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**T**he towering concrete chimney of Tabakfabrik in Linz rises into the grey Austrian sky. In the courtyard of the former cigarette factory a queue snakes its way along the side of the imposing grey building and groups of tattooed twenty-somethings mill around smoking, waiting to be let inside. It seems like a strange place to be searching for Clayton Patterson, the photographer, filmmaker and popular historian who has become synonymous with New York's Lower East Side.

Clayton is in town for the Wildstyle Tattoo fair. After touring Austria with the show for the past two decades, the bonds he's forged partly explain why he's planning to permanently relocate here. As I make my way into the cavernous exhibition hall, the air is filled with the buzz of tattoo guns pumping tiny amounts of ink into youthful flesh. A man covered with tattoos is on stage in the centre of the hall, amping up the crowd. He holds a hammer high above his head with one hand and raises a shiny silver nail with the other. He tilts his head back and starts hammering the nail down his upended nostril, to the horror of the girls in the front row.

At the back of the hall, I spot Clayton with his unmistakable wizard-like beard and signature skull baseball cap perched on his head. He's manning a stall surrounded by photos he's taken of CBGB's, graffitied storefronts, balaclava'd gang members and squat protests. He greets me enthusiastically, flashing a big gold-toothed smile, then dashes off to shoot the next performance on stage, leaving me to man the stall. As passersby pause to gaze at the TV screen displaying clips from Clayton's immense video archive - including punk gigs, drag queens, protests, riots and performance artist Joe Coleman biting the head off a live mouse - I start to wonder how I ended up here.

Since the late 1970s, Clayton has tirelessly documented the creative chaos of the Lower East Side. He watched the neighbourhood morph and change - from artistic melting pot to bougie brunch spot - and is a vocal critic of the direction New York City has taken in recent years. In a *New York Times* article entitled 'Last Bohemian Turns Out the Lights', Clayton proclaimed that gentrification had gone too far - that creativity had vanished in its wake - and announced his departure. He was leaving for the small Austrian town of Bad Ischl.

This piece was meant to explore his new life in Europe, but when we meet at Wildstyle I find a man in limbo. In many ways his heart has already left the Big Apple, but he's still fighting to secure his archive before making the move. His stance on NYC hasn't changed; today he's spitting fire at Taylor Swift's recent coronation as the city's 'welcome ambassador'.

"Taylor Swift is a global icon," he says, exasperated. "Taylor Swift, in no way or form, represents New York. But people in Europe - if I ask these kids here...." He swivels around and calls ▶

# CLAYTON PATTERSON'S LAST DAYS

The rebel photographer on how New York City lost its way.



out to a group of fourteen-year-old boys poring over a Hells Angels photograph. "You ever heard of Taylor Swift, the pop star Taylor Swift?" They answer, "Yeah," in that 'of course we have' way. "You see?" says Clayton. "Now they see New York as Taylor Swift, so that then sells it as a tourist commodity, but it also depreciates the value."

Clayton is angry with a city administration that seems determined to wipe out the city's grassroots culture. While promoting their Taylor Swift tourist video, authorities moved to remove Jim 'Mosaic Man' Power's colourful street mosaics at Astor Place to make way for a bland redesign. As he despairs at how the culture is being cleansed on all levels, he repeats a line that he used in a *New York Times* piece: "I never left the Lower East Side, the Lower East Side left me."

**How did you feel when you first arrived on the Lower East Side?**

I come from Western Canada which is pretty basic. But all of sudden I'm in New York, I'm on the Lower East Side and I realise there's ten different kinds of films out there, avant garde, narrative, what-have-you, people like Jim Jarmusch and Martin Scorsese. Then you have the whole mixture of food, because you had all the ethnic groups. You had Polish and Russian and Ukrainian and Japanese and Chinese and Indian and Bangladeshi... the Russian baths and different churches and synagogues and mosques. So all of that culture comes together as a form of education and stimulation. For a guy like me it was kind of like, 'Woah! I got a whole - I don't want to say a PhD - but I got an intense education.

**Why was it such a creative place?** The genius behind New York was connected to the cheap rent and inexpensive lifestyle. Coming out of that you have Jackson Pollock, Rothko, Jimi Hendrix, Madonna, Lou Reed. One way or another, the advantage of low rent gave them all the opportunity to become who it was that they are, which is the genius behind America. Now they've killed the golden goose. The thing you had on the Lower East Side was the collection of people. Let's say after WWI, you get the migration of the Jews and Puerto Ricans. Out of that, you go from the genius to the idiot within that social group, because they've all been migrated to a place like New York for whatever reason: ethnic cleansing, pogroms, or war. You have the people that are potentially doctors mixed in with people that are idiots, but they all have the same struggle. Within that ethnicity is where these things move up and move out. There's a connection with creativity. It puts people into a cultural place where there's a lot of stimulating information.

The next day, after Wildstyle has packed up and shipped back to its base in Bad Ischl, I'm cycling through the sleepy Austrian spa town and wondering how much stimulating information a man like Clayton could hope to find here. He first came here in 1994, when he was president of New York's Tattoo Society and Jochen Auer, Wildstyle's founder, invited him over to bring the fair some international credibility.

The tattoo studio where he's staying is so isolated on the edge of town that at one point I turn around, convinced I've come too far. Eventually, after one side of the road has turned to fields, I find the studio perched next to a petrol station. It's a far cry from the mean streets of New York.

Clayton was born into a rural, working-class family in Alberta, Canada, and met his partner Elsa Rensaa at art college in 1971. Elsa gave him his first camera and the confidence to follow a passion for art. In 1979, they moved to New York which at the time was



on the verge of bankruptcy and in the grips of a crime epidemic. On the Lower East Side, they discovered junkies, drug dealers and gang members rubbed shoulders with avant-garde artists, bands like The Velvet Underground and rich kids who liked to dabble in the wilder side, like William S. Burroughs and counterculture director Emile de Antonio.

Clayton and Elsa bedded down in the eccentric community. But even when the area was out-of-bounds for most self-respecting New Yorkers, rents were already starting to rise and they realised they had to buy a building if they wanted to maintain their independence. After forty-two mortgage applications, they

eventually purchased 161 Essex Street, which became the Clayton Gallery and Outlaw Art Museum. It showcased art created by local people that conventional galleries wouldn't touch with a bargepole, such as gang members, the homeless and Hells Angels. Through it all, Clayton enthusiastically photographed whatever was happening around him. Over the years he amassed an incredible archive of inner city life and was invited into situations few others would have been allowed. Much of his connection with the community stems from the fact that he's shot nearly everyone in front of his gallery door and placed their pictures on his Wall of Fame.

**How did you develop your participatory photography style?**

Truth, in a way is objectivity, but it's different because when you try to take on the pretence of objectivity, what you're really doing is you're pretending to be something that you're not. It's all about sharing the same environment, without the pretence of, 'I'm here as a person who's more educated than you,' or whatever. I'm not there to be objective. I'm there to try to get as close to the situation as possible within certain degrees and limitations... Like when I photograph people in front of my door, they look like normal Joes. I don't try to make them look like tough guys, even though some of them are Latin Kings, or Nieta, Crips, Bloods, or whatever. It's not based on the principle of objectivity. But I'm not going to Africa and photographing the pygmies, I'm photographing people in my own neighbourhood.

**So shooting them all against the same background makes it a democratic process?**

Absolutely. They're stripped of all essence of pretence. It was like a really - not religious, but a kind of sharing experience. By taking those pictures and putting them in the window I was able to capture one of the largest collections of inner-city people. A lot of them ended up doing crazy things, like Cochise stabbed a bunch of people and a few people went to jail for nineteen years, or whatever. But if you can get to that human level then you're there.

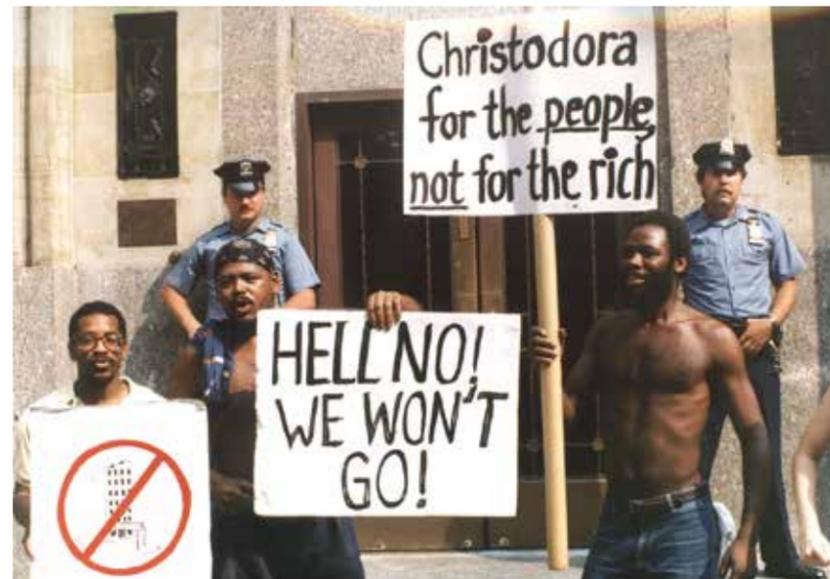
**Why were you drawn to the people nobody else gave a shit about?**

First of all, it's where my roots are from in a sense. I totally understand who these guys are and what they're doing, so I'm preserving a culture that not many people really have an interest in, and will in fact disappear. Art history is basically history of the kings and the rich. If you look at these pictures, I have people with guns and people that are dangerous and people that have done bad things but that's not anywhere near the whole focus. For the most part, the focus is on the good things those people do. I show the whole group, so you have a kind of empathetic look at a large body of people. The background to everything ▶





“[The video-camera] is a revolutionary tool. Little Brother is watching Big Brother.”



we've been talking about is the idea of the 1% society: the rich and the wealthy protect their own and create the history. But there's really very little history of the working class or the middle class or the poor, or any of those people. There's almost none.

While I wait for Clayton to come downstairs, I ask the tattoo studio receptionist, covered in tattoos and piercings, if there's much to do in Bad Ischl. She thinks for a moment and admits it's a small place but if you know the right people it can be interesting.

The quiet surroundings seem worlds away from the night of August 6, 1988, when NYC police attempted to evict a group of homeless people who had been sleeping in East Village park. The community came out in force and held a rally against the evictions, which was charged by the police, sparking the Tompkins Square Park Riot. It was one of the early flashpoints in the gentrification process as the police had been pressured into action by new arrivals to a recently renovated apartment block close to the park.

Clayton was out alongside the community, filming the whole thing on his bulky new videocamera. He captured multiple incidents of police brutality and his tape contradicted the official version of events. Authorities tried to seize the footage, but he went to jail rather than handing it over. After his release he appeared on *Oprah*, held the videocamera aloft and declared, "This is a revolutionary tool. Little Brother is watching Big Brother." He became an activist almost by accident, but once he realised the power of the camera he continued to use it to oppose police violence, getting himself arrested seventeen times in the process.

**Why did you keep fighting?** They wanted to throw me into the anarchist thing and I always said absolutely not, I'm an artist. After 1988, when they knew I had the videotape I had a position I wanted to lay out there. In order to do that I had to be as resistant as possible, so I ended up going to jail and going on a hunger strike and all of that. That was because of an ideological position, which was not 'fuck you' to the state, but 'I'm an artist, that's my work of art, that art belongs to me.' When you say it's art, there's something about that which raises it to a level of some sort of social significance.

**Do you think you'd get away with that today?** Well, I think that's almost where we're at now. I think if I did it now, they would be totally prepared for that and they would have a way of dealing with it.

**What made you retreat from street activism?** I was a pretty radical activist. I got a lot of cops in trouble because I was fucking good at it and I had the determination and the desire to do it. But you pay a heavy price for that. If we weren't self-sufficient in the way that we were, we would have been fucked. But even at the end, Elsa gets knocked down and damaged. That changed our lives. One way or another it will get you.

September 11, 2001, changed everything. It propelled the securitisation and corporate takeover of the city and affected Clayton and Elsa's lives directly, setting in motion their eventual departure.

**Where were you on 9/11?** We were right by Tower 7. One of the

towers starts to come down and I'm taking pictures. Then all of a sudden I look around and Elsa's down, a policeman had pushed her and said, 'Run!' She was in a totally focused position and it knocked her hard to the ground, broke the camera and she got smacked in the head badly. As the time has increased, her memory is almost gone now, to the point where I have someone staying there in the day and night when I'm gone. So in a way they got their revenge, they fucked her up. You pay a price one way or another for this stuff. That's part of the idea of coming to Austria; finding a safe location for her.

**Why was 9/11 such a turning point for New York?** We've lost our direction. That's why I think there's this big push with corporate capitalism. Somehow this becomes representative of who we are and where we're going. I think the argument now is democracy versus corporate capitalism. 'The will of the people should be the law of the land,' was the concept behind democracy. But when you get a billionaire like Bloomberg who comes in and spends over 100 million dollars buying himself a third term, he changed the city radically. He really pushed for corporate culture and the evacuation - the pushing out of the poor, which is really happening. You have this creep toward the corporate class and the diminishing of the connection to the working class. All the politicians are not really connected anymore to the people that they represent.

**What effect has that had on the Lower East Side?** The problem with the Lower East Side, or any other neighbourhood where the wealth comes in and takes over, is that they are disassociated. Maybe they come in and build a luxury hotel, but they have no real connection to the neighbourhood. In the past, it was a creative neighbourhood. Today, there's this big push away from the working and the middle class. And it's ruthless!

Clayton's days of street activism may have come to an end, but he still believes in the transformative power of art: "I look at art as something that can be a real concrete thing. And then eventually you can get beyond that and you can make it political, which can have an action and a reaction. Then you can have a larger concept where you're making social change." His latest action is a video response to the Taylor Swift promo, with his own footage from *Captured* inter-spliced between Taylor's mindless drivel, including police fighting protestors, eccentrics of the underground art scene and GG Allin running through the streets smeared in shit.

I'm sad when our two days together come to an end. I have enough material to write a small book, but I would have gladly stayed to hear more of Clayton's intimate knowledge of New York's popular history. When I arrive home, it's cool to be included in an email with his network back in New York as he attempts to push his video and whip up support for the campaign to unseat Taylor Swift. He's determined to build an alliance to fight the corporate whitewashing of the city's culture and revitalise the grassroots art scene.

He may be in the process of packing his bags, but he's determined to leave his mark on New York before he goes. As I'm writing up our interview, he publishes a fiery opinion piece in *The Villager*, calling the appointment of Taylor Swift a "stunning example of corporate capitalism dominating our democracy and freedom", and ends with the cry, "Wake up, N.Y.C.!"

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