfolio 1980-2020." (Hatje Cantz Verlag GmbH, \$150), that showcases his prolific work in photography, advertising, graphic art, architecture and industrial design. Arnell called creating the book "a monumental undertaking," which took five years to assemble.

In the book, he describes the strategy, design concept and point of view behind each of the campaigns and the work he created, whether it be the DKNY mural with a bird's-eye view of New York City; Hanes Hosiery ads with Tina Turner, where she shows off her famous legs, or the Bklyn Arena Media Wall, a massive digital billboard. Arnell photographed many of the campaigns himself.

During his more than 40-year career, Arnell has collaborated with such people as Helmut Newton, Peter Lindbergh, David Hockney, Muhammad Ali, Tom Brady, Spike Lee, Gwyneth Paltrow, Steven Spielberg and Jay-Z. He has also done pro-bono campaigns for the New York police and fire departments. After 9/11, Arnell designed the identity graphics for the fundraising to help the families of the victims and designed the Tribute Museum's identity and exhibit to commemorate its heroes.

For the book, Arnell asked people such as Lindbergh and Frank Gehry to write personal essays about his work. Lindbergh, for example, wrote: "Peter developed and created [Donna Karan's](#) campaigns from a radically different point of view, finding a totally new way to define a woman rather than the details of a clothing collection. It was an absolutely brilliant move." He called Arnell "a true visionary: with a 360-degree mind."

Gehry said, "For a guy who's difficult to understand sometimes, he's an irascible genius. He's relentless in his creativity. The length and breadth of his accomplishments are extraordinary."

Proceeds from the sale of the book, which contains 838 pages and 2,600 illustrations, will be donated to the Special Olympics in honor of its founder, Eunice Kennedy Shriver.

WWD spoke with Arnell last week to talk about his career and how branding and advertising have dramatically changed since he did his first ad campaigns.

WWD: What was the experience like going through all your old ad campaigns?

Peter Arnell: It was interesting because obviously there's a consistency of simplicity and clarity in all that work. We set a verbal and visual language very clearly, and those things lasted for a very long time. I always strive for things to be timeless. That was always very complicated against a tidal wave of people who were trying to set trends. It was also clear that I was never distracted by what was going on in the industry at all. If we were able to establish an identity or a brand and execute it well, it could actually live apart and be a strong differentiation. We were very close always to expressing or holding a mirror up to the company's culture. I think we did a really good job of never looking the same for everybody.

WWD: Do your campaigns have anything in common?

P.A.: There are a lot of people in the market who have a style. I never had a style. That's why it enabled me to do so many of these brands for so many years, whether it's McDonald's, or Donna Karan, or Chanel, or Banana Republic, it's all different. A big part of it is we do really good homework here. What we've learned from people like Karl Lagerfeld when he took over Chanel and the early days in trying to bring the brand forward and bring relevance to it — he was able to go into the archives and the history and be a great student of that history in order to know how to bring it into the future, like Tom Ford did at YSL and Gucci. These people are incredible historians of fashion brand culture. We used to get the keys to that.

When they were new companies, we went into the culture of the people who were designing it. If it was Donna [Karan], we were great students of her, a culture she was creating from Seven Easy Pieces. With [Reebok](#), we took the vowels out and created Rbk because of the need to really illustrate a hip, cool, fast-paced evolution of Reebok. Reebok was holding Reebok back, the name. You have things like DKNY, where clearly the challenge was a business challenge. Donna had hit a certain ceiling on the volume of Donna Karan New York, and there was a huge opportunity to look at the other side. The strategy, which was so important, was when we presented the other side of the same woman. We knew that that customer, who we referred to as “caviar,” also loved pizza.

WWD: How did you get your start in fashion advertising?

P.A.: Dawn Mello saw my David Hockney book in the window of Rizzoli and was interested in doing a book on the history of Bergdorf Goodman. Dawn hired us to do the 300 line [Bergdorf] ads on Sunday...it was my first fashion work. She introduced me to Donna Karan. What happened was the rest of the world, whether it be Samsung or anyone else, everyone wanted to be in fashion. That first 15 years of working in the fashion industry and kind of being recognized as the “go-to guy” for second lines — B by Byblos, A Line for Anne Klein, DKNY, Emanuel for Emanuel Ungaro. That led to so many opportunities outside of fashion.

WWD: How has advertising changed since you started doing ad campaigns for fashion brands?

P.A.: Advertising is no longer needed in the marketplace. I think that’s because of social media, Instagram, etc. I think people have engaged their trust in other people to be a voice or influence much quicker than what would be considered traditional [advertising](#). We do see a continuum of many brands in fashion, especially the luxury brands, continue to place their logos everywhere. But if you look at them carefully, they’re not thematic or with ideas, they’re with representation. They’re much more catalogue-y, they’re really only about the product. They moved far away from any social context or social responsibility. There’s very little shock and awe because social media is so powerful.

Advertising in the end today is acknowledging the awareness of representation of the brand, but it rarely serves the imagination, it certainly doesn’t provide innovation or an invention around using communication as a powerful tool, that is yet, in and of itself, another product of the company. I always believe that communication should be yet another product of the company, not an interpretation of the company. The conversation that it creates now is, “Do you like what I’m showing you?” “Is this what you want?” Instead of, “why is this available,” and “what’s behind it being available,” and where is the depth or the creative values?

Fashion played an incredible role in dressing society, and was an incredible reflection on a snapshot of where society was in any given moment in time. Things don’t seem to have purpose anymore. I don’t think that anything excites, because huge companies like LVMH [Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton] rely on collaborations. Products now to a large extent are

canvasses for others in order to stimulate a marketplace. You get [artist Yukio] Kusama putting dots all over Louis Vuitton, in the end, what is that? It's all flattened out in a way, it's predictable, in a way it's boring.

They might end up being incredibly important or relevant, in a way the market is so demanding of newness at such a high speed, at the speed of culture, they demand newness. These companies could not generate enough creativity at their own houses to stimulate, and a lot of those things go to how do you get promotion — Kusama's hanging over the building in Paris...she's a great artist, Frank Gehry makes a bag [for Louis Vuitton].

Everyone's playing with collab, but in the end it's the collab. It's moved away from a great sense of feeling amazing when you put clothes on. But what happened to glamour and couture? I think that advertising needed to move and it didn't. With social media, as a much lower price entry point, you can just have a direct one-to-one to the customer.

WWD: With the advent of digital, how has creating a memorable fashion image changed?

P.A.: In the supermodel days, the Peter Lindberghs, the Helmut Newtons and Patrick Demarcheliers, the Naomis, Christys, etc. became the ambassadors of beauty and style, and put that together with Bruce Weber. You got mood, spirit, attitude, inspiration, it was there. I think the supermodels bounced from the cover of Vogue magazines to galleries and museums. There was a zeitgeist there that was amazing. That went away. Big budgets went away. Ideas, I'm not sure I've seen any of them. Things have become very formulaic. I think that my early work shooting a photograph of a bridge to launch a very important fashion house [Donna Karan] illustrated the extreme opportunities and possibilities to actually engage with customers.

WWD: Do you think the fact that magazines are not as influential has diminished fashion advertising?

P.A.: Magazines and books, and specifically magazines and magazine stores, they don't move fast enough and they don't connect fast enough. They're of days gone by and are legacy things. On influence, how can one magazine and one editor go up against a million people in a marketplace? It's not possible. Instagram has more followers, more energy, more voice...so anyone who made the shift to the digital world and the speed to which people are living on their phones won. The bigger corporate monsters [the publishers], it took a long time to get there and they missed the optics.

WWD: What are your favorite campaigns that you've done?

P.A.: The thing that I loved the most was the introduction of Donna Karan Bath and Beauty, with Sonia Ryzy-Ryski in the bathtub. There was no product in the picture. It was the first time I was able to very powerfully communicate the emotions and feelings one is going to receive and be left with. Every woman was able to relate to that moment of calmness. Making connections to feelings is much better than making connections to product. The product ultimately has the

responsibility of delivering the promise of that feeling and capturing it. What's the point of showing the box of a product? Do you remember the Hanes campaign, it was just naked legs? Hosiery ends up being who you are. You don't have to show it. Everybody wanted a piece of Donna Karan for \$14. When you present things that rely on the product you choose for a photo shoot, next season they're not going to be timeless anymore. If I had some wish or dream, I think people should go back to capturing ideas and not photographing models.

WWD: Which was the most successful of all your campaigns?

P.A.: By far, in the fashion world, the campaign and billboard of DKNY cutout letters, that we did in one place, in one city for DKNY. That was a bell that rang all over the world. People had not put billboards in the city for a long time. That we were able to with these four letters give the city back a view and the fact that I had that photograph that I took, when you're coming down Broadway and Houston and it just blew up in your face.

WWD: Which of your campaigns was most underrated?

P.A.: I think the most underrated campaign was what I did for [Efraim] Grinberg at Movado. It was for Concord Watches and I did the campaign, "Be Late." It was brilliant. If you can afford a Concorde, you don't care about the time.

WWD: What do you think about the digital age that we're in?

P.A.: It's fabulous. It's created for someone who can now use an iPhone like myself and get proficient on it and actually capture images and then utilize them in real times. As we collapse the time between the creation and discovery of an idea, the development and production and shooting, the time line to get it out in the world, to be able to collapse that into minutes from months...the fashion world was waiting for that tool, that technology, that opportunity to connect at the speed of culture. Somebody named Steve Jobs delivered on a silver tray an opportunity for the fashion world to expose, connect and be living in a real-time conversation with everyone in the world. It democratized it.

I think fashion means something different today because of that world. It probably went from being a pattern and a fabrication and a material and a color and price point to being a conversation, an emotion, a feeling and an indulgence. Technology puts you into the spirit of the product more than the hanger. The hanger was removed once digital technology came.

WWD: Do you feel that today, everybody can be an art director?

P.A.: I think, first of all, everyone always saw themselves as art directors. Everyone has an opinion. I think it's more than an art director. I think people have become curators. People have shifted into curating the narratives, and actually engineering and designing narratives. Who the hell is around anymore? All my peers that I grew up with have either passed on or retired. I'm in the middle of this Fontainebleau project. My title is chief creative and brand officer in charge of

design for the entire Fontainebleau Hotel in Las Vegas. From sculptures in the lobbies to the furniture, to the graphics, the brand, the fountain designs, I'm the head of design for the entire project.

WWD: Why did you get out of fashion?

P.A.: That's a really great question. I still get assignments from many people in the fashion industry. I just recently worked with Staud. I'm kind of like "the Yoda of this world." I grew up with Dawn Mello, Mickey Drexler, Andrew Rosen, Donna Karan. It never leaves you. It's applied to everything you do every day. If you're asking me, in the fashion industry, I think what I have to offer isn't necessarily today what is needed. I would love to redo some companies right now. I would love to get my hands wrapped around the Gap. I would love to do soup to nuts from first concept to shelf.

WWD: What do you attribute your longevity in the business to?

P.A.: A lot of things. I always stayed relevant. And I've always been slightly ahead or at least on track with society, and I think a big part of our longevity here is the consistent delivery of successful work. At the end of the day, we just continue to work like we're 20 years old here. We're not associated with any era or period of time. We strive to do timeless work.

WWD: What part of the process do you get the most enjoyment out of?

P.A.: I think what I learned from the fashion world, a pencil in hand and sketching. Working with the ideas and working through the prototypes and the final result. I think I love the journey, and love iterating constantly. I think I enjoy the education along that journey. I'm always learning. My ability to wake up every day and say, "Today is the first day of the rest of my life." Next month I'll be 65. I get really excited in the end by photography. I know how to capture things that have a great appeal to people, and I think that's a very big part of the equation as well. Photography, design, sketching, observing. I think you need to remain the witness of your times in order to remain relevant.