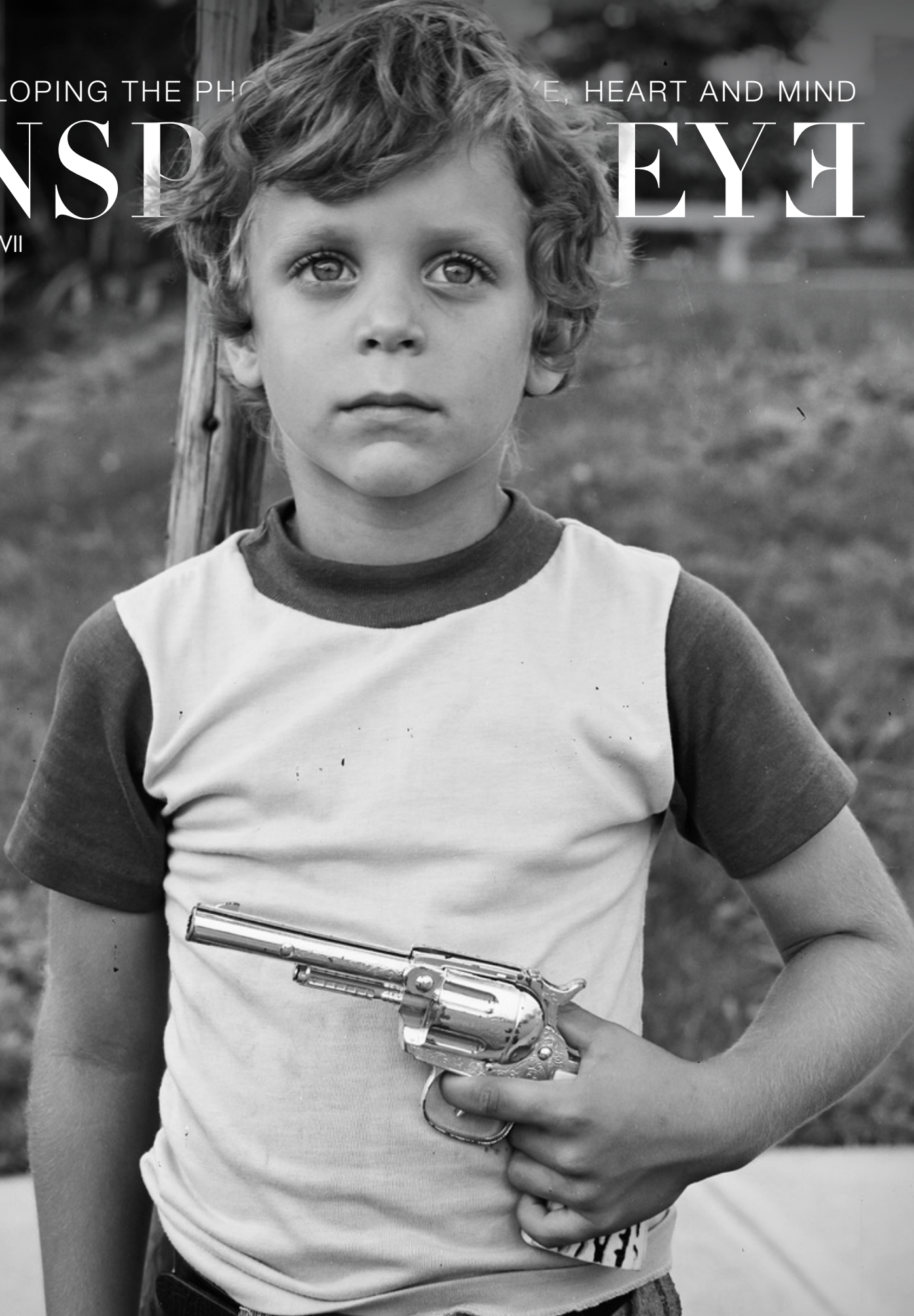


DEVELOPING THE PHOTOGRAPHY COMMUNITY, HEART AND MIND

# INSPIRE EYE

ISSUE CXVII



TO INSPIRE AND TO BE INSPIRED BY ALL OF THE PHOTOGRAPHY COMMUNITY





INTERVIEW WITH

# AMY TOUCHETTE



***Please tell us something about you, your life and interest, etc. Put as much detail as you like and then we will start the questions.***

I'm a fine art photographer based in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, who specializes in street portraits. I was raised in a town outside of Syracuse, New York, and spent a lot of my adolescence interested in writing, painting, and drawing. In my twenties I got a BA in Literature and Studio Art and an MA in Literature. In 1997 I moved to New York City to pursue a career in publishing, and a few years later, when I realized that wasn't for me, became totally hooked on photography. I've always had a very personal relationship with photography. It's something that feels more like a lifestyle or philosophy than a career or even an action. Diane Arbus called photographing a condition, which I love.

***What inspired you to become a photographer?***

I came to photography kind of dramatically. After September 11th, I became acutely aware of the value of my life and of those around me. I felt this at my core. I'm not sure what better words I can use to describe just how changed I was. Suddenly I knew the purpose of life was to fill it with meaningful experiences, and that that was entirely up to me to do. I think it didn't seem an option before that; I don't know why. And in looking at what I had accumulated so far—I had been an adult for several years at that point—I knew I was going through the





motions, albeit completely unaware that I was doing so. I actually thought I was ambitious, but I think steamrolling is more like it.

Anyway I thought I would be lucky to figure out what I should be doing with my life, let alone get the chance to pursue it. And after a month of very honest soul searching, I started to look into photography. I wanted to connect with people, and I knew the medium—at least in the way I wanted to use it—would help me learn how to see other people—really see them, and after that, how to gain their trust. It seemed like the coolest artform out there. Although reasoning and process of elimination played a part in arriving at photography, most of my actions and decisions were gut reactions. I tried to be as honest as possible with everything I did because I felt that would be the quickest way to find answers. And that has been the motto I've tried to live by ever since. Now, twenty years later, I can say it has really proved itself. I am so glad I made the change when I did.

***What age are you and at what age did you start your journey as a photographer?***

I am 52 now. I started learning about photography when I was 31.

***Would you mind sharing some of the things you feel helped you along the way with your photography, (lessons, workshops, books, etc)...and also some of the things that may have***









***hindered you, that you  
overcame on this journey?***

The International Center of Photography was indispensable in my understanding of photography. I enrolled in my first class not even knowing what an f-stop was, and now I teach there. I basically made my own curriculum through continuing education courses at ICP, starting with Photo I with the legendary Jeff Mermelstein, followed by Photo II, III, some documentary courses, lighting courses. If photographers I admired taught—like Mary Ellen Mark and Andrea Modica—I'd enroll in their classes.

Then I was a teacher assistant for several years, which helped me keep my costs down, because I could use their facilities in exchange for my time. And now I've been teaching there for the past five or six years. So I can't emphasize enough how important that school was and still is to me. As my photography grew, developing relationships with other photographers, photo lovers, and people in the photo community was very important, and definitely made things more interesting and fun. It's great to hang out with people who are as deeply entrenched in a medium as you are. Portfolio reviews have been a particularly good way to meet colleagues.

It's how I met my gallerists and my photo book publisher, although in all those cases we didn't start working together until at least a couple of years after our initial meeting. These meetings are really good at getting you introductions and helping you find the people who get you and, as important, who you





would like to work with. Reading about photography, intellectualizing it, has also been important to my understanding of photography. Robert Adams is particularly articulate, his more recent book *Art Can Help*, as well as *Why People Photograph* and *Beauty in Photography* are some of my favorites. But also writing by James Baldwin, Paul Graham, Ernst Haas, John Berger, Tod Papageorge, Steven Shore, and Ben Shahn. It's fun to dip a toe into Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, but sometimes that stuff seems way beside the point somehow. I am also a big fan of *Aperture* magazine, which consistently has good articles. Its pages often end up taped to my office walls. As far as things I overcame through photography, my first thought is there are too many to mention. Aside from the hugely beneficial experience of learning how to have healthy and honest conversations with people, photographing on the street teaches you how to go with the flow, confront challenges, seize moments, and work with what's there (as opposed to lamenting what's not).

***Do you feel photography enhances your life? If so, how?***

In addition to what I've already mentioned, deciding to make photography my life brought a lot of peace. There are so many different ways to experience this one life on earth, and deciding photography would be the one thread through which I would view the world has brought a lot of focus to my life. It eliminated distractions somehow. I feel settled, but not complacent.





***If we are speaking specifically of photographers, which are the ones of the past and present do you admire?***

I am hugely inspired by Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, Helen Levitt, and August Sander. Jamel Shabazz is a hero of mine. Larry Fink, Rosalind Fox Solomon, Richard Sandler, and Bruce Davidson are all at the top of my list. I also admire Gus Powell for monetizing street photography in such brilliant ways, Missy O'Shaughnessy for consistently capturing the wondrous serendipity of the street, Peter Funch for his fan-freaking-tastic series 42nd and Vanderbilt, and Gulnara Samoilova for being a force of nature and uniting women street photographers.

***What purpose does photography serve for you?***

Photography teaches you how to see. It teaches you to be "exquisitely present" as Joel Meyerowitz says, to not check-out, and there seems to me to be no greater purpose than that, because it goes way beyond photography. I photograph to have an experience first, and make a photograph second, and my goal is to always keep that as real as possible.

***Do you do photography for hire or as an art form?***

Both, but I only take photography jobs that feel right, that give back and don't interfere. I am very protective of photography. I don't want to ruin it somehow, put out the flame. I think about that a lot. It's my worst nightmare.





***What do you do for work and how does photography fit into that?***

Before I became a photographer, I was working as a managing editor. When I switched to photography, I became a freelance writer, working from home, so that photography could be my focus without leaning on it to pay bills. I write about photography for various outlets, but I write about a variety of other topics as well. I've written practice Reading & Language Arts ACTs, business data reports, a white paper for a cryptocurrency company in Belarus, marketing stuff online I don't even put my name next to (haha—true). Right now I'm translating a few

Shakespeare plays into modern English for an educational publisher. I'll do whatever it takes to keep my schedule my own. I work when I'm going to be productive, and I don't work when I won't be. It's a very comfortable life, and I do really enjoy writing. It's like doing the crossword puzzle for a living. A great exercise. Otherwise, I have print sales pretty steadily. I teach photography. I might do a portrait session or two. Sometimes I get some cool commissions, adventures that are really unusual and fun. So I make money in a lot of different ways.

***What genre of photography are you most comfortable working in?***

Street photography





***When you work, are you working on different series or just finding photos that fit the way you feel at the moment?***

Photo opportunities present themselves all of the time, so I'm continually aiming to see those moments. I have a series called Street Dailies that I began in 2012 and comprises over 3,000 photographs of candid street portraits. They're iPhone images I release regularly on Instagram that are of-the-moment images of just this sort. But when I'm deliberately working, I use a Rolleiflex 3.5f Planar, a twin lens reflex film camera, to make posed, collaborative street portraits that, yes, are usually for a certain series. But at the same time I'm also clutching my iPhone for whatever presents that seems to lend itself more to a candid approach.

***Can you describe a few of the trigger mechanisms that make you want to stop and shoot?***

I hope not. I hope it's always a mystical, intuitive, ever-changing, vibratory, of-the-spirit moment that one can't know by its very nature. But I will say that photography is light on surface, and that's it. So whatever I photograph has to be something the camera can pick up, something that hangs on the exterior, or in the clues of the exterior. It has to be visible.

***How strong of a connection do you have with your subject matter and can you describe that connection?***

I am hugely inspired by New York City. My first photography subjects were New Yorkers. They are who drew me to photography.





In New York, there is so much diversity, so much life out on the streets, so many characters and stories, I wanted to learn how to gain a stranger's trust to create a little glimpse into those real lives. Looking someone in the eye, asking a stranger to make a portrait, takes courage, even though it shouldn't, because it's just like saying, "I like you." And if it goes according to plan, they say yes and you collaborate on making this thing together, it is an extremely affirmative experience, an anti-depressant that reminds me never to give up on humanity. A

nd even when it doesn't go according to plan, even when it goes off the rails—especially when it goes off the rails—those are just as important experiences to me because I learn about my own shortcomings, where my ignorance lies. What I didn't know and didn't say or do. Photographing is about listening to another human being with your eyes and ears and every cell of your body.

***How do you see the relationship with your camera? Is it a friend, tool, or whatever?***

On the street, the camera is like another person in the dynamic. It has a personality, and it adds that personality into the exchange I have with people. The Rolleiflex has a vintage look—it's a film camera—people react positively to it in general. Some people call me over to talk to me about it; meaning, it actually gets me portraits. Fantastic, right? That's why I say it's like a person. Like the best assistant ever. It also achieves what I want aesthetically, the genuine simplicity of sumptuous film grain.







***Do you like to work by yourself or to have someone with you? Please explain why.***

One of the realizations I had about myself on my way to finding photography was how much I enjoyed being alone in a crowd of strangers. It feels empowering and intimidating all in one and something about that really suits me. I don't know how to make street photography with another person present. To me, it is so deeply personal, I don't see room for anyone else except for who I'm viewing.

***Do you listen to music while you are shooting? How do you feel the music enhances the visual experience?***

I don't think you can make street photographs with people in it while listening to music. At ICP, where I teach, I can tell when students have their ear buds in. You can see it, just like you can see it in someone's body when you encounter them on the street and they have earbuds in. You can feel there is a sense that has been shut off to the world, and I think that has to result in a less compelling experience, and therefore, a less compelling photograph. How do you jump off from there? I don't know. I don't think you can.

***Do you have a preference for images in an analog or a digital state?***

I'd much prefer them in analog, but I'm happy digital exists for all it's capable of capturing and its immediacy and instructive



qualities. Film photographs are just so beautiful though, each piece of grain like a snowflake, completely organic and unique, and the polar opposite of an always-perfect pixel. There's a soulful quality of an analog print.

***How important is the post-processing of the pictures in your work?***

With Street Dailies, it's pretty important. That series was born out of Instagram. That platform gave me a reason to photograph and share those photographs in a way that never existed before, and it was a super, super fun addition to the experience of being a photographer. To every day be able to make images, use all the editing tools, and filters, and cropping, etc., to make it what it should be, and then post it, and have people's response, was like a sketch pad that never existed before. I love how loose it makes photography. Anyway, I always use the post-processing options with those iPhone images. It's part of the fun. With my Rolleiflex images, I just want the skin tone to look as realistic as possible, and I might tweak the crop ever so slightly, but that's it. Those film images stay pretty much untouched.

***Where in the world are you located?***

Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, in New York City, USA

***Where is your favorite place to work?***

New York City! In NYC, even misfits belong. "Only in New York" is a saying







that is still very true. I love it here, and I love New Yorkers. I made a deck of playing cards that celebrates them, actually. Each card features a different New Yorker, and each suit comprises a different set of people: spades are grannies (my affectionate name for older women), diamonds are workers, clubs are twins and sets (people who emulate one another), and hearts are quintessential, beloved NYC characters. I also had a book of street portraits published recently, *Personal Ties: Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn* (Schilt Publishing, Amsterdam), which is sort of a love letter to the people in my adopted neighborhood, Bed-Stuy. So New York is a continued source of inspiration from me.

That's how it all got started, and that's how it feels still.

***What do you dislike about photography?***

Less of something I dislike, but more of something I was challenged by, was the personality changes that happened in me once street photography started to really seep into my bones. I was so entrenched in going with the flow, of letting the world dictate where I'd go, that I kind of stopped having opinions outside of photography. It sounds weird—and of course I did form thoughts!—but I lost my own mood or my own desires, or at least it felt as if I did. I certainly didn't pay them any credence. And like anything, if you go too far with it, a problem starts to develop. I wasn't speaking my mind, and quite happily so, being completely uninterested in myself, and I paid a price



that I still think about today. I would say it's sort of like a job hazard.

So I do try to make sure I speak up, not just about my feelings but to just talk in general.

Sometimes it's very easy. You might catch me on a night I talk your ear off. Other times I recede into the background, and I can stay there for a really, really long time. I have a lot of really dominating friends, and I know we seek each other out, even though it never feels that way.

***If you would like to make a closing statement, we'd love to hear what you have to say.***

Thank you for all you do to support and promote street photography. It's so important that we have a visual record of today for tomorrow. As the saying goes, "Those who can't remember the past are condemned to repeat it." And besides, don't we want to be able to show a five-year-old what a telephone booth was? There are so many reasons to document and share what we see, from the most profound to the most pedestrian. So thank you for contributing to that. I appreciate it very much.

 WEB PAGE

 INSTAGRAM







Personal Ties: Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn book:



NYC Street Dailies playing cards:



Recent talk at School of Visual Arts:

 YOUTUBE