

SALGADO ON MIGRATING POPULATIONS IN SEARCH OF ANCIENT TREASURES

APERTURE

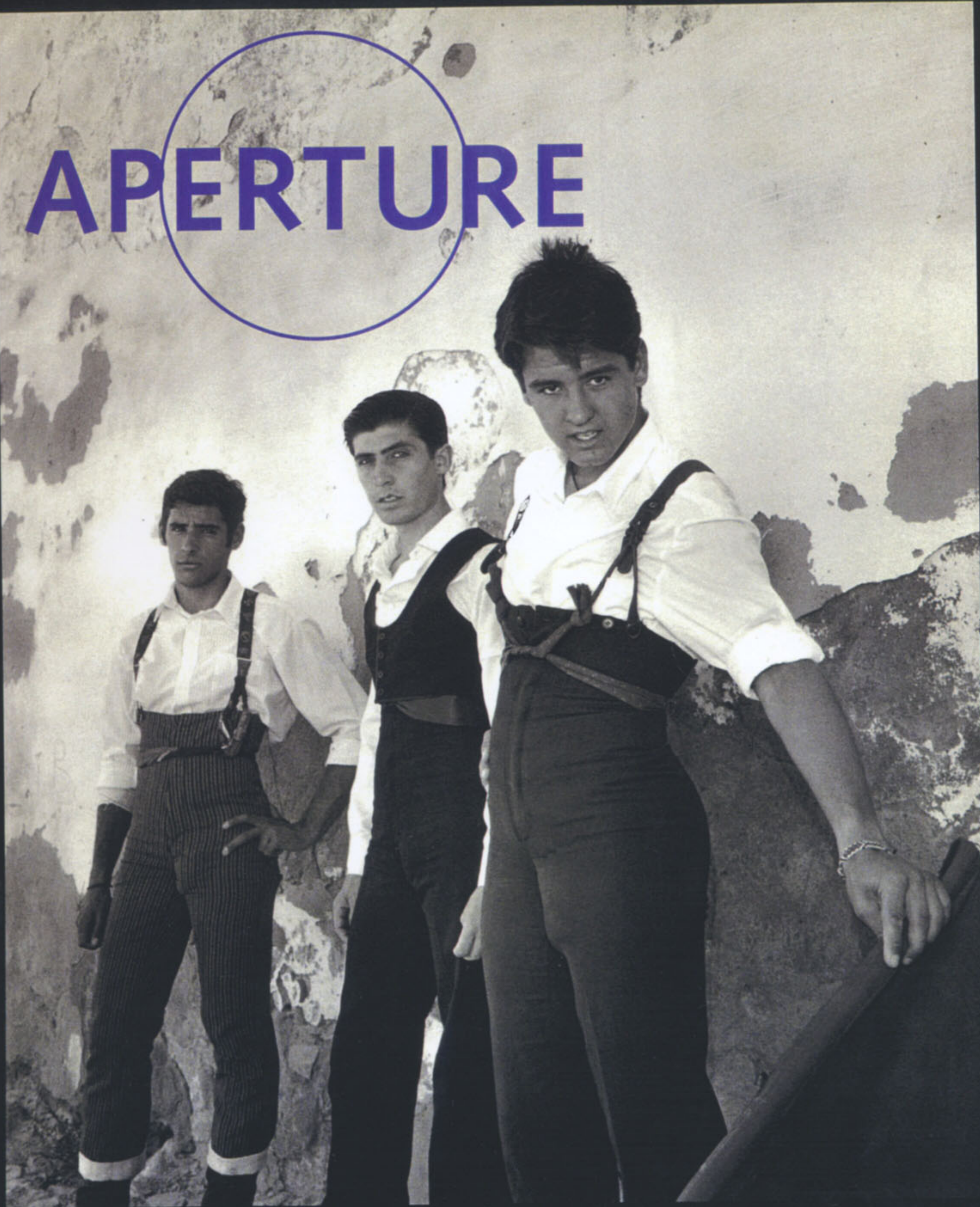
THE POETICS OF PULITZER PHOTOS

BORIS MIKHAILOV'S HOMELESS UKRAINIANS

MARPLETHORPE'S INSTANT GRATIFICATION RUDY BURCKHARDT'S DANCING CAMERA

VITTORIO STORARO WRITES WITH LIGHT

GIORGIA FIORIO'S MEN





GIORGIA FIORIO'S MEN OF COURAGE

Photographs by Giorgia Fiorio

Interview by Véronique Vienne

I was lucky to catch up with Giorgia Fiorio in Paris last November—she spends most of her time on the road, obsessively pursuing her subjects in order to create the epic visual narratives she has become famous for.

Born in Turin in 1967, Fiorio is a wiry, rather glamorous gamine, who now lives in Paris. She has spent the past ten years of her life as a nomad, traipsing the world: to Russia, the U.S., the Mediterranean, and Africa, photographing communities of men who live and work on the brink. She has visited disciplinary camps, training fields, naval academies, coal mines, factories, fire stations, bullfighting arenas, boxing rings, and gyms. Little by little, it dawned on her that these men were the keepers of an age-old vision of masculinity that is imprinted on our collective memory. To Fiorio, they are the last heroes of a disappearing culture. Brave, stoic, and for the most part brawny, they are also vulnerable and resigned, isolated in a world that no longer celebrates physical risk-taking.

As it turns out, Fiorio, frail as she might seem, is one of them. She has risked everything to tell their story. They accepted her, allowing her to chronicle their travail because she, too, is motivated by a desire to go beyond her physical limits, and beyond the limits of her femi-

nine preconceptions. The result of her work is a series of books on American boxers and firemen; Russian workers; toreadors; legionnaires; and men at sea.

VÉRONIQUE VIENNE: For more than ten years you have been photographing men who, one way or another, choose to endure extreme conditions. How did you arrive at this subject?

GIORGIA FIORIO: The first project I did was a report on American boxers. It was 1990 in New York, where I was taking a course at the International Center of Photography. Boxing was the topic I chose for my last semester. Even though I knew nothing at all about the subject, I was fascinated. It was completely different from anything I had been interested in before. I worked on this project for three months, then realized I would have to keep going. I was broke, I didn't have a job, I don't even know how I managed to survive. My father wanted me to come back to (continued on page 32)

LEFT: Bullfighter for the team of matador José Pedro Prados, Segura de la Sierra, province of Jaen, Spain, October 1996.



LEFT, TOP: Matador Curro Romero, Real Maestranza, province of Sevilla, Spain, April 1996.

BOTTOM: Matador José Pedro Prados, "El Fundi," Segura de la Sierra, province of Jaen, Spain, October 1996.

RIGHT: Sebastian Sánchez Mora, eleven years old, and bullfighter Villalunga del Rosario, province of Cádiz, Spain, September 1996.

PAGE 30: Apprentice matador José Antonio Chipiona, El Puerto de Santa María, province of Cádiz, June 1996.

PAGE 31: Training with a mock bull, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, province of Cádiz, May 1996.





(continued from page 27) Turin. I told him I was working on a book. "Do you have a publisher?" he asked. "No," I replied. "But I have a great topic, so I'm not worried." And then I added, "If you are Tolstoy writing *War and Peace*, you don't worry about getting a publisher" [LAUGHS]. I was so naïve at the time—and in many ways, I still am.

The greatest challenge, of course, was to get entry into this very sequestered world of boxing. I had begun by hanging out at a gym in Brooklyn. After the second month I got into a gym in Harlem, and eventually I was able to watch boxing practice all over the city. Only toward the end of my stay was I allowed into actual fights—though they were still not sanctioned fights. It was very difficult for me to get into the official fights because I had no credentials as a journalist. And no one knew who the hell I was or where I came from. I even tried to get a fake press card! Eventually I met "Big George," a man who truly opened doors for me and made all the difference for my project. He was a big boss, highly respected in the milieu, and he took me all over. He was a terrifying figure. But I adored him—he was a giant—a mountain.

At last I was able to attend a fight with Mike Tyson in Atlantic City, even without credentials. I went to the arena and crawled on the floor between people's legs to reach the ring. When the officials noticed me, they dragged me away—but not before I had shot three pictures of Tyson.

After completing the boxing series, I went back home to Italy. I was happy with the pictures, and feeling lucky that I had been able to pull it off in spite of difficulties. All in all, it had taken nine months.

Back in Italy, I spent almost a year on a series about Italian soldiers. Although my work improved, for some reason, the pictures were not very satisfying. I then decided to go to Russia. I wanted to photograph coal miners, factory workers, and so on. At the time I was influenced by Russian literature—I had read a lot. I was convinced that in Russia I would find something as *essential* as what I had found with boxers in America.

You have to realize that it was 1993 and '94. Russia was coming out of a seventy-year period under Communism. They were still operating with a nineteenth-century mentality—the same mentality that had generated all the great Russian novels I love so much. And sure enough, I was completely charmed by the Russian people.

I visited coal miners, steel-mill workers, manual laborers. Then I thought that I couldn't finish my series until I'd photographed prisoners. To me, it seemed obvious. I felt that prisons were the metaphor for Russia at the time—people had been held prisoner by the Communist regime for so long. I remember that I tried to explain that to a man who I was told could give me an entry into some prison [LAUGHS]. "What?" he said. "What was that metaphor again?"

I've never told anyone this—I am sort of ashamed of it: to get to where I wanted to go, I had to bribe officials in Russia. I used any money I could find or borrow. I even took with me the jewels my grandmother left me. I rationalize it now by telling myself that somehow she would have been proud to know that her jewelry allowed me to take pictures of men in Russian prisons!

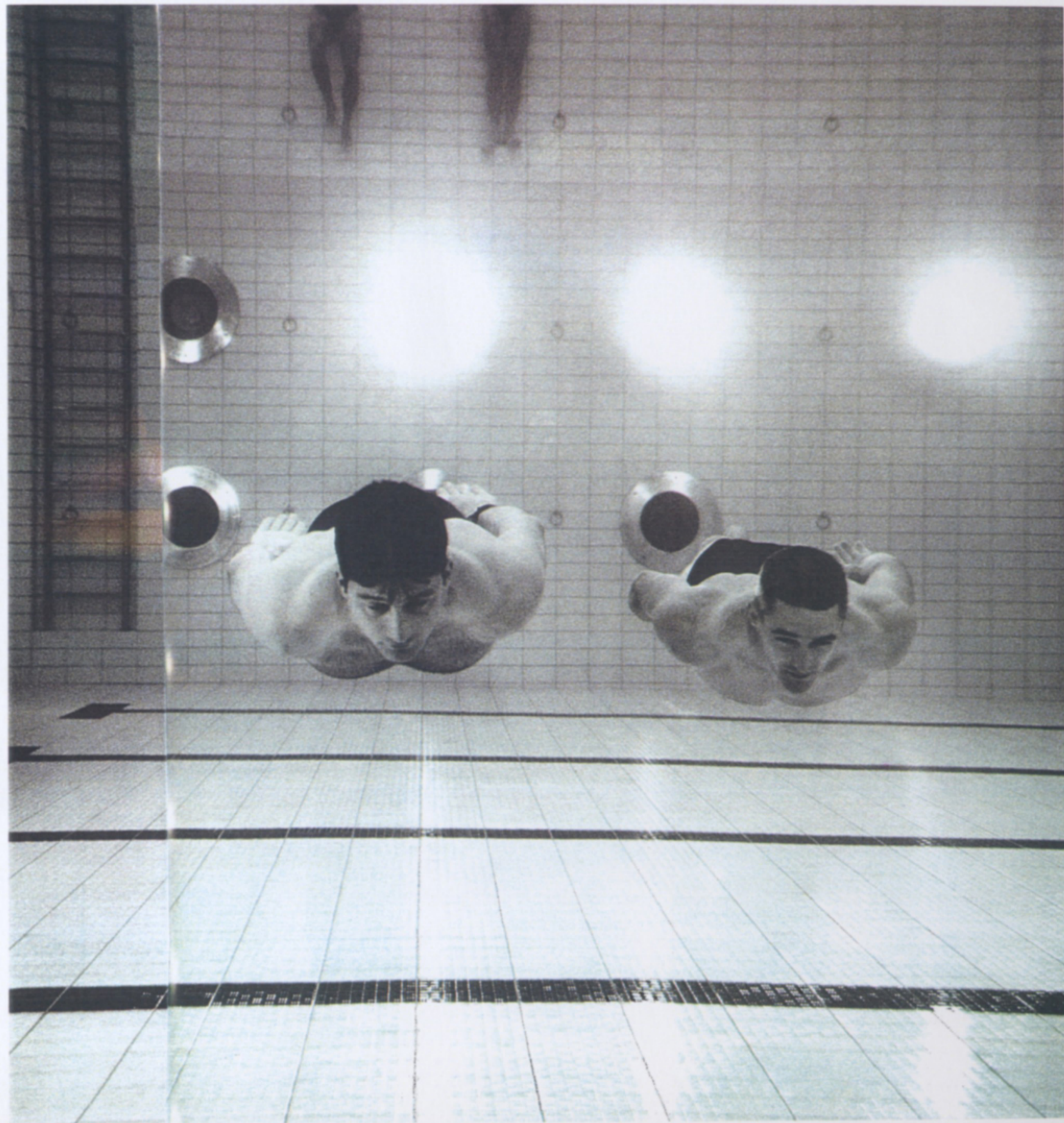
A consul in Saint Petersburg helped me work out a plan. The bribe was presented as "rent." It was decided that the officials would charge me rent in order for me to stay in a prison. It was outrageously expensive for me at the time: three thousand dollars for three days—"Take it or leave it." As a bonus, though, they would throw in a contract—a real contract—to seal the deal.

So, for three grand I rented a prison, complete with three thousand inmates. "It's all yours," said the head warden. This was a real deontological conflict for me. I was afraid it was morally wrong to *rent* prisoners in

RIGHT: Underwater commando training of the *Kampfschwimmerkompanie*, Eckernförde, Germany, November 1999.

PAGE 34: Member of the Third Amphibian Company of the Second Foreign Paratroopers Regiment, Calvi, Corsica, France, May 1995.

PAGE 35: Platoon of corporals-in-training from the Thirteenth Half Brigade of the French Foreign Legion, Myrium zone, Djibouti, October 1995.





order to take their pictures. But in the end, it was an incredible experience. The inmates turned out to be amazing people.

When I entered the prison and they closed the heavy doors behind me, I almost lost it. I was taken to a dormitory room with 120 beds next to each other, with almost no breathing space between them. I was terrified. There was no privacy there. None. I set my tripod in the middle of the room, with one hundred men with shaved heads staring at me. In desperation, I decided to simply ask their permission to take pictures.

Then something remarkable happened. One man got up, and, pointing at a sealed-off window, he said: "We can't get out. But with your pictures, you can take us into the world out there." It was so generous of him, so inspiring. I adored him, and immediately regained all my energy and self-confidence. The prisoners sat for me, without moving, looking at the lens with a self-awareness that never faltered. Each one had an inconceivable presence. For me, it was a transforming experience.

Ultimately, it helped me understand what my work was all about. But I came back from this absurd and baroque adventure in a Russian prison with only the beginning of an understanding. It was not obvious at first. These pictures were so rich and so varied. They were eventually published as a book by Éditions de l'Imprimeur. My French editor encouraged me to connect specific pictures with specific passages in Russian literature; that's how I created the text for my Russian book, *Des Russes* (Russians).

VV: How did you connect with a French publisher?

GF: By 1994, I had moved to France. Again, I knew France not so much through personal experience, but through French literature. That's how I knew I would adore the people, the streets,

the light, the sounds. I felt at home in Paris even before I moved here. And I met Jeanloup Sieff, who became a mentor and a great friend. I am still mourning his death; I find his absence intolerable.

He was a juror for a photo contest in which I won an award. After the ceremony, I approached him and asked if he would critique my work. We spent an afternoon at his place talking about photography. I told him that I was planning to do a new series of pictures on the Foreign Legion. "Yes," he said. "One day you will do a book called *Des Hommes*." When he said that, I understood on the spot what I was about. I finally had a clear vision of

my mission. After completing the legionnaires project, I knew I would do sailors, tore-adors, firefighters, and so on. I no longer felt doubt or ambivalence about my work.

VV: How did being a woman influence your vision of these men?

GF: What appealed to me, as a woman, was the fact that these men were willing to go up against themselves—up against their own physical limits, and against natural elements like the raging sea or out-of-control fires. For them,

death is a daily reality. They are not afraid, they simply face the risks involved. Today, our culture teaches us the opposite: how to escape the thought of death in our daily life. Though on television and in the media, we see a lot of people dying, we forget that bleeding hurts, that dying is a moment of anguish. In contrast, the men I photograph confront a life that's utterly real—and that's at the core of what I wanted to capture: real life, dangerous and dirty—not the modern alienation.

In my photographs I try to translate my internal vision. I believe that reading is more inspiring than looking at photographs of the subject. Before I made pictures of toreadors, for instance, I had never been to a corrida. Never (continued on page 38)





FAR LEFT: Hand-to-hand combat session of the Fourth Fighting Company, Second Foreign Regiment of Paratroopers, Camp Général de Gaulle, Libreville, Gabon, April 1995.

LEFT, TOP: Member of the First Cavalry Foreign Regiment, French Battalion in the Rapid Reaction Force, Velikopolj zone, Mount Ingman, Bosnia-Herzegovina, September 1995.

BOTTOM: Member of the Third Infantry Foreign Regiment, during a search and rescue training operation. Rain forest training center in Regina, French Guiana, July 1995.

PAGE 38: Thurston Livingston at Gleason's Gym, Brooklyn, New York, 1990.

PAGE 39: Larry Barnes at the Jerome Boxing Club, Bronx, New York, 1990.

(continued from page 35) looked at pictures of toreadors. All I knew was what I had read in Hemingway and Lorca.

At the beginning, I didn't know what I was after. I thought that I wanted to photograph the masculine world with its visual and aesthetic contrasts, with its sweat, its smells, its movements. I deliberately focused on them as a woman admiring male creatures. Later, I learned to approach my subjects in a more introverted way. But still, I had a lot of soul-searching to do. Who were these men? Why did I feel such a strong connection with them? What was my point of view? Finally, I decided that these men represented an Occidental ideal from the past. They were part of our collective imagination. Before modern women established their presence and social position, all men were considered strong. The men I photograph are archetypes—the last of a disappearing breed.

VV: How did your approach evolve?

GF: Each year I discovered a new dimension. With the toreadors, I understood that displays of bravado and courage were in fact an affirmation of the immense *fragility* of men, of the fleeting nature of bravery. I began to see that the gestures of all these men, in different situations, were all the same gestures. The lifting, the fighting, the crawling, the standing, the hauling, the crouching. It was all the same vocabulary of physical confrontation—an age-old language.

VV: How did you orchestrate the bullfighter series?

GF: When I got to Spain, where everyone is a self-appointed expert on bullfighting, I had to convince the authorities that I, who had *no* understanding of their national art, should be allowed to take pictures of bullfighters. I showed them my photographs published in *Life* magazine. After hours and hours of negotiating, I finally got my press pass.



It was very difficult at first. I went to many corridas but still couldn't find the *internal* vision I was searching for. All I saw was the pageantry surrounding the event—the rituals, the parades, and so on. I felt I was completely missing the point. After six months, I was almost ready to give up. As a last resort, I went to a school of tauromachy, where they teach toreadors the basic moves of their art. I, too, needed to learn the basic gestures.

But again, I was in for a major disappointment. The young men in the school all wore crappy sweatpants and T-shirts with Nike or Coca-Cola logos on them. In those baggy clothes, there was no definition in their gesture, no beauty in their attitude. So I approached one of the teachers and asked if the men could

remove their shirts. I tried to explain that the young toreadors didn't look good without their costumes. The teacher was shocked. He told me that if I wanted the men to take off their shirts, I had to ask them myself. That's another thing about the men I photograph—they are often very prudish. Bullfighters are quite shy, even though they have a ritualized sense of exhibitionism. In their shimmering costume, they flaunt the bulge of their masculinity in tight pants. But taking off

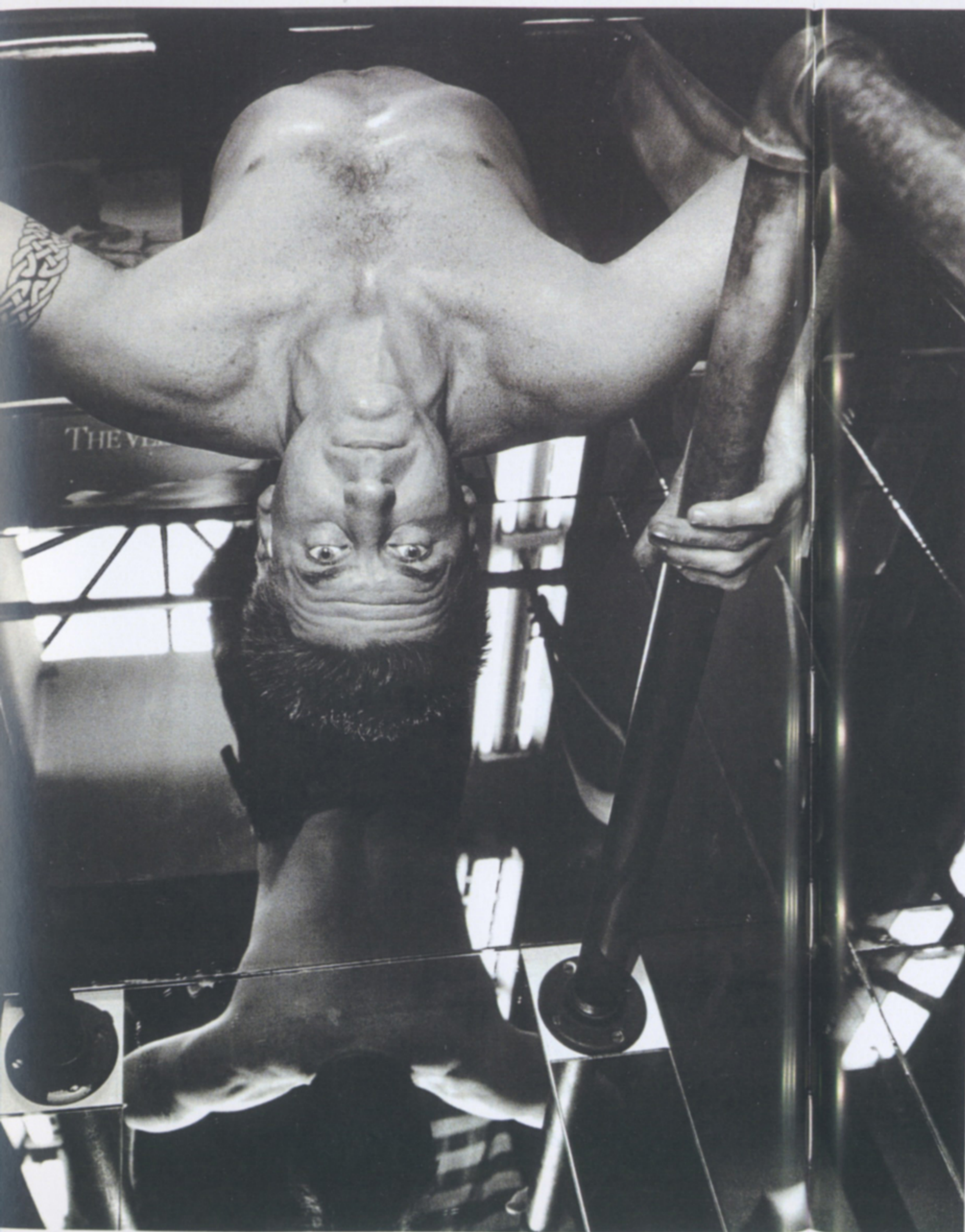
their shirt? Are you *kidding*?

Down in the arena with the young toreadors, I got tangled in a long, embarrassing explanation, but to my surprise, they understood. They removed their shirts and soon it all seemed much more natural, incredibly beautiful. And they felt so good, they enjoyed their own bodies much more. I was mesmerized.

VV: Was it physically difficult for you to keep up with the men?

GF: Each situation is different—and unreal in its own way. In the mines, for instance, you walk underground in the dark for six hours at a time. You really need a different nervous system to survive. To keep up with firefighters, (continued on page 42)





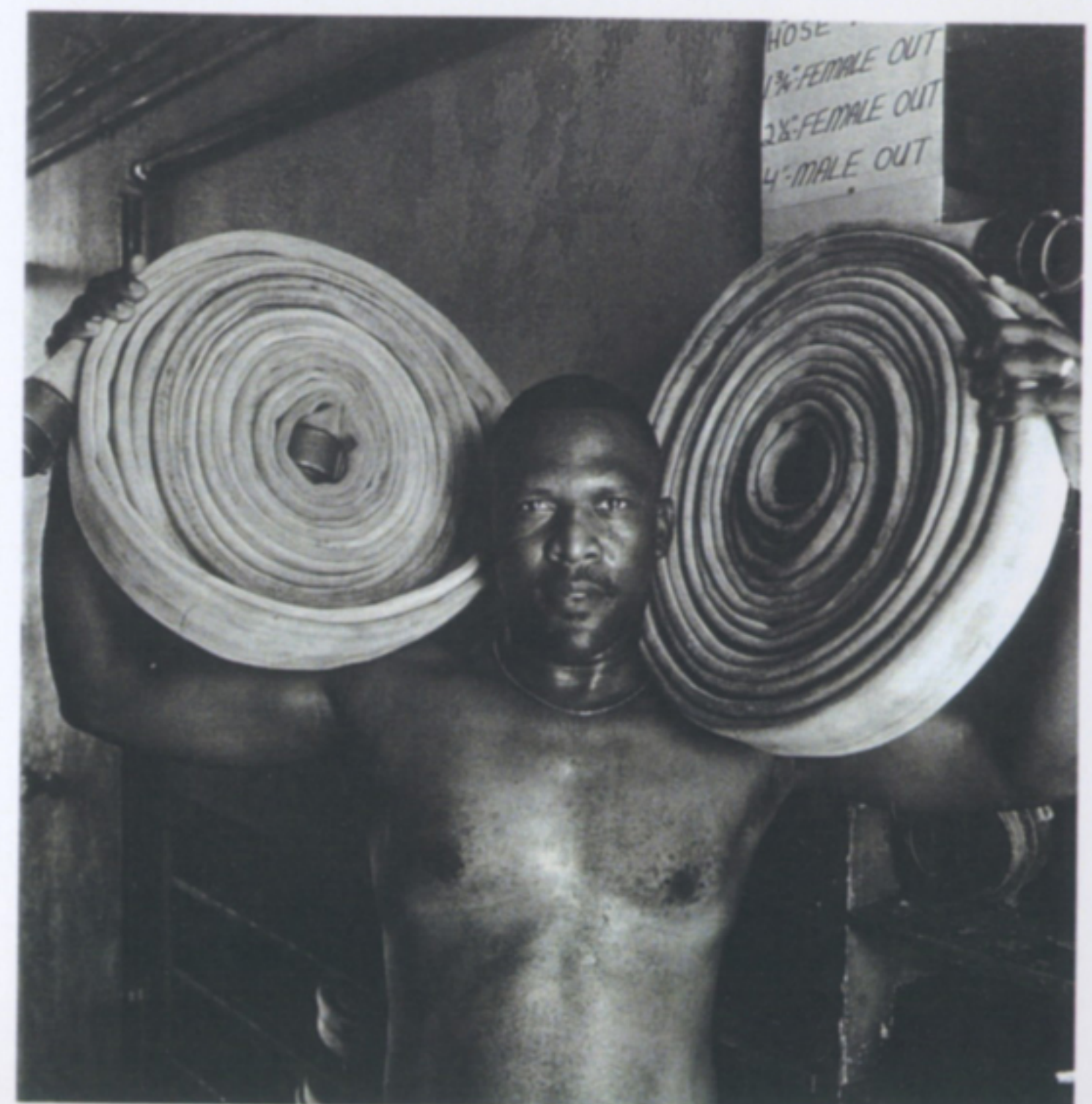
FAR LEFT: FDNY member of the "Vinegar Hill Gang" at the station's gym in Harlem, New York City, November 1997.

LEFT, TOP: Inmate volunteers for forest firefighting duties in training (from center, right to left): Kevin Barnett, Lindsay Butler, David Spears, Vern Daniels. "Intermountain" conservation camp, Bieber area, California, October 1997.

BOTTOM: Fireman with the Houston Fire Department in his station house, Houston, Texas, September 1997.

PAGE 42: Tuna fishermen Paolo Scala and Angelo Cannarella in tuna fishery, Portopalo di Capo Passero, Sicily, Italy, June 1999.

PAGE 43: Tuna fishermen Tonino Marina and Michele Campisi hoisting nets, Portopalo di Capo Passero, Sicily, Italy, June 1999.



(continued from page 38) you have to be in very good form to drag around all your heavy protective equipment. Of course, my own photo equipment always adds a lot of weight as well. And with the toreadors I almost never slept. Every night I had to drive to another city to attend yet another corrida, arriving early in the morning to obtain the necessary permits.

VV: What has been the most challenging project for you so far?

GF: Keeping up with the legionnaires was impossibly difficult. But again, I was lucky to be accepted by them. First of all, I had to get approval from the French authorities. I had to research the project for six months before submitting a proposal to a high official in Marseilles. He gave me the okay, surprisingly enough.

I had been with the legionnaires in Africa for three months when the hostage crisis in Bosnia erupted. My legionnaires were sent there. I wanted to go with them, but the logistics of getting credentials made it impossible. Yet somehow, through unbelievable circumstances, I was able to accompany them part of the way. I flew to Zagreb

and from there was allowed travel with them in their tanks. After a few weeks in Bosnia I went to Guyana, then back to Bosnia, and to Africa again—each time catching up with different groups of legionnaires as they went from mission to mission.

I grew very fond of the legionnaires, and it was mutual. I spent Christmas with them in Chad one year—a rare honor, because Christmas is for them a very sacred and private ritual during which they consume a lot of alcohol. I mean a lot of alcohol!

The reason the legionnaires accepted me is the same reason all the other men welcomed me into their ranks. Somehow they understood that my role was to tell their story to the world.



VV: Could you talk about your next book?

GF: I am now preparing two new books: *Les Hommes de la Mer* (Men at sea) will be published this winter. I did this series last year on fishermen, sailors, and military combat swimmers, in Sardinia, Sicily, and other parts of Italy, as well as Portugal, Germany, Russia. By the time I started this project, I was a little tired of all that traveling and all the dramas of that masculine world. But again, I was so touched by the men. Visually, it was something very different from what I had ever seen, anywhere. The last thing I want to do is repeat myself. I never intended to

photograph warriors forever.

The second upcoming book is an anthology of all my work so far. The reality is that each of my previous books turned out to be chapters in what has become, over the last ten years, one large project. So my eighth book—*Des Hommes*—will be in fact my first book. There will also be a traveling exhibition, touring New York, Paris, and Milan.

VV: What is your next project?

GF: In January 2000, I started a series of photographs on a new subject:

people being confronted with another kind of challenge altogether. I call it *The Gift*. It's about faith. Not just men this time—also women. It's another way of looking at the world.

The first chapter is called "The Sign of The Cross." It's mostly about Christianity. I started with this topic because the year 2000 was very important for this faith. In 2001, I will be doing Hinduism, because it also happens to be a special year for this faith. I am now learning Hindustani to get ready for this trip.

Then I'll do Buddhism. Then Islam. But I am not interested in the dogma of these religions. Again, I will be studying the codes and gestures that these faiths have in common.



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