

Books | Clayton Patterson: Outside In

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Photo: Jason Wyche

Artist, activist, and historian Clayton Patterson is a man of distinction. A native Canadian, Patterson and wife Elsa Rensaa moved to New York in 1979. He arrived in the Lower East Side as so many have done for generations, and began to document the neighborhood with photographs, video, audiotape, and collected ephemera. Like Jacob Riis and Weegee before him, Patterson walked the streets of his beloved city, capturing the fantastical figures of the era who gave New York its character, backbone, and nerve. Patterson's work takes us back to a time before gentrification and tells it like it was.

In tribute to his legacy, *How! Happening: An Arturo Vego Project* has just released *Clayton Patterson: Outside In*, an intimate catalogue of his work. Featuring writings by Ai Weiwei, John Strausbaugh, Jose "Cochise" Quiles, and Agathe Snow, among others, the catalogue is beautifully designed and produced, allowing us a vivid look at Patterson's singular New York legacy.

Patterson and Rensaa have long worked together in various capacities, dating back to when they first met at art college in 1972. As Patterson writes, "She saved my life. Without her, who knows where I would have ended up? Everything I have become I owe to her friendship, guidance, inspiration, love and belief in me."

The two worked together at home, with a cottage industry they founded in 1986 called The Clayton Cap, a custom-made embroidered baseball cap. That same year, they also opened the Clayton Gallery and Outlaw Museum at 161 Essex Street, and exhibited works by graffiti artists, tattoo artists, comics illustrators, filmmakers, photographers, musicians, clothing designers, and underground heroes like Taylor Mead.



Photo: Jason Wyche

As Patterson writes, "Our art lays bare a lot about who we are. Exposes a truth we believe in. Whatever truth we may be seeking. A work of art goes beyond surface. It exposes our inner being, our soul, our loves and hates, our imagination, our beliefs, our character, our integrity." It is in these words that we can consider the work of the artist himself.

As Ai Weiwei remembers, "I first met Clayton in 1988 during the Tompkins Square riot. He was this person who appeared at every demonstration with his wife, Elsa. Both of them were always there, filming all the time. He was the only person doing this kind of video at the time, his wife was always standing close by, watching him and giving him supplies, such as batteries or tapes. He used to have a lot of fun and was addicted to his work."



Photo: Jason Wyche

Patterson's tapes became instrumental in exposing police brutality at the riots. New York District Attorney Robert Morgenthau ordered Patterson to surrender his camera and tapes. He refused and was sentenced to ninety days in jail. After a ten-day hunger strike, Patterson's lawyers negotiated a deal that allowed the city to get a copy of the tape while allowing Patterson the right to keep the original. Patterson was an early example of the way in which video could be used to hold law enforcement accountable for their crimes.



Photo © Clayton Patterson

Clayton Patterson: Outside In reminds us that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. Through the many texts and images we are able to grasp the totality of Patterson's vision, one which stands for truth, justice, and power to the people.

Miss Rosen is a New York-based writer, curator, and brand strategist. There is nothing she adores so much as photography and books. A small part of her wishes she had a proper library, like in the game of *Clue*. Then she could blaze and write soliloquies to her in and out of print loves.