



This zine contains excerpts of a conversation between  
**Clayton Patterson**  
(photographer, author, Lower East Side documentarian)  
and  
**Lauren Rosati**  
(Assistant Curator, Exit Art)

The conversation took place at the Clayton Gallery  
& Outlaw Art Museum, 161 Essex Street, NYC, on  
December 3, 2009.

**Clayton Patterson:** I'm going through a whole thing right now with the Sanitation Department, and they're telling me that I have to clean my front door.

**Lauren Rosati:** What, the graffiti on it?

**CP:** Yeah. So it's kind of this pushing of regulations and the suburbanization of New York City. Down here, this used to be the ghetto. There were lots of crack houses, you know, this used to be one of the most dangerous areas in all of New York City. When the drugs moved they moved here. The first time we were here someone got shot across the street. That was like our introduction to the neighborhood.

By suburbanization I mean, what they try to do in Connecticut or whatever, that they want to monitor the look of the whole place. So everyone has to have a white garbage can, a pink fence, yellow trim. And they're doing that in New York now, it's like "enough already!" That's why I tell people once in a while to watch 'Housewives of New York.' I think it's important to watch. Because that's about the homogenization and the gentrification of the look of a woman. You understand? It's the same as Starbucks. Those women are interchangeable. They're interchangeable with the women in Orange County, with the women in Dallas, and so they've created this look of what sophisticated women are supposed to look like. Those women aren't New York women at all. They have nothing to do with New York. They have to do with this Starbuck look, this homogenization and gentrification of the female image which is really offensive to me. And that's not what a NY woman looks like. To back up further, the whole American icon used to be the rebel. It used to be Elvis Presley, rock and roll, anti-authoritarian. It used to be like James Dean. It used to be like the good guy and the bad guy. There used to be specific kinds of people. It isn't like that anymore. So what you get is that they've switched the American ideal and homogenized it. Is it possible for punk to happen again? Probably not. Because the ideals of punk have switched. And it's not just punk, it's the whole culture, the whole subculture. If you go to a rock show now – you used to be able to tell it's a punk show, everyone has a Mohawk. It's a hardcore show, everyone's a skinhead. Now, the only distinguishing factor is what they have on their T-shirts.

## **“There’s a gentrification of our mind and a gentrification of our ideals and a gentrification of our values.”**

Because the look has been homogenized, it’s the same, and it’s making us into robots. It’s a different kind of police state, in the way of homogenizing the look.

The whole thing about America before is that it was all about individuality, it was about being independent, it was about coming up from the grassroots. The whole idea of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps. That stuff is all bullshit now. The reason I ended up over here is that we used to live in the Bowery. And when we lived in the Bowery, this is when Reagan first came in to power, I saw a huge amount of money crossing Canal Street. It was Chinese money. It was coming out of Hong Kong and Taiwan because they thought Red China was going to take over, or maybe because Reagan just opened the gates. I don’t know exactly why the money came. I can’t really prove, without somebody following the money, the Chinese takeover of the Lower East Side. And I don’t mean it in any sort of racist way, I’m just talking money. I know that the building on the corner which was Jasper Johns’ studio was bought by the Chinese, I know that the building next to me was bought by the Chinese, I know that most of the block down is Chinese. I know that my friend over on 3rd and B’s building was bought by the Chinese. I know that Carlo Pitori’s building on 12th and A ... all of this was in the early 1980s. And to look at another factor to prove my point – Little Italy. Now Little Italy is Chinese. And it’s only on the ground floor. That’s the Chinese factor. Now what they do is blame the artists...

**LR:** “They” meaning ... cultural critics?

**CP:** Yeah, critics, writers – they say, well, the Lower East Side was gentrified by artists. Wherever the artists go, the gentrification follows. I say it’s not true. And the reason why I say it’s not true is this ... It’s like going to Afghanistan and calling all those Taliban people terrorists. When I was a kid, people used to go to Turkey and Afghanistan because they were exotic places where people

your age would go after college, wanting to see the world. You'd hitchhike across America or you'd go to Afghanistan, and it was safe. There was still the Taliban then, but now we have this image of the Taliban. The reality is, the Taliban were not the people who blew up New York. The Saudis blew up New York. So my point is that it's just like blaming the artists. It's really who owns the property. It's the money.

**LR:** If you think about DUMBO in Brooklyn, it's the same thing. One person essentially bought the neighborhood.

**CP:** And the artists, the people renting the spaces, are no longer there! That's what happened here. It became cheaper to go to SoHo than to rent a store here. It was about the flipping of buildings, about one person buying a building and flipping it, and then the mortgages go up, and then the payments cost more ... Who was renting the property didn't have anything to do with it. They're in and they're out! And no one talks about that factor. That's the curious thing. But I just observed it.

The point is that now it's 30 years later, and the Chinese own our debt, our manufacturing – they own everything. America went through all these different struggles with human rights, unions, certifications, and government authorities. Starting in the 1930s you needed meat inspectors because meat wasn't inspected, and all of a sudden people started getting sick, so they came up with an agency. There were all these oversights, all these agencies that are watchdogs. Rent has been a court struggle in New York for over a hundred years, back and forth, rent control, rent stabilization ... It's been a struggle between strong voices of people. All of a sudden when you start making everything in China, you don't have any oversight. Go through the recalls, just the ones that we know about: dog food, milk, toys, cribs, strollers – the list is endless! There's no oversight. We don't think about that. So now we've gone from the money crossing Canal Street to, all of a sudden, all of it ending up in China. They own our debt, they own our manufacturing. The whole fabric of America is changing – the style of women, the sense of individuality, my door, being independent, manufacturing – all that shit has gone out the window and no one is thinking about it!



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FOUR DISPLAY ONLY

FIVE DISPLAY ONLY

I'll tell you the genius behind New York. It was cheap rent. The history of America and of New York City, the greatness of New York City – all of it, just about every piece of it – came from cheap rent. There were a few people like Teddy Roosevelt who came from money – but if you go through the list, be it Jimi Hendrix, Jackson Pollock, Rothko, Houdini ...

**LR:** They were brought up with no money.

**CP:** No money at all. They came from cheap rent. You could come here – even when I came here in the late 1970s, early 1980s they had a 99 cent breakfast. Two eggs, toast, coffee, homefries and a little orange juice. Unlimited coffee. And you had three choices of bread for toast. It was a good breakfast. You could have rye, white or brown bread. You could actually take someone out for breakfast. You could sit there for 99 cents and everyone could pay their rent. Cheap rent meant that you could work as an artist, struggle as an artist – so you have people like Pollock, Rothko, Charlie Parker, Jimi Hendrix, Lou Reed and all the rest. Lou Reed lived on Ludlow Street, and he was paying \$38 a month – all the artists. Jackson Pollock didn't hit his pace until he was in his 50s, and Rothko, most of those artists. So Lou Reed took some time just being Lou Reed – am I a junkie? Am I not? Am I straight, am I gay? – He went through all these different mutations. But at that time you could do that because if you were paying \$38 a month for one place, you could struggle to answer that question – who am I? Well now, in one of those studios across from Katz's it's \$3000 a month. What's the chance that you're going to get Lou Reed out of that? Or a Pollock or a Rothko or Monk?

**LR:** Right, this notion that New York could be a fertile place.

**CP:** Of course. And you had the whole stratification of culture that was here. Whole layers. You go from the genius to the idiot, all of us struggling in this big mess. So you have that kind of creativity and energy going on and then the artists that come here because there is this energy – be it related to Yiddish Theater, or art, punk whatever. So you have this loss of the stratification of culture. You see, the other thing that really pisses me off about my door ... It's Bloomberg. He's a megalomaniac. You can't think in billions of dollars. It doesn't mean anything. It's just numbers.

It's like if you've never seen snow and I tell you that in Saint Petersburg, Russia it's 40 below and 8 feet of snow - you don't know what I'm talking about because you don't know what 40 below is and you don't know what snow is! So you can't deal with the money because it's too much. We can deal with 20 bucks – you know, “you owe me \$20.” But you can't deal with billions. So I ask people this equation. He went from 7.5 billion dollars to 15 billion dollars in personal wealth in 7.5 years. So in 7.5 years he made 7.5 billion dollars. The question becomes how many millions of dollars a day would you have to make to add up to 7.5 billion dollars? Let's say it worked out that you were making a billion dollars a year. So if I only made a million dollars a day, that's just 365 million dollars a year. That's not even close to a billion. So how many millions a day do you have to make – is it 7 million ? [The answer is about 2.74 million dollars a day]. The reality is that when we look at this other guy Thompson [Controller William Thomson, who challenged Bloomberg's mayoral seat in 2009], it was a real struggle for him to get up to 26 million dollars. That might have been 13 days of Bloomberg's income. 100 million dollars – He spent 100 million dollars of his own money. That might have been 13 days work.

**LR:** I know, his wealth is almost beyond comprehension.

**CP:** We're talking huge amounts of money. So when he talks about being generous and giving a million dollars here and there, it's nothing. It's not even a day's pay.

**LR:** I remember that in one of their debates Thompson accused Bloomberg of not doing enough to build housing for low-income families. And Bloomberg came back and said that he's building something like 165,000 units.

**CP:** That's nothing. They're getting rid of these people. I photograph them on the Lower East Side. They're disappearing. They're gone. Go through my pictures. They're gone.

**The muse has left.**

**LR:** Then maybe the muse is the grit, the muse is the international community, it's the 99 cent breakfast ...

**CP:** It's the cheap rent. The muse is not someone that kisses you in the middle of the night and gives you a dream. That's one kind of muse. The other muse that makes it all happen is the difference of individuals, it's the muse of being whoever you want to be, it's the possibility to have cheap rent so you can make your art and only work two days a week. It's the right to have a 99 cent breakfast, it's the right to make your front door whatever it is you want it to look like. When you take away those rights and gentrify everything, including what a woman is supposed to look like, you take away the muse. The muse is gone. It's the muse for everybody. It's punk rock. How can you be punk rock here?

**LR:** You also said that CBGB's could not exist again.

**CP:** It can't, right. The Bowery in a sense was a no man zone. It had its own chemistry. For example, the Bowery wasn't SoHo, it wasn't Little Italy, it wasn't the East Village. It was its own little strip, its own little town almost. There were bums and artists and different individuals, so you could kind of be whoever you wanted to be on the Bowery. Public identity didn't matter.



Another thing – this whole thing in America about conservatives, the idea of conservatism, it's bullshit. I come from Western Canada, I know what conservatism is. If I want to see conservatism in New York I go down to Grand Street and see the Jewish community. That Jewish community takes care of their own, they have their own public transportation which takes people around that are elderly, they have their own local dentist. That's what conservatism is.

**LR:** OK, so you're saying that conservatism is about having and maintaining a sense of community ...

**CP:** It's about having a sense of community, about keeping the manufacturing there because they're your people, it's about keeping jobs there because everyone has to work, small government ... it's internal. Being conservative is taking care of your own, building your own community, taking care of your own people, taking care of your own schools.

**LR:** By that definition then, conservatism has nothing to do with politics, with being Republican or Democrat.

**CP:** No! It doesn't. That's all bullshit talk. It's an image, it's an ideal, it's crap. Walmart isn't conservative. It's global. Conservative was the local manufacturer. You don't need bigger government because everyone is taking care of their own.

**LR:** And this is back to the whole issue of China buying our debt. That local businesses and local products are all disappearing.

**CP:** It's all disappearing. That was conservative. Do your own thing, be your own person, be your own boss. That was the American ideal. This stuff is all bullshit. Just think of the roots of it. Conservative. What does it mean?

I manufactured my own caps, I was buying and selling. That's capitalism. I wasn't looking for the government to bail me out. I was looking to make my own way. You know, leave me alone. Let me be my own person and make my own caps. I changed the history of the American baseball cap with the Clayton Cap. Give me a break! That's conservative. But how did I get to the cap?





I got to the cap because there was a guy with a little manufacturing place on Avenue A and 12th Street. He used to make baseball caps – a little funky, an old guy. Old Jewish guy and he got into the business because he found out that he could make caps and the guy next door had a sports outlet. They had this combination. One guy made basketballs and the other guy made caps. Then this guy also did embroidery, like putting names on jackets and things like that. So suddenly I realized that he did the backs of the Savage Skulls, a street gang in the Bronx, and that he could draw with this machine. So I said, “can I give you my drawings to put on a cap?” And it took a little while to push him, but I could and he did. He made the first Clayton Caps. So I had this opportunity to be a conservative, and to be a small time manufacturer and a capitalist and I found this guy who had one person working for him and I could share my ideas. But this whole bullshit that people are putting on now – I’d have to go to a manufacturer in China, which I don’t know how to do, I’d have to buy in bulk, buy 10,000, so I can’t experiment – so we’re losing this base. If I was a creative person in Maine making shoes, I could find a person in Maine making shoes in his garage and I could say, “I have this idea for boots – could we talk about making them?” I could design them or something – I can’t do that now. That’s not conservative, it’s anti-conservative. And it’s anti-capitalist. That means that no one can get into buying and selling and dealing and doing things. It’s all about big manufacturers.

My interest is local. I have an opinion of George Bush that’s not very nice, and I have an opinion on Cheney which is even worse – but those are just voicing opinions. My real political interest is in the local. I can touch, feel and taste because it’s real. I can bitch about the door because the door’s real and it’s my door. That’s a real back and forth thing. That’s conservative.

**I’m interested in the real, and the tangible and what affects my life directly and how I can deal with what affects me and my friends’ lives. My interest is local. That’s conservative.**

When I was a kid, when a bank opened in the neighborhood, they'd give the kids a silver dollar. You take it and you put it in the bank and you start a bank account.

**LR:** The good bank.

**CP:** Yeah, the good bank. But no one thought "bad bank" in those days. Then you got your little bank book. Passbook. You went home and put in \$4 and it was OK to put in \$4 and after a few years you had \$73 or whatever. Or \$700 – and that was a fortune. With the globalization factor it's not like that. They want to charge you for not using your credit card. What kind of scam is that?

New York has TONS of money. I call them whales. There are a bunch of whales like Bloomberg. If I look at Bloomberg – our mayor, our good guy, our conservative, our wonderful mayor – there is no Bloomberg University, Bloomberg Hospital, library – there's no Bloomberg anything! Nothing! One of the richest guys in the world! It's just his corporation, which costs you money! And he's laying people off! Are we crazy?

Look at Madoff! We've pried him open, so we can look inside the guts of that whale. What did this son of a bitch do with his 50 million dollars that he stole from everybody? He bought his wife a sable coat, he bought a big house in Florida, a big house in Long Island, a yacht, he had all this crap ... But what did he support? Did he create a MacArthur-type grant which is about \$500,000, which to him is just (snap) nothing. No. There's no Madoff anything.

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Someone asked me the other day how I ended up here and it's because I could never assimilate into Western Canada. When I hit the Lower East Side, I'd found home. And now the Lower East Side has changed everything about me. The whole idea behind the Outlaw Art Museum was based on a number of things. Outlaw doesn't mean criminal, it can include criminal. Over the years I got involved in a lot of court cases about documenting on the street. So obviously, by the establishment, that was considered part of outlaw culture. I got arrested a bunch of times, teeth knocked

out, all for documenting the streets of New York. They became court cases. Court cases became about challenging different laws. So the Outlaw became about challenging law, cases, plus I had things like a heroin bag collection. The heroin bag collection is interesting because white people really don't get it. You have the conservatives, Republicans and they think that you need the police, that you need more enforcement, to come in with the justice department. The reality is that dope bags had stamps on them.

**LR:** Did the stamp signify the dealer?

**CP:** Basically. In a more generic way it signified location. The location belonged to a person so it did identify someone in particular in the end. You would have Red Rum on 3rd and C. It was interesting that the guy from Smashing Pumpkins [touring keyboardist Jonathan Melvoin] could come from Seattle and go to Red Rum on 3rd and C and OD and die. That's how I know he bought from them. That's what he OD'd on was Red Rum. If you'd taken that bag and brought it to a junkie and asked where Red Rum was, they could give you a location. Now how come the cops don't know that? Conservatives are interested in justice and all that – they think we need better intelligence, cops need more authority so they can have more control. The reality is that the police were involved in the business. So no matter how much money you poured into it, no matter how much secret intelligence you had, and wiretapping, and documents, and video and photographs, some cop in the precinct would tell them, "Look, you're gonna get busted tonight." And that'd be the end of it. They'd be gone. That was proven during the Mullen commission, and proven during the Knapp commission. There's no question that there's a relationship here between the cops and the drugs. You can't say every cop, but the problem with the criminal cops is that they dominate the precinct – because they're the "tough guys." You can't compromise who you are because then you become the rat, like Serpico [Frank Serpico, retired New York City police detective]. Serpico's biggest fear was that he'd get killed by others in the precinct because he's the guy who opened the casket for others to see what's in it. It becomes a death sentence almost. So if you look at the riot tape – it became classified as a police riot. Tompkin's Square.





It changed the history of the NYPD. Chief retired, Captain moved out of the precinct, six cops criminally indicted and a lot of departmental issues. And people think that it was a hot night in August, that it happened to be one of those moments in time when chaos ruled. But if you look at it, you realize that it was totally out of control. The police could not control the police.

**LR:** They got spooked.

**CP:** No, they lost control. It wasn't the night. It was the culture. The police lost control of the police. It wasn't just the evening, but the evening exposed the lack of organization and control. That's what it did. The important thing about these books I make, anthologies, is that they have everybody's opinion. So if you look at *Resistance*, a radical/political/social history of the Lower East Side, it's one of the only radical history books you'll find that has the police point of view. I have a Chief's point of view and I have a patrolman's point of view. The patrolman will tell you clearly in the book that after that night, and after seeing that tape, that they changed the structure and got more into being a para-military organization. The police department is not interested in their own history though because there are so many hierarchies of corruption and struggle. They need a serious critic within the department, not someone who's a police groupie which is who they always get, but somebody to say "This dog can't hunt."

You train the people in the academy, the cadets, and you get them to be patrolmen, but once they're involved in precinct culture, everything they've learned goes out the window because now they're part of a criminal organization in a sense. So they laid off and retired a bunch of older cops, brought in hundreds of younger new cops, brought in the Mullen commission and rooted out a bunch of the bad criminals. Then they had to reorganize. So 4 years later, Giuliani is handed a razor sharp para-military organization. If you can't control the streets you will never control the city, the economy, nothing. So when Giuliani gets into power he now has the authority to change the culture of the streets.

**In 1988 they couldn't close a 10 ½ acre square park.**

But in 2001, they could close down the city in two hours. Bridges, airports, tunnels, subways, trains, all traffic, everything. You had a cop on every corner from about 23rd Street and below. In order to get onto your block you had to show ID. So that's the difference. And it all came out of Tompkin's Square and my tapes.

**LR:** So was the Outlaw Art Museum about taking an anti-authoritarian stance or about recognizing this corruption? What was it about?

**CP:** Clayton Gallery really started in 1986. I did shows and used the front window to display photographs. The photographs were of the neighborhood and they were on the front door. The Lower East Side never really had a graffiti culture per se the same way that you would with the trains. So the graffiti that you had on the door were tags. So there were two things going on: The Hall of Fame, which was the pictures, and the Wall of Fame, which was the door. I was making the local kids famous. There's really no large scale documentation of an inner city with that many people except for school pictures or something. So I have all these pictures, mostly Hispanic, and it goes from 14th Street to the Brooklyn Bridge which is the whole Lower East Side, the projects, everywhere. I have pictures from all of these blocks and neighborhoods, and that includes good guys, bad guys, in-between guys, gangs like the Crips and Bloods and Latin Kings and Ñetas, La Familia, Hell's Angels, Unforgiven Motorcycle Club, Satans Sinners Nomads, so all of these people that would be impossible to go out and photograph, having them come to me and go out in front of the door, and putting them in the window made them famous. Here I am, photographing some of these kids when they were in grade one, now they're in their mid-20s. And capturing their best part, so you see in *Captured* I'd say "pussy" or something, because for boys it would make them laugh. Couldn't say that to girls obviously, but for young boys it would make them laugh. If you look at the photos, they look like sweet innocent kids, and a lot of them killed people, were dangerous, but if you take that best part, they look like normal, average, everyday people which is what I wanted. That was the local factor. On a certain level, the photos are part of the Outlaw Museum because a lot of what happened on the street was outlaw culture.

**LR:** So it's not just a space where you did shows, it's also your archive.

**CP:** I've documented people involved in drugs, so that's part of outlaw culture, it doesn't necessarily mean negative. It means a history of a neighborhood that had things that were going on that were outside the law. But it's important to have that as a document too. It's important to think about it when you think about the culture of the Lower East Side. Elsa one day found a book on the street of kid's stories of the Lower East Side from the 1960s and it was written by kids in elementary school. And one kid talked about the cops pulling up and being given bags of money. I used to tell people that if you want to know who sells the drugs in the neighborhood, forget all that shit about the spying and the phone tapping, ask the kid across the street in grade one who sells drugs on your block. Guaranteed that kid knows. Guaranteed.

**LR:** Because he sees it.

**CP:** And he lives in it. Everybody knows that Eddie lives over there and Eddie's a drug dealer. It's not a mysterious business. First of all, it's a business and they're trying to sell a product. This area here was one of the heaviest drug areas in the world, so that's a lot of product. If it was that secret, nobody would know!

**LR:** Are you still doing shows here?

**CP:** Yeah, I had Agathe Snow in there just recently. Yeah.

[Lauren begins to look at the *Front Door Book*].

**LR:** Wow, look at that.

**CP:** Yeah. See that's old. And there's the door.

**LR:** And they want to make you change it.

**CP:** Yeah, they want to make me change it. [Pointing to a picture]. See this little kid here? He's now away for murder. This kid is still around. She turned into a prostitute.

**LR:** So you know the history of some of the people you photographed?

**CP:** A lot of them, yeah. And they're all smiling and looking good. They just look like normal kids.

**LR:** When do these photographs go back to?

**CP:** 1985. I started really photographing the front door then but I have photos here going back to 1979 ... See this [pointing to photograph] ... This has got to be 1985. Look at how they're dressed. Super 1980s. When kids look at this stuff they can tell right away – the sneakers, the jacket, the North Star, oh, look he's got the full downy, that was 1990 ... Oh, look at those sneakers, he's got the early Nikes. Yeah. They're definitely hip to it.

I'm interested in doing things. I'm trying to make something happen, and it's kind of more of a point of view of making something happen on your own. That's kind of the outlaw feature in a sense, that you're making something happen yourself.

\* \* \*

Boys & Girls Be Careful



City Police Chief  
On Case

Coke Cop

COPS SELL  
DRUGS

BE  
SOMEONE  
6/21/67

FREE  
Kenny  
and All political  
PRISONERS  
NOW

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