



BILL CUNNINGHAM NEW YORK

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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

BILL CUNNINGHAM NEW YORK

a film by Richard Press

“We all get dressed for Bill,” says Vogue editrix Anna Wintour. The “Bill” in question is 80+ *New York Times* photographer Bill Cunningham. For decades, this Schwinn-riding cultural anthropologist has been obsessively and inventively chronicling fashion trends and high society charity soirées for the Times Style section in his columns “On the Street” and “Evening Hours.” Documenting uptown fixtures (Wintour, Tom Wolfe, Brooke Astor, David Rockefeller—who all appear in the film out of their love for Bill), downtown eccentrics and everyone in between, Cunningham’s enormous body of work is more reliable than any catwalk as an expression of time, place and individual flair. In turn, ***Bill Cunningham New York*** is a delicate, funny and often poignant portrait of a dedicated artist whose only wealth is his own humanity and unassuming grace.

AWARDS AND FESTIVALS

OPENING NIGHT

NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS FILM
NEW YORK

WINNER

AUDIENCE AWARD
BEST DOCUMENTARY
MELBOURNE FILM FESTIVAL

WINNER

AUDIENCE AWARD
BEST DOCUMENTARY
SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL

WINNER

BEST STORYTELLING FOR DOCUMENTARIES
NANTUCKET FILM FESTIVAL

WINNER

BEST FIRST DOCUMENTARY
ABU DHABI FILM FESTIVAL

WINNER

AUDIENCE AWARD
BEST DOCUMENTARY
CANBERRA FILM FESTIVAL

LONG SYNOPSIS

“We all get dressed for Bill,” says Anna Wintour about Bill Cunningham, the 80-year-old *New York Times* photographer and unlikely man-about-town. Cunningham has two weekly columns in the Style section of The New York Times: “On The Street,” in which he identifies fashion trends as he spots them emerging on the street; and “Evening Hours,” his ongoing coverage of the social whirl of charities that benefit the cultural life of the city. The result is far from simple picture taking—it is cultural anthropology.

Still, no one knows a thing about Bill Cunningham, the man himself. Intensely private and averse to any kind of attention, it took filmmaker Richard Press and producer Philip Gafter years to convince Bill to be filmed. Using only small consumer cameras and no crew, Bill Cunningham New York has the intimacy and immediacy of a home movie.

Bill Cunningham New York chronicles a man who is obsessively interested in only one thing—the pictures he takes that document the way people dress. Bill has lived in the same small studio above Carnegie Hall for fifty years, never eats in restaurants and gets around on a worn-out bicycle—his sole means of transportation. The contradiction of his monk-like existence and the extravagance of his photographic subject matter is one aspect of his private life revealed in the movie.

The film’s cast of characters ranges from the downtown New York eccentrics Bill has photographed over the years to the uptown fixtures of New York culture (Tom Wolfe, Anna Wintour, etc) and pillars of “New York Society” who have never before appeared in a movie but who agreed because of their regard for Bill (David Rockefeller, Brooke Astor, Annette De La Renta, among others). The range of people reveals something of the delirious and delicious romp through New York that composes Bill’s world.

A sartorial Weegee, habitually dressed in a blue work jacket, Bill Cunningham has tried to live his life as an unencumbered man. He wants only his independence to be able to point his camera when beauty crosses his path. With this singular goal, he has managed to create a poignant and ongoing chronicle of the intersection of fashion and society in New York over fifty years—in effect, a portrait of New York City itself.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When people ask how long it took to make *Bill Cunningham New York* I say ten years: eight to convince Bill to be filmed and two to shoot and edit the film. Had it been any different, Bill wouldn't have been true to who he is or nearly as interesting a subject to film.

My fascination with Bill has always gone beyond the work he actually does. Who he is as a person, how he's chosen to live his life and his almost religious dedication to his work—that is where my curiosity initially resided.

But how do you make a film about a man who is so private that even the people who have known him for years don't know anything about him personally?

Bill's reticence to be filmed set the practical terms for how the documentary could be made. The spectacle of a camera crew, sound recorder, and boom operator would be impossible. We had to capture him the way he claims to capture his own subjects: "discreetly, quietly, and invisibly."

As a result, the movie was made with no crew, relying only on small, handheld consumer cameras so Bill wouldn't feel intruded upon. It had to be a kind of family affair with people he trusted—myself; Philip Gefter, the producer; and Tony Cenicola, a *New York Times* staff photographer whom Bill knew and liked and who operated one of the cameras.

There would be no scheduling of Bill's time for the film. We just had to be at the *Times* with cameras, ready and waiting, the same way Bill goes out onto the street and shoots—without a preconceived notion of what he'll find. He says that he lets the street speak to him, and I knew we'd have to take the same approach—believing that over time, the man and the story of the film would begin to reveal itself.

Making the film was a dance. For a year we spent all our time at *The New York Times* waiting for a moment or a mood that Bill would allow us to capture. I would casually hang out near the desk of John Kurdewan in the *Times*' art department where Bill would work on his "On The Street" page. With no fuss I would turn on the camera and film Bill and John working together at the computer. But then I would have to wait weeks for Bill to cooperate again. It took a month for Bill to allow me to put a wireless mike on him, and then he would only allow it occasionally—whenever the mood struck. We would leave notes on his desk (his preferred way of communicating) asking to follow him to an evening party, or to trail him riding his bike. Occasionally Tony and I would just show up on the street where he was shooting or at the lab where he develops his film or even more risky, outside Carnegie Hall, where he lives. I began to sense that even if he wasn't willing to be filmed at that moment, he was developing a respect and appreciation for our dedication to doing our job, and, as a result, he would sometimes reward us—first by introducing us to his neighbors in Carnegie Hall Studios and then (and almost unheard of for him), allowing us into his apartment.

It began to dawn on me that the process of making the movie paralleled the slow revealing of the man himself and that his relationship with us, the filmmakers, should be a part of telling the story. In looking for a way to do this, I thought of the early Andy Warhol/Edie Sedgwick movies with Chuck Wein as an off-screen presence—a voice never seen but prodding and provoking—just as we were doing with Bill.

The sit-down interviews with Bill were conducted with Philip and myself, with Tony occasionally chiming in. But in order to turn the filmmakers into a single palpable character, Philip's voice replaced all of ours whenever they were heard. This also made the need for any clarification or exposition in any part of the movie easy—I simply recorded Philip's voice making a comment or asking a necessary question.

Bill traverses so many disparate layers and overlapping social milieus of New York City. I thought it essential to interview people who not only have a relationship with Bill but who span the spectrum of New York to help tell his story. I tried to lessen the tyranny of the bland talking head by filming each character in the form of a photographic portrait—one that gives as much visual insight into who they are and how they live or work—and trying to make each person a character in the film in their own right.

The use of music throughout the movie is spare—I initially envisioned a more scored film but for most scenes when I tried adding underscore the music invariably worked against the scene—cluttering the immediacy and emotion of the moment. Where music did work, I was excited to discover that John Lurie and the Lounge Lizards was just the right sound for Bill: urban, quirky, fun and with heart.

In the editing room, I approached the movie's structure less like a documentary and more like a narrative with a strong protagonist surrounded by a menagerie of characters (kind of early "Altmanesque" and seemingly loosely structured) but with narrative threads that slowly builds, so that when taken together—a portrait emerges and comes into focus. Like one of Bill's pages—a collage, adding up to something larger than its parts.

The facts of Bills life were important to me only to the extent that they reveal the contours of his life. But it's not what he's about, even to himself. I wasn't interested in making a bio-pic. Rather, I wanted to capture something more intangible—though no less powerful—which is the essence of him, that joy—his way of being. Bill has dedicated his life to documenting what is unique and individual and I wanted the movie not only to be a portrait of him and by extension New York, the city he loves, but a celebration of self expression and self invention.

—Richard Press

THE FILMMAKERS

RICHARD PRESS (DIRECTOR/CINEMATOGRAPHY)

Richard Press has written and directed several award-winning short films, including *2÷3*, which premiered at the New York Film Festival and received a jury prize at The Berlin International Film Festival; and *Rambles* and *Expecting*, both of which premiered at Berlin. His film project *Virtual Love*, developed at the Sundance Filmmakers Lab, received the Sundance/NHK award at the 2005 Sundance Film festival. He is currently at work on *The Farnsworth House*, a narrative feature that he wrote and will direct about the scandalous romance between architect Mies van der Rohe and his client Edith Farnsworth. The film will be executive produced by Bill Condon and Gail Mutrux. ***Bill Cunningham New York*** is Press' first feature film.

PHILIP GEFTER (PRODUCER)

Philip Gelter was on staff at *The New York Times* for fifteen years, and held positions as the Page One Picture Editor and Senior Picture Editor for Culture. He also wrote regularly about photography for the *Times*; a book of his essays, *Photography After Frank*, was published by Aperture last year. Currently he writes about photography for *The Daily Beast* and is at work on a biography of Sam Wagstaff for W.W. Norton. ***Bill Cunningham New York*** is Gelter's first film as producer.

RYAN DENMARK (EDITOR)

Ryan Denmark has been an associate editor on every film Spike Lee has made since 2003. Ryan's directorial debut, *Romeo & Juliet vs. The Living Dead*, premiered at the 2009 Edinburgh Film Festival. His second film *Chase the Slut* is currently in post-production.

BARRY ALEXANDER BROWN (ADDITIONAL EDITING)

Co-director of the Oscar-nominated documentary *The War at Home*, Barry Brown has edited many of Spike Lee's films including *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcom X*, *Summer of Sam*, *25th Hour*, *Inside Man* and others. Other editing credits include Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay*, *Cousin Bette*, *Madonna: Truth or Dare* and *The Original Kings of Comedy*.

TONY CENICOLA (CINEMATOGRAPHY)

Tony Cenicola has been a staff photographer for *The New York Times* for the last ten years. This is his first feature film project.

KEIRA ALEXANDRA (PHOTOGRAPHIC ANIMATIONS)

A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, Keira Alexandra has worked for some of New York's most notable design firms including M&Co., Bureau, and Number 17. She moved into broadcasting, first as an on-air designer/director at MTV, and most recently as creative director of the Sundance Channel. Her work has won many awards including the title sequence for Richard Press' short *2÷3*. Keira has also been a lecturer and critic at Yale since 2000.

BILL CUNNINGHAM NEW YORK

Directed by **Richard Press**

Produced by **Philip Gefter**

Edited by **Ryan Denmark**

Additional Editing **Barry Alexander Brown**

Cinematography **Tony Cenicola and Richard Press**

Title Design and Photographic Animation **Keira Alexandra**

Featuring
(in order of appearance)

**Editta Sherman
Patrick McDonald
Harold Koda
John Kurdewan
Carmen Dell' Orefice
Annette de la Renta
Anna Wintour
Iris Apfel
Shail Upadhya
Kim Hastreiter
Annie Flanders
Lesley Vinson
Josef Astor
Toni "Suzette" Cimino
Thelma Golden
Tom Wolfe
Kenny Kenny
Anna Piaggi
Didier Grumbach
Michael Kors**

2010 • USA • 84 mins • Color • In English • Stereo • Digital • 1.78:1 aspect ratio



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An example of Bill Cunningham's On the Street page in the Sunday New York Times



ON THE STREET

Bill Cunningham

Oranginas Uncorked

Eight decades after Prokofiev wrote "The Love for Three Oranges," the fashion world has gotten the message: the midwinter streets are dotted with people in orange. The epidemic of pink last year has been succeeded by a palate of oranges. The reason so many people suddenly appear wearing one color is that the cloth and clothing makers and mass-market retail chains have replaced designers as the most influential arbiters of fashion.

An example of Bill Cunningham's Evening Hours page in the Sunday New York Times



June 15: The annual gala of the Council of Fashion Designers of America was at Alice Tully Hall. The guests were greeted by dozens of models standing on the outdoor promlike amphitheater, wearing designers' latest work.

1. Models on parade.
2. DIANE VON FURSTENBERG, center, the council's president, with KATE MULLEWY, left, and LAURA MULLEWY, Los Angeles designers who won the top women's wear award.

3. JACKIE ROGERS, left, and CARMEN DELL'ORFICO standing by a life-size model of the council's award.

4. BERNADETTE PETERS, left, and TRACEY ELLMAN, who was the M.C.

5. CLARE DAVES and NARCISO RODRIGUEZ.

6. RACHEL ZOE and JASON WU.

7. LILA HAMILTON, EXAN FOX and TIM HAMILTON, who was honored for his men's wear.

8. MICHAEL NORN and HEIDI KLIN.

9. BETNEY JOHNSON, left, and ANNA SUI, who was honored.

10. ANIA RUBIN, who accompanied her dress designer, Kaufman Franco.

11. DREE HENNINGWAY and ALEXANDER WANG, who won an award for women's wear and designed her dress.

12. From left, NAOBLE SMOOP, LOTTIE GANLEY and ELIE MAZOLLO.

13. MOLLY SIMS and BRIAN ATWOOD.

14. SOPHIA HERRTIN, left, and JULIA FOSTON-ROITFELD.

15. From left, VICTOR OSBORNE, PHILLIPPE BLOND, MAURICIO PASTILHA, ANNIE FLANDERS and ROGER PASTILHA.

16. From left, RODDY CARAVELLA, SRETCHEN FENSTON and TZI PIRAN SALAZAR.

17. From left, BRIS APPEL, ISABEL TOLEDO, CARL APPEL and RUBEN TOLEDO.

18. Dr. VALENTIN STEELE, the museum's director.

19. NICHELLE HARPER, left, VICTOR DE SOUZA and YAZ HERNANDEZ.

20. MICHAEL CALLOWAY and TONIL CIRINO.

21. MIMI SHERATON and husband, RICHARD FALDINE.

22. LOUISE DOKTOR.

23. ROSEMARY PONZO and J. R. WALPER.

24. Dr. JOYCE F. BROWN, F.I.T.'s president, and her husband, CARL McCALL.

25. BETHANN HARDISON, left, and JEMIL WILLIAMS, wearing a Toledo dress.

26. From left, RODDY CARAVELLA, SRETCHEN FENSTON and TZI PIRAN SALAZAR.

27. From left, BRIS APPEL, ISABEL TOLEDO, CARL APPEL and RUBEN TOLEDO.



EVENING HOURS Bill Cunningham In the Land Of Fashion



June 15: At the annual awards gala of the Americas Society, the 350 guests toasted David Rockefeller, the society's founder, in celebration of his 94th birthday.

15. The salute to David Rockefeller.
16. From left, ALBERTO BAILLERES, WILLIAM R. RHODES and DAVID ROCKEFELLER.
17. ROGER ASHELL, left, and LUIS ALBERTO MORENO.



June 16: Pratt Institute announced the establishment of the Marc Rosen Distinguished Visiting Chair in Design at a dinner at the Gramercy Park Hotel. Mr. Rosen is known for his packaging design.



June 16: Annie Flanders, the founder of the original Details magazine, celebrated her birthday at the Bubble Lounge. The magazine was started in 1982 to showcase unknown downtown talent. The hosts were Ms. Flanders's New York friends; she now lives in California.



June 16: The Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology unveiled a retrospective, "Isabel Toledo Fashion From the Inside Out." The Inauguration Day ensemble that Ms. Toledo designed for Michelle Obama was at the entrance to the show, which follows the designer from 1985 to the present, and clearly shows the discipline and freedom of an independent design studio as opposed to the larger commercial world of fashion. Her husband, the artist Ruben Toledo, created a 500-foot frieze of her clothes to circle the 22-foot-high gallery. The exhibition continues through Sept. 26.



22. The gallery.
23. From left, BRIS APPEL, ISABEL TOLEDO, CARL APPEL and RUBEN TOLEDO.



24. Dr. VALENTIN STEELE, the museum's director.
25. NICHELLE HARPER, left, VICTOR DE SOUZA and YAZ HERNANDEZ.

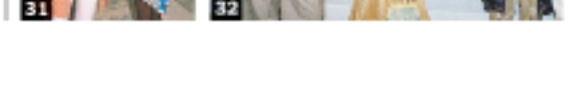
26. MICHAEL CALLOWAY and TONIL CIRINO.
27. MIMI SHERATON and husband, RICHARD FALDINE.

28. LOUISE DOKTOR.
29. ROSEMARY PONZO and J. R. WALPER.

30. Dr. JOYCE F. BROWN, F.I.T.'s president, and her husband, CARL McCALL.

31. BETHANN HARDISON, left, and JEMIL WILLIAMS, wearing a Toledo dress.

32. From left, RODDY CARAVELLA, SRETCHEN FENSTON and TZI PIRAN SALAZAR.





THE NEW YORKER

March 16, 2009

MAN ON THE STREET

Bill Cunningham takes Manhattan.

by Lauren Collins

A few summers ago, on upper Fifth Avenue, Bill Cunningham spied a remarkable creature: a woman, in her seventies, with a corona of blue hair—not the muzzy pastel hue associated with bad dye jobs but the irradiant one of Slurpees and laundry detergent. The woman gave Cunningham an idea. Every day for a month, whenever he saw something cerulean (a batik shawl) or aqua (a Hawaiian-print sarong) or azure (a Japanese parasol) coming down the sidewalk, he snapped a picture of it. One morning, he spotted a worker balancing, on his shoulder, a stuffed blue marlin. “I thought, That’s it, kid!” he recently recalled. The following Sunday, “On the Street,” the street-fashion column that Cunningham has maintained in the *Times* for more than a decade, was populated entirely with New Yorkers dressed in various shades of the color—a parade of human paint chips. “Mediterranean shades of blue are not yet the new pink, but they are a favorite this summer,” he wrote. “The cooling watery tones, worn as an accent with white and browns, appear in turquoise-color jewelry and blue hair, but it is rare to see a man crossing the Avenue of the Americas with a trophy sailfish.”

Cunningham’s job is not so different from a fisherman’s: it requires a keen knowledge, honed over years, of the local ecosystem and infinite patience in all manner of weather conditions. His first big catch was an accident. It was 1978, and a woman wearing a nutria coat had caught his eye. “I thought: ‘Look at the cut of that shoulder. It’s so beautiful,’ ” he later wrote. “And it was a plain coat, too. You’d look at it and think: ‘Oh, are you crazy? It’s nothing.’ ” Cunningham shot frame after frame of the coat, eventually noticing that other people on the sidewalk were paying attention to its wearer. It was Greta Garbo. Cunningham showed the pictures, along with some shots of Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney (whom he recognized), Farrah Fawcett (whom he didn’t, not owning a television), and the King and Queen of Spain, carrying plastic bags from Gristedes, to an editor at the *Times*. “The editor said, ‘Why don’t you wait and see who you get next week?’ ” Cunningham recalled. “And I said, ‘My God, I’m not expecting Jesus Christ.’ ” Soon after, his column became a recurring feature.

“On the Street”—along with Cunningham’s society column, “Evening Hours”—is New York’s high-school yearbook, an exuberant, sometimes retroactively embarrassing chronicle of the way we looked. Class of 1992: velvet neck ribbons, leopard prints, black jeans, catsuits, knotted shirts, tote bags, berets (will they ever come back, after Monica?). Class of 2000: clamdiggers, beaded fringe, postcard prints, jean jackets, fish-net stockings, flower brooches (this was the height of “Sex and the City”). The column, in its way, is as much a portrait of New York at a given moment in time as any sociological tract or census—a snapshot of the city. On September 16, 2001, Cunningham ran a collage of signs (“OUR FINEST HOUR,” “WE ARE STRONGER NOW”) and flags (on bandannas, on buildings, on bikes) that makes one as sad and proud, looking at it now, as it did when it was pub-



Bill Cunningham: “I’m looking for something that has beauty.”

lished. So far this year, he has identified vogues for picture-frame collars, microminis, peg-legged pants, and the color gray (“often with a dash of sapphire or violet,” in the manner of the Edwardians). His columns are frequently playful—he once featured a woman, near the Plaza, walking three standard poodles, “an unmatched set in pink, turquoise, and white”—but they also convey an elegiac respect for the anonymous promenade of life in a big city, and a dead-serious desire to get it all down.

For two groups of New Yorkers—the fashionable people, whose style changes more rapidly than that of the masses, and the truly creative ones, whose style, while outré, in its theatricality never really changes at all—“On the Street” is also a family album. The magazine editors Anna Wintour, Cecilia Dean, and Carine Roitfeld and the society dermatologist Lisa Airan are regulars on the page, as are Tziporah Salamon (her Web site showcases her eight appearances in Cunningham’s column, including one—a Capri-pants montage—in which only her legs are visible), and

Louise Doktor, a midtown executive secretary, whose experimental outfits Cunningham has been documenting from afar for twenty-five years. “She once bought a coat with four sleeves!” he told me. At a party thrown last season at Bergdorf Goodman to celebrate the decoration of the store’s windows in Cunningham’s honor, guests included not only the police commissioner, Ray Kelly, and Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., the publisher of the *Times* (“You’re great! This is a really big thing,” he said, grabbing Cunningham, who had shown up at his behest, by the shoulders), but a woman wearing, on her head, what looked like one of those blue pompoms from a car wash, and a man with a Swiss-dot veil drawn in ink on his forehead.

Cunningham, who turns eighty this month, is an annual presence at certain society events: the Fifth Avenue Easter Parade, the Central Park Conservancy luncheon, the Hampton Classic Horse Show. This winter, at the ice-skating rink in Central Park, he took pictures of the children of the children whose parents he once shot outside Maxim’s and at the Hotel Pierre (where, at a dinner dance in 1984, he captured thirty-three women in similar Fabrice beaded gowns). His vocabulary (“Cheers, child!”) and his diction (“Mrs. Oh-nah-sis”) are those of a more genteel era—the weekly audio slideshow he does for the *Times* offers many of the pleasures of a Lomax recording—but he rarely goes for the easy grip-and-grin shot. His sensibility is exhilaratingly democratic. He takes wonder, or whimsy, where he finds it, chronicling the Obama Inauguration, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, Wigstock, and the snowman sweatshirts and reindeer turtle-necks of tourists; the do-rag and the way that, at one point in 2000, many young hip-hop fans spontaneously took to wearing their sweatshirts abstractly, with the neck hole on the shoulder, or with the sleeves dangling down the back. (He related the phenomenon to both the Japanese deconstructionists and the sideways baseball cap.)

The four corners of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street are some of Cunningham’s favorite shoals. One bright afternoon, he was there, as he has been for countless hours, casting about for inspiration. “I have an idea what I’m going to do this week,” he said. (What that was he refused to say.) “I’ve got to face the bullet very quickly. If it doesn’t have enough depth, I should wait.” It was a crackerjack day. “Look at the style you have here!” Cunningham said. “Stay here on Fifth Avenue and you see the whole world. Summertime—the vacationers and the Europeans. The holidays—everyone from the Midwest, the West, Japan. They’re all here, the whole world!”

Cunningham lives alone in the Carnegie Hall Tower, one of the last tenants in a formerly vast complex of artists’ studios, without a private bathroom or cooking facilities. His bed consists of a piece of foam, a wooden board, and several milk crates. Nearby is a metal file cabinet crammed with decades’ worth of negatives. (Trip Gabriel, the editor of the *Times*’ Sunday Styles section, where Cunningham’s column appears, told me that when Cunningham goes to the Paris collections “our reporters are staying right in the First Arrondissement, sometimes at the Ritz, and Bill insists on staying at a cheapo hotel that has no phones in the rooms.” To make a reservation, he sends a postcard.) “When I fall out of bed in the morning, I can come over here and get up my adrenaline,” Cunningham said, blowing his nose into a deli napkin that he produced from a pocket of the blue workman’s smock that he customarily wears, as if to say, in solidarity with the hot-dog vendors and delivery boys amid whom he spends his days, that his office is the street. Around his neck was a battered Nikon. Its strap was held together with duct tape. Cunningham has often been described as a fashion monk, but he is closer to an oblate—a layperson who has dedicated his life to the tribe without becoming a part of it. A friend of Cunningham’s told *Artforum* in 1996, “One of Bill’s favorite sayings, when anyone starts taking the fashion scene too seriously, is ‘Oops, you’re falling into the traps of the rich.’” In a recent column, examining the way New Yorkers dress for wet weather, Cunningham poked fun at “the

snobs,” who “are so above it all, they think the waters will part for them even as they sink to their ankles.”

Behind Cunningham, the windows of Bergdorf’s were festooned with blow-ups of his columns. Linda Fargo, the store’s vice-president of visual merchandising, said it had taken ten years to persuade Cunningham to agree to the exhibit. “Bill is not somebody you can ever press yourself on,” Fargo said. “I once, to thank him for something, gave him a very small box of chocolates, and he personally delivered it back to my office two days later.” In one of the windows, there was a red bicycle with silver fenders, in tribute to his customary means of conveyance. There was confetti made from shredded newspapers. “I’m delighted, but also a little embarrassed, because you try to be invisible, and this blows your cover!” Cunningham said, hoisting the Nikon to his eye and darting off, mid-sentence, in pursuit of a woman with a fetching fur-lined handbag.

“Luckily, you can slip back into being anonymous very quickly,” he continued, once he’d returned. “I don’t really see people—I see clothes. People say everybody’s a slob. Ridiculous! There are marvellously—it came out, in a wonderful archaic honk, as “*maah-vah-lously*”—“dressed women you see at a quarter to eight, going to business. When people say fashion is no more, they’re ridiculous! It’s as good as it ever was.”

I asked if he ever photographed people who didn’t look so great, the sidewalk’s blooper reel. He seemed almost offended. “I’m not drawn to something awful,” he said. “I wouldn’t even see that. I’m looking for something that has beauty. Do’s and don’ts? I don’t think there are any don’ts! What right does one have? It’s like the Queen of England, when she appears, and people have nasty things to say. My God, she’s dressing for her station and her office!”

A burly man dressed in a flannel shirt and steel-toed boots approached. “Hi! I’d like to shake the hand of the kid!” he said, booming, offering his palm to Cunningham, who smiled. The two men began shadowboxing.

“Congrats, Billy. Can’t believe they even got a bicycle in the window!”

The man headed off down the sidewalk, and, as he faded from view, I asked who he was.

“You get to know people,” Cunningham said, explaining that it was an undercover cop.

Cunningham was born and brought up in Boston, the second of four children in an Irish Catholic family. There remains about him a distinct New Englishness. “One of our colleagues says that his voice sounds like that of an elderly hardware-store owner in Vermont,” Trip Gabriel said. At the *Times*, Cunningham doesn’t use a computer; he recently got a desk, and voice mail, which he has never checked. The paper got rid of its film-processing lab a few years ago, when it went digital, so Cunningham has his film developed at a one-hour photo center, on Forty-third Street. Each week, he brings a batch of his negatives to the office, where a member of the art department helps him create a layout. “He has browbeaten and exhausted and worn out the patience of generations of assistants in that process,” Gabriel said, with affection.

“It was difficult around the turn of this century,” Cunningham said, “because I had older art directors and they had other ideas of how things should be laid out. No one could stand me. Too much trouble! Five pictures, and that’s it. I said, ‘You can’t do that. You’ve got to tell a story to the reader.’ I’m writing with pictures—that’s what I always tell them. You go and tell Maureen Dowd she can only use fifteen words, and no changes. That’s ridiculous!” He continued, “Young kids, aren’t they wonderful? Not because I push them around—I would never do that—but

because they're more open to new thought."

According to "Bill on Bill"—an autobiographical article, published in the *Times* in 2002, that for those with an interest in Cunningham has taken on the authority of a holy text—Cunningham got his start in fashion as a stockboy at Bonwit Teller, where an executive, noticing his habit of watching the lunchtime passersby ("I said, 'Oh, yeah, that's my hobby'"), encouraged him to revamp their outfits in his mind's eye. In 1948, after a few months of classes at Harvard, Cunningham arrived in New York, where he lived with an aunt and uncle and worked at Bonwit's, again, in advertising, his uncle's profession. "That's why my family allowed me to come here and encouraged me to go into the business," he wrote in "Bill on Bill." "I think they were worried I was becoming too interested in women's dresses."

Actually, hats. After a year, Cunningham rented a top-floor room in a walkup on East Fifty-second Street. In exchange for the apartment, he agreed to clean for the men who owned the building. He worked at a drugstore, and at Howard Johnson, as a counterman. ("Both jobs provided my meals," he wrote, "and the dimes and nickels of my tips paid for millinery supplies.") He sold his creations to a carriage-trade clientele under the name William J. "My family would have been too embarrassed," he recalled. "They were very shy people."

During the Korean War, Cunningham was drafted into the Army; when he returned to New York he resumed the hat trade from a shop on West Fifty-fourth Street. In 1963, John Fairchild hired him as a writer at *Women's Wear Daily*. (Eventually, he went on to cover fashion for the *Chicago Tribune* and for *Details*.) For a time in the late fifties, he owned a hat shop on Jobs Lane, in Southampton. He is said to have slept on a cot, hanging his wardrobe—khakis, a shirt, a pair of underwear—over the closet door. In 1966, a photographer Cunningham knew gave him an Olympus Pen D half-frame camera. "It cost about thirty-five dollars," Cunningham wrote. "He said, 'Here, use it like a notebook.' And that was the real beginning."

The best ensembles Cunningham ever saw were in the sixties. "I was at a fashion show on Seventh Avenue one day, and I heard commotion out on the street," he said. "I said, 'Huh, what's that?' and got up and left the show and saw all these flower children protesting the Vietnam War. I suddenly realized that I had always liked the street. I should have known all along." Other scenes that have stuck with him: the "incredible things" from "those marvellous concerts in Tompkins Square Park"; a woman, walking up Madison Avenue, in a beige-and-black knitted suit from Sonia Rykiel, accompanied by two beige-and-black pug dogs on Venetian-red leashes with gold bells.

Cunningham stepped up to one of the Bergdorf windows and peered at the exhibit inside. "Oh, this is a Doktor," he said, referring to a shot of Mrs. Doktor, the secretary, with the hushed reverence accorded a Renoir or a van Gogh, as if she, not he, were the artist. "One of the most fascinating. That's a wooden gold picture frame that she's wearing as a necklace. I got up close, and saw that it had been cut and it was on hinges, so that it conformed to her body." A few seconds earlier, a young Japanese woman had pressed her nose to the glass. "See, that's a Margiela sweater," Cunningham said, indicating what appeared to be a few stray white yarns on the back of the woman's cardigan. "It's his label. He just uses stitches."

Haute couture, of which Cunningham has rabbinical knowledge, is appealing to him insofar as it attracts the most fluent speakers of fashion, which he, and his admirers, consider a sort of social language. "He is able to show us who we are before we're able to see it," Linda Fargo said, when he spoke last fall. "No sooner does Bill call it a trend—observe it, organize it, and publish it—than it's a trend. The real news of the week was the

aggressive footwear. I'm kind of bubbling and aerating it with our team, and boom!"—Cunningham's column the following Sunday featured a montage of mostly black high heels and boots, studded and strapped like those of a stampe of dominatrices. In October, a few years ago, Cunningham noticed, on his daily rounds, that an unusual number of women were carrying enormous—practically Hefty-size—tote bags embellished with geometric patterns. "I thought, My God, what's going on?" he recalled. "You see, the story was the handbags were becoming more elaborate and heavier and heavier, and apparently Goyard, a hundred-year-old French firm, was able to develop a canvas coated with lacquer that was durable, lightweight, and could hold lots of stuff. There's got to be a reason when a lot of people buy things."

Cunningham is as attuned to the bourgeois as he is to the avant-garde, and the mundane accessories of day-to-day life are as exalted in his photographs as any platform shoe or deconstructed bustle. Balaclavas, shown in collage, hint at the martial aspect of New York street life. An umbrella, flipped inside out by the wind, becomes an abstract sculpture; a snow poncho, wrapped around its wearer's head, is a plastic exoskeleton that will eventually be shed. He is drawn to anything natural: children, gardens, parks, animals. (His column has featured a parrot, a duck, a python, a monkey, a tortoise, and many dogs; not long ago, he took a train all the way back to Long Island when he realized that some black irises he had just seen at Old Westbury Gardens perfectly echoed the filigreed lines of both a 1900 cut-velvet Worth gown and some nearby wrought-iron gates.) He has a thing for curbside puddles. "It's a little ridiculous, but a fierce snowstorm is wonderful!" he said. "Oh, it's marvellous—it just rearranges the whole fashion scene when the wind blows down from the top of the Avenue. Six-, seven-hundred-dollar shoes, and they're all in the slush—hey, it's pretty peculiar!" He went on, "Nothing like a good blizzard, kid, and you got pictures!"

Among the sort of people who know they are wearing noteworthy outfits it is considered poor form—and, moreover, bad luck—to acknowledge that Cunningham is taking one's picture, to blow his pose of invisibility. "If you see him, proper etiquette is just be yourself, but keep moving forward," Linda Fargo said. For a civilian, though, opening the Sunday paper and finding that the way she looked, on the way to a dental appointment, or to the grocery store, was pleasing to Cunningham can be a thrilling experience, like opening the mailbox to find a love letter from a suitor she didn't know existed.

"I'm so excited that my picture is in here!" a woman exclaimed, in front of the Bergdorf windows, pointing to an almost unintelligible figure in one of the blown-up columns. "You made my life. I'm in the pink earmuffs—I just wish I had looked better."

Cunningham nodded politely, but said little. As soon as he could, he scampered off down the sidewalk to snap a picture of a matron, on her husband's elbow, in a yellow-and-black checkerboard suit.

"The season is changing, but it's more than change of season," he said, when he returned. "It's how fashion will reflect the financial changes. Fashion, the people wearing it, will do it before they even know what they're doing. You don't know yet, it's just starting to gel, but there will be a style. You watch, you'll see something. There's the old saw about hemlines. Who knows? It's only in the future you can know. You just have to stay out on the street and get it. It's all here." ♦