

Richard Wentworth Azzedine Alaïa

**In this unique series of images, the pioneering photographer and leading protagonist
of New British Sculpture enters the world of the great couturier**

Might it be that Richard Wentworth is the Brassai of our time? Or the Atget? Or Henry Moore, Duchamp or Warburg? With Brassai, Wentworth shares a fascination for real-life encounters, brilliant and uncanny, and an outstanding ability to seize and manifest them into images. He is bound to Atget by his great sensitivity to daily life and the sense of time passing and vanishing; to Henry Moore, whose sculptures he helped to realise in the summer of Sergeant Pepper, by his sense of shape and the signals of the human body (almost always absent from his work); and to Duchamp, because he understood, in 1972, that sculpture no longer lay in sculpture, as Duchamp understood that painting no longer lay in painting, but in the eye's ability to see it in the ordinary world. With *Making Do and Getting By*, one of the most important bodies of art created today, an incomprehensible masterpiece, Wentworth has gathered more than 200,000 images of 'sculptures' taken from the world, where they were existing peacefully, unchallenged. It is ongoing. And with Warburg he shares an encyclopedic ability to bring together images that are fragments of life and, eventually, fragments of humankind.

But something was missing from his encyclopedia – which includes all forms of materials, of unconscious craftsmanship – something that once we understand it, we decipher to be essential and metaphysical: Fashion. In Richard Wentworth's book, fashion could only be couture. And couture could only be Azzedine Alaïa, in whom Richard Wentworth sees a proper "inventor-artist". In these pages, we see elements of the artist's visits to the Maison Alaïa. We discover architectural fragments of this couture house, where the designer – a master craftsman in the lineage of Madame Grès, Madeleine Vionnet and Cristóbal Balenciaga, but also a true empowerer of women and a revolutionary force in their contemporary life, like Christian Dior, Gabrielle Chanel, Rudi Gernreich and Yves Saint Laurent – primarily makes everything, controls everything, and pushes the craft to a level one would not have thought possible. Richard Wentworth was offered unprecedented access to the Maison Alaïa, unheard of in any couture house, where the secret of craft is jealously protected from any form of intrusion.

Here, for the first time, we are offered a sense of the fabric of couture; we experience how extraordinarily poetic and essential it all is, how humane. The images presented belong to a series that has been unfolding for the past three years, as the friendship between the sculptor and the couturier has become closer, and as the former's intimacy with the house has grown stronger. As Azzedine Alaïa says: "Richard's eye is wonderful. He has made me see things I do not see, I do not pay attention to. He sees it all. I am very private, but never, with him, have I sensed a difficult presence. He makes us see things in a way

we would have never seen them." Richard Wentworth's artistic practice is genre-defying: a sculptor in other media, including ready-made and photography, a teacher of life to all those who have the fortune to know him, a radical thinker in the guise of a polite and warm Englishman, a historian of modernisation.

We discover his unexpected affinities with Berenice Abbott, Richard Avedon and other major figures who have paved the way towards the aesthetics of today. We sense traces from Berenice Abbott's dual aesthetic citizenship: as an image-maker fascinated with the structure of bodies; as a photographer who was equally involved in what photography could do, how it could engage with the order of things, mirroring the relation of clothes to bodies with the relation between bodies and the universe. With Richard Avedon, he shares a treatment of the sensibility of the world in clothed bodies – bodies that say something of their time, leading to a notion of the present beyond the instant, semi-fictionally eternal while being completely of the moment. Each of the photographs taken by Richard Wentworth is an instant that his eye deciphered, and which he seeks to save from oblivion and disappearance – at least for the duration of human time. Such is the premise of *Making Do and Getting By*, of which these images are a part as well as a spin-off – somehow belonging to it while existing in their own space. From being part of this body of work and from engaging directly with fabrics and couture, each image is a momentous fragment of timelessness: It is completely of a given instant. It is there and then.

Maison Alaïa, 7 rue de Moussy, Le Marais, Paris. Part of the architecture of the extraordinary Alaïa compound – an entire late-19th-century city block – is unveiled. After moving in more than 20 years ago, the couturier progressively arranged the organisation of this space, which includes shop, studio, ateliers, archive, personal apartment, a kitchen where friends and collaborators gather for lunch and dinner, the Galerie (his not-for-profit exhibition space where these photographs are presented this September), a three-room hotel, and soon a bookshop featuring publications by his friends.

Some point in 2016 or early 2017... Here is the very dress on which the couturier was working for this very client; there is the fabric he developed for the sake of couture and, eventually, for women; and this is the preparation of the Spring/Summer 2017 presentation. This is also the history of all women who have ever worn dresses, of all humans who have ever dressed their body, and of those devoted to the cult of humanity who have made clothes for them. It is a human history, which involves all cultures, all lives, throughout.

With his unique ability to see things and read through them in order to retrace lineages and re-emphasise our position within them, Richard Wentworth reminds us that couture is not fashion:

It follows no other path than its own, but this path is intimately tied to the lives of human beings – to women. For that reason, when the attention and the intent of couture is brought into fashion – as it is by Azzedine Alaïa, who conceives couture-crafted ready-to-wear designs – magic happens. This is what the artist has been able to sense, and translate: These images allow us to feel the magic of time. In them, we see elements, objects, practices to which, had they been given the privilege of such access, Atget would have borne witness at Worth, or Brassai at Vionnet.

We also see the incredible, almost futuristic craft of design by a genius maker. As Richard Wentworth describes the creation of a dress: "It is like airplane engineering – it's just got to fly!" It starts with a deep knowledge of materials, how they can be explored, how they are to best serve women's lives. It includes experimenting with them, engaging in dialogues between fabrics that no one would have thought could come together. It unfolds in a vision, with a maker's ability to see on tracing paper what is going to happen 'for real'. It then goes through step after step of being worked and re-worked, made and re-made, until what was a prototype is finally realised. No wonder Azzedine Alaïa is so widely admired by the world's preeminent industrial designers, from Jean Prouvé and Pierre Paulin to Jonathan Ive, Marc Newson, and Martin Szekely.

In these images, we also have an entry into Wentworth's decades of studying materials – and pushing them to unexpected locations. Let us think of 35°9', 32°18', a steel ladder sculpture in the Tate collection. Wentworth found a distorted, abandoned ladder in Israel, bent, the structure of which was so unexpected it was obvious the artist had discovered something uncanny. The title refers to the location where Jacob supposedly dreamt of his ladder. It floats in the air with wires; it does not touch the ground, as light as a flying piece of textile. When looking at it, we are confronted with a certainty: "I've never seen a ladder like this before, one that does not even touch the floor." And we then see ladders – their tension, their torsion, the way we place our bodies within them – differently; nothing has been done, and yet everything has been created. This impression can only be evoked by someone who knows things: their genesis and their construction.

One also thinks of the method of such master practitioners as the architects Frank Gehry and Renzo Piano, where everything, all the construction that later becomes the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles or The Shard in London, starts with a set of lines, of cuts. It is then pushed to completion, involving the highest forms of technology. All of that designed to host humans, to offer them a dwelling.

Here, the artist and the couturier meet again. We sense, in the artist's vision, a drive to provide entry into the discrepancies of meaning, which can be textual as well as material – the whole

world is a text the artist reads. Textile is textual. Everything is layered meaning, from the moment we are sensitive to these layers, and to that meaning. And nowhere can it be more apparent than in couture and in Azzedine Alaïa's mastery: Every reader writes as he or she reads, and every writer reads as he or she writes. Couture is its own form of writing.

We are thankful to Richard Wentworth for reminding us that Baudelaire, Wilde and Proust were right: The dress is a text, sewn, tied; the world is a dress, and so is the text. All three exist in parallel. We are given to bear in mind Mallarmé's journal, *La Dernière Mode* (The Latest Fashion), which he designed as an encyclopedia of all the technical words of couture, as if, by mastering them, he was able to found the mystical text he was aiming to open.

While making a dress, Azzedine Alaïa reads all the information related to the physical, actual person who will wear it, and he brings into it all his experience as a reader, not simply of bodies and lives, but also of the readings of others, the history of couture, of which he might be the preeminent secret expert. There is no consistent reading that is not aware of the work of those who preceded us.

Thus, an existential principle appears: From reading, you write; Azzedine Alaïa authors life in dresses. Richard Wentworth reads life in making: He authors sculptural images and significant physical realities that all feature his quest for meaning, and his unveiling of it. This meaning is humanity itself. In the series of images on the following pages, we are allowed to read, first hand, an utter devotion to humanity, and traces of the patient, ceaseless service it requires.

There is a lot of writing in Richard Wentworth's images, from his own handwriting (literally, by his hand on his hand) to the name of the atelier (flou, cuir), to two words he found used across the life of the house, and that are so appropriate – blanc and noir. We are given a lesson in demanding, self-challenging writing, from two people who know how to write and read in a way so many of us will never be able to conceive.

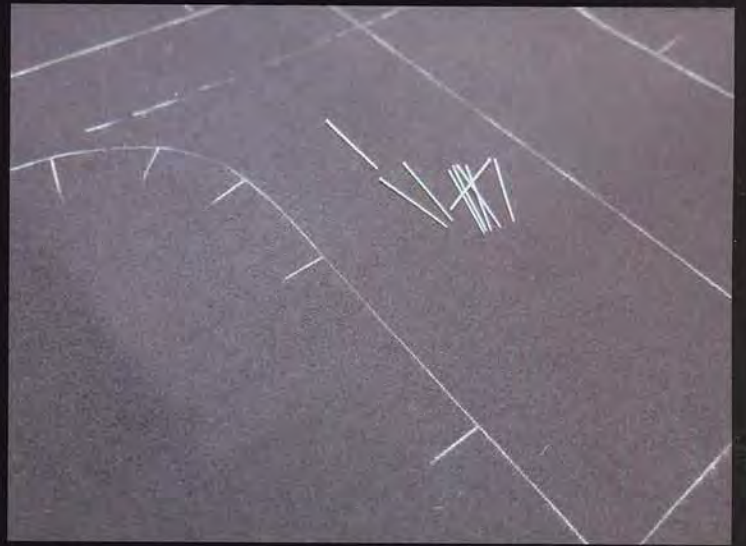
It is both moving and inspiring to witness the encounter of these two generous visionaries and their activities, evolving to help others live. We now just have to see, and learn how to read again. We might never write like this, but we can be changed by the metaphorical power of making, and its ability, when at the most acute, to include present, past, and future.

As St Augustine said, there is no time but the present. The past is the present of the past, the future is the present of the future, the present is the present of the present. Breaking from our lives, Richard Wentworth's photography – the sculptor's – provides us with the intensity of the present, as does the experience of wearing an Azzedine Alaïa dress.

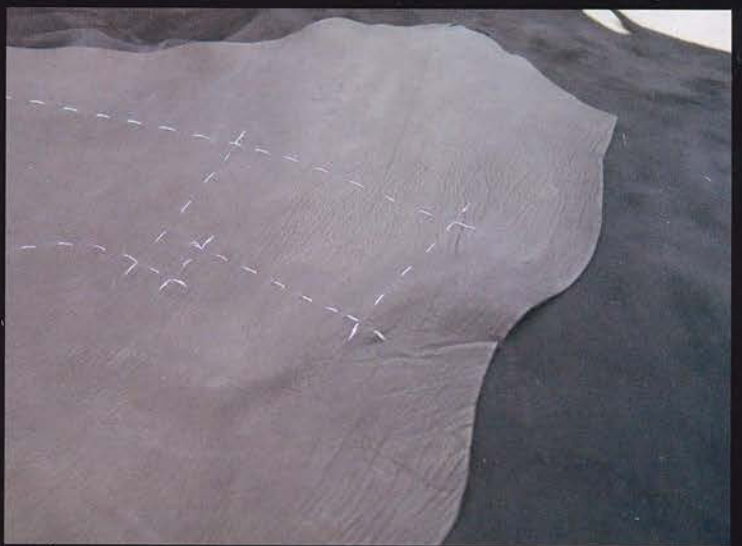
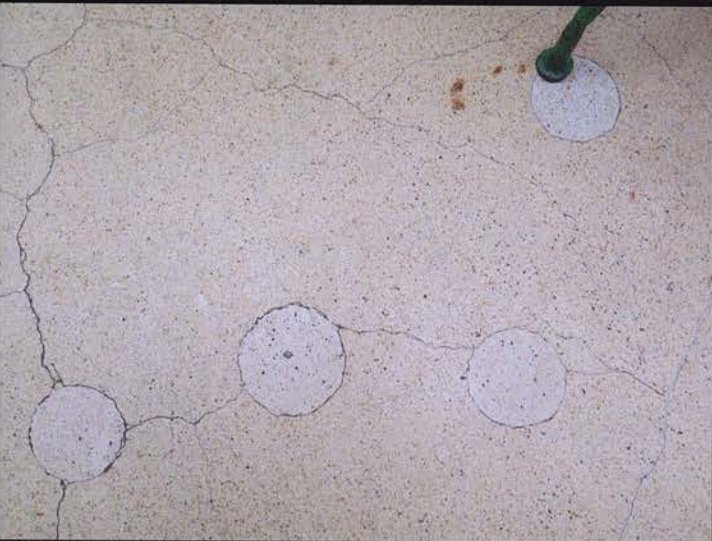
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Richard Wentworth à la Maison Alaïa is at Galerie Azzedine Alaïa,
18 rue de la Verrerie, Paris until 26 November 2017









- BLANC -
- NOIR -

Azzedine











