



# Bush Ranger

**Just what is it that turns a wealthy playboy  
into one of the world's most significant image makers  
and a respected 'photographer's photographer'?**

IMAGES | PETER BEARD | WORDS | MIKE VON JOEL

## Bush Ranger

Previous page: *Elephants on the Plain* Courtesy Peter Beard/Taschen

**P**ETER BEARD, CLAIMED the late Andy Warhol, 'is one of the most fascinating men in the world - until you get to know him. Then he's impossible, wild, strange, obsessed and demanding.'<sup>1</sup> They were neighbours then in Montauk, a little town at the very end of Long Island, about one hour past Southampton. Beard had the house nearest the Point and their other joint neighbour was Dick Cavett - whose bit of shoreline also doubled as the nudist beach - Cavett's Cove. The seven houses designed by Stanford White (the 'seven sisters') are the most sought after properties in the area and Cavett has one. Montauk, or The End as locals call it, still enjoys the wide-open spaces valued by an artists' colony of sorts that has sprung up there - songwriter Paul Simon, artist-filmmaker Julian Schnabel, Beard and fellow snapper Bruce Weber, art critic Ingrid Sischy, Ralph Lauren, and media man Adam Lindemann.

Long-time Warhol collaborator, Paul Morrissey, has just sold out for \$27 million and Vanity Fair magazine recently reported that 'Peter Beard is trying to get \$26 million for his five-plus-acre compound of cottages with ocean views and access'... whilst... 'former TV talk-show host Dick Cavett has put 77 acres of oceanfront land next to his home on sale for \$30 million'. The times they are a-changin'.

It's big-bucks-land all right, but a world to which Peter Beard - photographer, adventurer, socialite, artist, writer and eccentric - is no stranger. But how *did* a wealthy playboy make the transition to admired and admirable photographer and the social conscience of African culture?

### Out of New York Society

Born in 1938 and raised in New York City, Beard was an obsessive diary keeper from an early age and, around twelve years old, discovered photography. An element he rapidly added to his highly eclectic style of diary making. He duly attended Yale University in 1957, first as a pre-med student, but quickly moving over to art history - his family having had a long association with art and philanthropy. He teachers reputedly included Joseph Albers at this time.



*Rungstedlund, Karen Blixen's home today, 15 miles outside of Copenhagen. A museum run by the Rungstedlund Foundation since 1991*

*Photo: Mike von Joel*



*Peter Beard in the African Bush 1960s  
Courtesy Peter Beard/Taschen*

**'One of the most fascinating men in the world - until you get to know him. Then he's impossible, wild, strange, obsessed and demanding'**

**ANDY WARHOL**



Beard's mother was fond of safari holidays and she took her son to Africa in the 1950's. Even today, he remembers that he expected a 'back to nature' experience and was disappointed by 'much too much human impact'.<sup>2</sup> The writings of Danish author, Karen Blixen (pen name: Isak Dinesen), and in particular her romanticised autobiography, *Out of Africa* (1937), impressed Beard greatly and he subsequently met the author through his cousin. When Peter returned to Africa himself, it was via Denmark and her house, 15 miles outside of Copenhagen, called Rungstedlund. It was a late friendship that was to last to the end of Blixen's life and Beard took some moving portraits of the author at her home just before her death in 1962 aged 77. She bequeathed him some of her notebooks and photo-albums.

Blixen had been a beauty in her day and an integral part of a disappearing colonial Africa. She had actually left her failed coffee plantation at the foot of the Ngong Hills and returned to Denmark in 1931, after only 18 years in East Africa, but is forever associated with traditional Kenya and its (now despoiled) culture. It was at her family estate, Rungstedlund, that she wrote *Out of Africa*, *Shadows In the Grass*, *Gothic Tales* and *Mottos In My Life*. The success of the movie, *Out of Africa*, with Meryl Streep and Robert Redford in 1985, turned the Danish author into a household name and there has been renewed interest in her work ever since.

### Chip off the Old Block

Peter Beard's grandparents came from the American robber-baron mould. One step-grandparent, Pierre Lorillard IV, was a tobacco magnate; and great-grandfather Hill was the founder of the Great Northern Railroad, which helped open up both the USA and Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries. James Jerome Hill left Beard a trust fund that made him wealthy and a family tradition for art appreciation that made him cultured.

The male Beards were striking and handsome by tradition and as a young jet setter, Peter was renowned for his attraction to women. He was married one time to the model Minnie Cushing and later to Cheryl Tiegs, with a host of other celebrity women recorded on his arm. For Peter, the beauty of women is a life long addiction - alongside that of Africa. Charm and wealth opened all the right doors for Beard, his milieu was that of the Rolling Stones, Andy Warhol, Lee Radziwill, Truman Capote, Andrew Wyeth, Richard Lindner, Terry Southern, Bianca Jagger, and the painter Francis Bacon. His originality kept them hooked. During the infamous Rolling Stones US tour in 1972 (which nearly did for Annie Leibovitz) Peter Beard was part of the extended entourage. 'He's like a modern Tarzan,' noted an envious Warhol from Long Island, 'he jumps in and out of the snake pit he has at his house. He lived in a car in a parking lot on 13th Street for 6 months until he woke up and found a transvestite sleeping on the roof...'

PETER BEARD



*Elephant Foetus Exposed* Courtesy Peter Beard/Taschen

In the early 60s, Peter Beard worked in Kenya's Tsavo National Park and this is when he recorded the annihilation of some 35,000 elephants and hundreds of black rhinos in a series of emotive photographs and diary like documents that became *The End of the Game*. It was also the beginning of his fervent political analysis of the corruption of the natural African eco-structure by 'modernisation' driven forward by corrosive Western influences.

Even today, Beard will easily rile to anger about the self-serving, guilt-ridden politicians and celebrities who try to 'solve' Africa's many problems whilst merely exacerbating them through sentimentality and naive, misdirected distress. 'Geldof, Bono, Bush & Co. pouring money down the black hole; like missionaries! Medicines! Western dogma, politicians, lawyers, Madison Avenue, all the way to "Nairobi" - a virtual industry of foreign influences adding up one thing: overpopulation in the land of no jobs and no resources.'<sup>5</sup>

#### End Game

Beard's time in Kenya was consolidated by purchasing a house near to Karen Blixen's old home - today a museum amidst a suburban housing development named 'Karen' (although, in fact, Blixen was

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*Escapades in Equatorial Africa* (2004), it is *The End of the Game* that made his reputation and created the most impact. Originally published in 1965 and updated in 1977, this classic has been respectfully repackaged for 2008 by Benedikt Taschen with a new foreword by Paul Theroux.

The content of this seminal work on Africa captured popular imagination with its distressing photographs of the destruction by disease and starvation of the elephant herds of Kenya in the Tsavo lowlands. An animal particularly dear to - and anthropomorphised by - humans. It illustrates and narrates the legends of the Victorian explorers, missionaries and big-game hunters whose conduct and excesses were to change the face of Africa on into 20th century.

always known as 'Tania' by her intimates). Near the Ngong Hills, he called it the Hog Ranch and made it his base of operations in East Africa through the 1960s and 70s.

Although Beard has produced a number of works on 'his' Africa: *Eyelids of the Morning: The Mingled Destinies of Crocodiles and Men* (1973), *Longing for Darkness* (1975), and *Zara's Tales: Perilous*

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*Elephant Feeding* Courtesy Peter Beard/Taschen

In *The End of the Game*, elephants play a major role. They were the trophies the 'boys own' heroes of Victorian and Edwardian Africa took on in face-to-face contest - often resulting in the death of both parties. They are the subject of sentimental rescue schemes by charitable organisations across the West and the elephant poachers are particularly reviled by armchair conservationists. Beard draws a fascinating and terrible parallel between elephant society and that of the human race - pointing out the similarities and the horrendous effects of over-population and enforced density of habitat on both. Once white interference in Africa tipped the balance against the wild animal population - being both a participant and a teacher to the local inhabitants - by creating a slaughter-for-profit ethos, an ecosystem that had sustained for thousands of years was destroyed in less than one hundred. Darwinism was encapsulated in Africa, with every living thing fulfilling its role for the common survival.

**'Even today, Beard will easily rile to anger about the self-serving, guilt-ridden politicians and celebrities who try to 'solve' Africa's many problems'**



Today, the myth of the inexhaustible supply of living matter on the plains and bush is coruscatingly exposed and the clear glass of hindsight has revealed the cause is no more complex than human arrogance, stupidity and personal greed on all levels.

Beard has updated his original book three times now. But his message and warning on the situation in Africa remains consistently ignored. He is even handed in explaining

the behaviour and attitudes of the original explorers and big game hunters whose psychology was essentially 18th century, and not slow to applaud the raw courage and fortitude of those early pioneers advancing on foot into the unknown 'dark continent'.

One of the book's many strengths is the endless array of archive photographs, not least those given him in the Karen Blixen bequest. These, 'heroic' and simultaneously saddening images of a time as



*In the Shade of Kilimanjaro* Courtesy Peter Beard/Taschen

far away and alien as Agincourt, are contextualised for the modern reader. This extended collage diary is amalgamated from hundreds of these historical photographs and writings, starting with the opening-up of Africa from the coast, inland to the tribal territories, railroads, and on to the new 'civilisation' of Kenya where 'the game now involves accommodating statistics like every mature female in Kenya having 8.2 children.'<sup>1</sup> *The End of the Game* was 'my first book in 1965 and things have been steadily getting worse ever since,' he told *Vogue* magazine recently.

An exhibition of Beard's art in 1977 echoed the book with an installation of photographs, elephant carcasses, burned diaries, taxidermy, African artefacts, books and personal memorabilia shown at the International Center of Photography, NYC. It was his first one-man show.

In 1996, he in turn was spiked and trampled by an elephant, but travelled back to the Hog Ranch in 2006, after a few years absence. This trip - at aged 68 - once again stimulated him to make a new

series of images, giant hand-made silver gelatin prints collaged in typical fashion, which were shown by the Michael Hoppen Gallery in London. ●

Peter Beard currently lives in New York City, Montauk Point, and Kenya, with his wife Nejma and daughter Zara.

#### NOTES

- 1] Andy Warhol's *Exposures* 1979. Hutchinson & Co. [p.248]  
2-4] Conversation with Ben Kaplan. 2008



**The End of the Game:  
The Last Word from Paradise**  
**Peter Beard**

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