

1981 found Art Gerstein seeking employment in Great Barrington, MA, as a professional photographer. He had been living in nearby Columbia County, NY, and was friends with photographers and artists in the Gt. Barrington so the move would prove to be part of Art's evolution as an artist.

His search led him to the darkroom of Hungarian born photographer and photo-journalist, Lucien Aigner, who gained fame in Europe in the mid 1930's as part of the elite "L'ecole de Paris", who adopted the newly developed 35 mm Leica rangefinder camera. At that time, photographers were mostly using view cameras on tripods. They were not allowed to roam freely at important events, but relegated to stand in a "photographer gallery" to take a photo of the dignitaries entering or departing, or inside an event in a roped off area.

Aigner would use his credentials as a journalist to cover events like the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the 1936 Winter Olympics in Germany, for example, and when nobody was looking, he would snap off a few pictures, put the "toy" camera back in his pocket and leave quickly. Initially, nobody paid him any attention, as the little camera was not threatening and they did not know how much damage the little camera could inflict in its ability to catch a slice of life to show the world.

With his ability to use candid photography along with his writing ability, Aigner became one of the first photo-journalists. His scoops in "Match" helped make him famous in Europe. After the Second World War, Aigner decided to come to the United States and got a job with Voice of America. He lived on Long Island for a time, driving around in "Sexy" as he used to call his old Essex sedan, and eventually fell in love with Great Barrington, MA, where he met Norman Rockwell, and put him to his "toy" camera, as well.

When Art found Aigner, he was living in a two story home at 15 Dresser Avenue, just off the main road in the middle of town. He had a darkroom assistant, Hero Wagshieder, who was making prints for him and who needed assistance with a project of duplicating 35,000 original French-oriented black and white negatives that Aigner made in France in the 1930's and 1940's. As luck would have it, Heros decided to quit just after Art was hired, and left him in the middle of a project funded by both Kodak and Poloroid to help defray Aigner's expenses of duplicating the negatives that now had an approaching deadline to be transferred to the French National Library (Biblioteque Nationale). With the aid of one of Aigner's friends who was an old master photographer, they worked out a system of photographing the negatives on negative lithograph film that made them into positives, that could then be re-photographed to become negatives once again. If done correctly, the process yielded a nice duplicate negative with the advantage that there was a positive to go back to if the negative became damaged.

"When I started the project, there were weeks of experimentation to nail down the exposure and the developing time of the positive", explained Art. "However, it became apparent to me that with the large diversity of densities of Aigner's original

negatives, getting a “normalized” positive would be a little tricky.” So, he suggested to Aigner that they divide up his negatives to three categories – underexposed, normal and overexposed. The big problem was that the negatives were in small rolls of sequential negatives, and separating them into three discrete sections would be impossible. Time was running out and Art had to pick up production speed. When he started production, Art was making 10 positives per day and re-photographing them to negatives later in the day. He was able to remake positives that did not yield good negatives. At this rate, Art would need several years to complete the two-man project.

Art started to pick up production speed and broke the 200 positive per day mark. As production speed increased, the consistency of the positives started to vary more that made it more difficult to make a good negative, Art did his best and was able to duplicate a little more than 25,000 of the 35,000 negatives before the deadline.

“I became more than just a master print maker”, says Art, “Aigner’s family wanted me to carry more responsibilities than that”. Art eventually took over the duties of the secretary who quit to raise a family. He was able to produce some catalogs of Aigner’s work, and helped develop a portfolio of Albert Einstein, who Aigner had the privilege of meeting in Europe as well as at Princeton, NJ. Art even had a tutor to learn to speak French, Michael Houlihan of Lenox, MA, and Art accompanied Aigner to Paris in 1985.

Art Gerstein worked with Lucien Aigner until 1991 when he moved to NY City on the advice of Douglas Trumbull, who produced the special effects for Stanley Kubrick in “2001 – A Space Odyssey”. Trumbull converted unused commercial space in Housatonic, MA, into a sound stage to produce the first ever ride simulator project, “Back To The Future – The Ride” for Universal Studios in Orlando, FL, and used Art as his production still photographer on this landmark project.