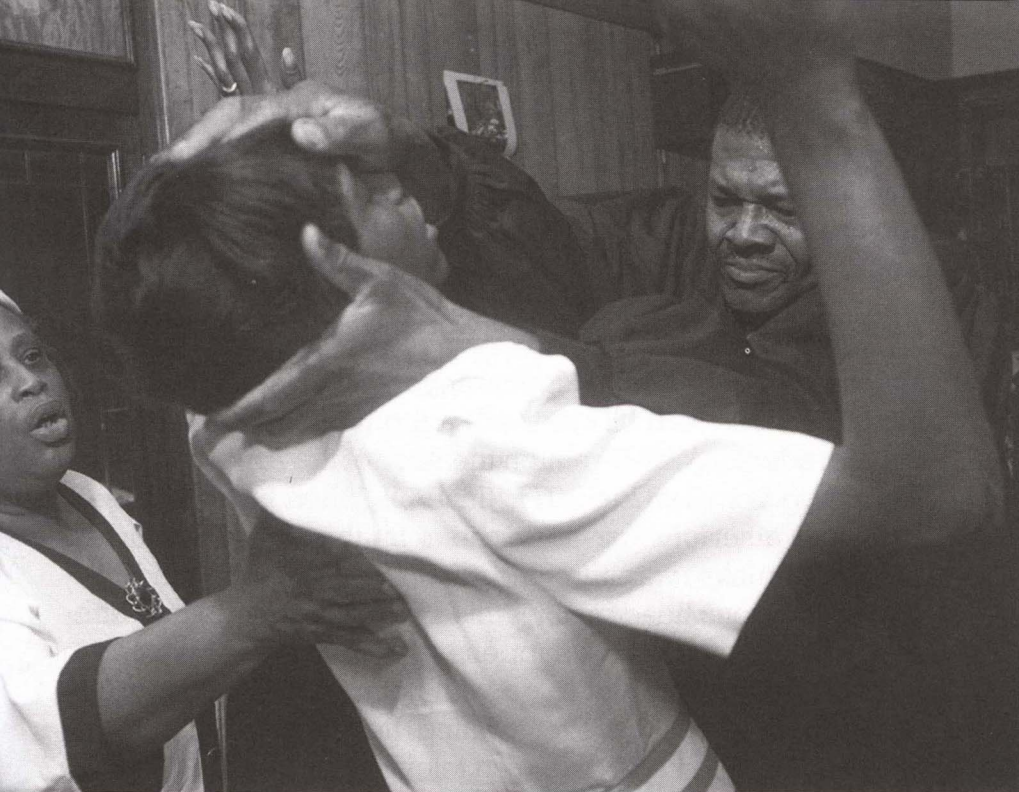




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Thomas Roma, from "Come Sunday," 1992, Brooklyn, NY

# **BROOKLYN BOUND**

## **INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS ROMA**

Alex Klein and Betty Shzu

**T**homas Roma has photographed extensively in his native Brooklyn, narrating scenes from churches, subways, and everyday life. He has exhibited these photographs in solo shows at both the Museum of Modern Art and the International Center of Photography, and he has also published a number of artist books. Not only has he succeeded as an artist, he is also an influential photography teacher in the Visual Arts Department at Columbia University. He has taught students to look critically and to



compose their photographs carefully, always from the integrity of the heart. Thomas Roma was our photography teacher at Columbia.

**Alex Klein:** How did you start working as a photographer?

**Thomas Roma:** Well, just like anyone's life story, mine has many versions, and I'll start with a medium-length version. I was a trader on Wall Street on the floor of the American Stock Exchange from 1967 to 1971. In 1969, when I was nineteen, I got into a serious car accident. I hit three double-parked garbage trucks, was thrown from my VW Beetle, and sustained a serious head injury, which is a totally mundane unremarkable event unless it happens to *you*. My rehabilitation in the very beginning had to do with not moving. I couldn't lie down because of the excruciating headaches and I didn't have the attention span to watch television or read, so I would sit up and stare out the window.

One day, my older brother Joel came to see me, and he had a camera. I asked him to get me one. He later sold me his for thirty-five dollars, and I started photographing out the window. A few weeks later, when I was able to move, I was taken to an old department store and got a home developing kit. Something about my first pictures didn't look right, but I kept doing it, and then, a couple months later, I bought a little enlarger. When I went back to the Stock Exchange, I started buying better equipment and bought a better camera. It turned out that my first camera was broken all along (which accounted for some of my failures). When I told my brother that later, he mumbled, "I know." I asked him why he had sold me a broken camera, and he said that he didn't think I'd pull through. So, I first got involved with photography by accident, and the first person I dealt with had no faith that I'd continue doing it. It seems a lot of things start that way — by chance — and then, they become your life.

Although I was making a lot of money on Wall Street,

my interest in photography was reaching a critical mass, and I couldn't continue to do both. I realized that I aspired to something else. I was overwhelmed by photography, even though I was so bad at photographing. I ended up taking a job as a darkroom technician and teaching assistant at Pratt Institute. I left my job on Wall St. to do that, thinking in the back of my mind, that I could always go back. I met some great people at Pratt, and they introduced me to other great people like Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, and Walker Evans. But I never showed anyone any of my photographs — not until 1973 or 1974, after I'd done a body of work with a camera I had designed and built myself. I saw in *Camera in Paris* that Brassai had used a medium-format camera that wasn't made anymore, and I decided to make a modern version of it.

**Betty Shzu:** How did you do that?

**TR:** At Pratt, there was an engineering school, and there was an old technician who kept dozens of lathes and milling machines in perfect condition. No one ever used the anymore because Engineering had moved beyond them.

He helped me fumble along with machines, and I learned enough to make my first camera. Later, I taught myself to do mechanical drawing from US Navy manuals and I worked in other machine shops, sweeping the floor, watching what they'd do.

**AK:** A kind of hands-on learning?

**TR:** I learned by watching people. Ignorance is just such an

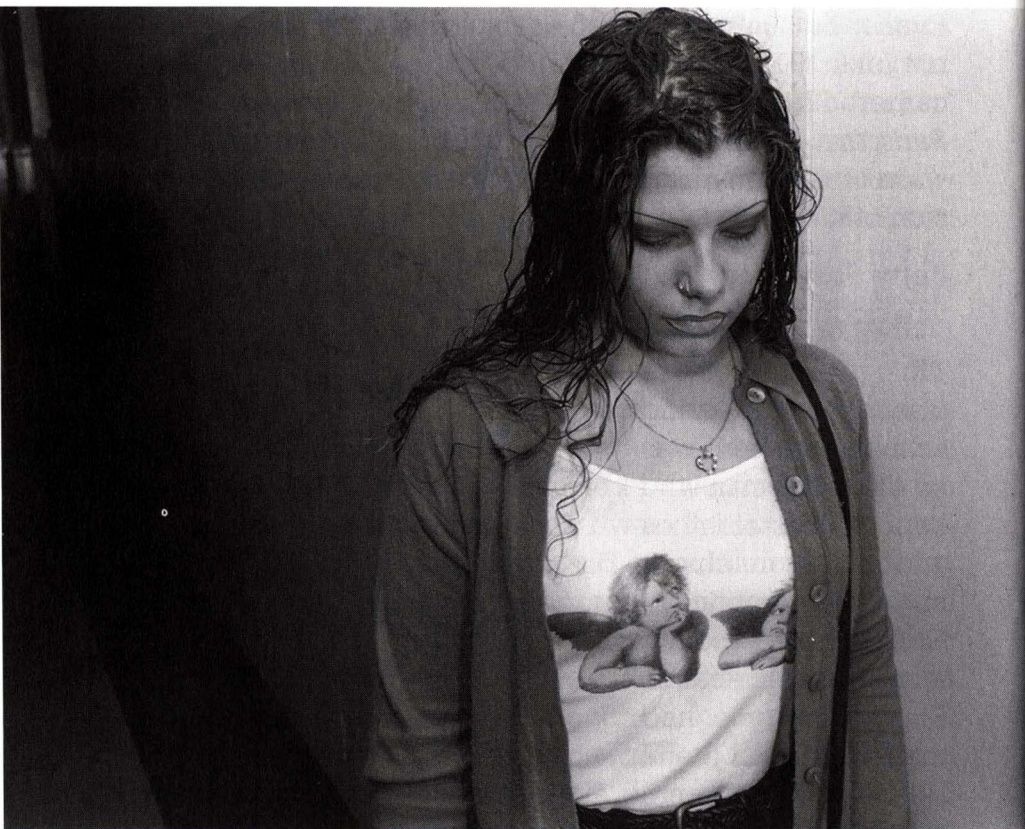
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important part of life. How many times have I told my students to try not to know so much? If you think you know something, you're finished with it — there's nowhere else to go. I didn't know how hard it was to make that camera. If I had known, I never would have tried to do it — that would have been crazy; I would have compromised and made something less good, but instead, I made the exact camera that I wanted, the exact camera of my dreams.



Thomas Roma, from "Enduring Justice," 1998, Brooklyn, NY

**BS:** Which was?

**TR:** A lightweight three-pound hand-held camera that I could hold up to my eye that made a rather large negative, a cam-

era that worked very quickly — basically, a modern-day press camera. Then, people saw my pictures, and they wanted cameras, so I borrowed some money and went into business manufacturing cameras.

**AK:** And how about your photography back then?

**TR:** I approached photography back then, the only way that I knew how to approach anything — as a job. I would get up, photograph all morning, stop and have lunch, and then, photograph all afternoon. I didn't think that I had to wait for some inspiration. Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson seemed to write about what was going on in their lives, and I wanted to do something similar in photography. I never questioned that what I wanted to photograph was the actual stuff that made up my life, what shaped me. So, I walked around Brooklyn and photographed, and things would occur to me.

I was also trying to unravel what I thought was this musical language, listening to a crescendo in Mozart, and trying to find a visual analog to that — seeing the world as having multiple things going on, folding into each other, and still being as clear as Mozart's music. And like listening to a piece of music, you might only be sensitive to certain things in a photograph at certain times, with different viewings allowing different meanings. I wanted to make something that was complex enough to stand more than one reading. I wasn't interested in making jokes or illustrations. *Straight photography*, following the medium, is kind of intoxicating — trying to wrestle it into the form of a poem.

**AK:** Were you in dialogue with the street photographers?

**TR:** Not a dialogue, because a dialogue happens among equals, and I was not an equal, nowhere near. I looked at everything that they did, and I did provide them with something too — the tremendous energy of someone who was paying attention. I insist on teaching Photo 1 every semester because I want to be around people that I have to strain to



explain things to.

**BS:** Could you talk about your philosophy on teaching?

**TR:** When I first started doing some teaching at Yale, I realized that I had a decision as to whether I would train people in what I knew (but I didn't really know what I knew, because that was never really useful to me) or find a way to engage my students in my practice. I thought training had to be bad because it would be limited to what I remembered that I knew. I thought that the one thing that I could do would be to bring my own investigation to the class. So, I tried to explain what I was trying to do in my work and asked people to do that along with me — the only thing separating us being that I had done it for longer. In my class, I show no slides and don't show my own work. The only reading I require is John Szarkowski's book *Looking at Photographs*, a brief introduction to the history of photography. After that, I don't comment on anyone else's photographs except for those of the people in the room. Everyone can be an authority because the picture are right before our eyes.

**AK:** People definitely come out of your class with an ability to approach their own work as if they didn't make it themselves.

**TR:** I think that's because we don't first discuss the photographer's motives or intentions — we only discuss what the students have done, looking at it with a cold analytic eye. Allowing your unconscious to inform your actions and then looking at the results of your actions is exhilarating. I don't want you to say, "I wanted to do this." After that, what's left to say? "You didn't do it" or "you did do it." The trouble is, if you have a really dumb idea and you succeed in doing it, that's not success. I could understand the attraction to trying to illustrate ideas, but I believe it's more fruitful to allow yourself to respond to the world — at least in Photo 1. In my own work, I still allow myself to be interested in the world, knowing that just being present with a camera often changes everything around me. I'm interested in looking at the world

in a new way because I have this awesome machine in your hands. Imagine what Masaccio or Leonardo would have done if they had an instrument with which they could point, push a button, and get an image. Of course, it's very frustrating to a lot of people because we make masterpieces and rough sketches with the exact same physical gesture.

**BS:** Could you tell us why it is that you portray yourself as being anti-theory?

**TR:** We're in the presence of what's probably the greatest art history department in the country. Why should I be a minor-league version of the people who do this full-time, who I admire tremendously? You cannot tell from my photographs or from the way that I teach what my appetites are. It's very common that a jazz musician will know about, consume, and even be passionate about classical and country music, but play only jazz. For some reason, that luxury is not afforded people in the visual arts. I'm interested in all of it, including theory. What I'm against is being confused or paralyzed by theory.

**BS:** Do you find that you learn from your students?

**TR:** I think that that's mostly false. More importantly, I remember things that I know — things that I wouldn't remember if I weren't teaching. But if I'm in Photo 1 class and I'm actively learning, we'd all be in trouble. I'm aware that in the

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## ROMA

A nice thing about photography is that nobody knows who you are. Even achieving a certain amount of success doesn't make you aloof from the world, or from the necessity of earning a living, or reaching out to people. The lottery was up to 100 million dollars when I was photographing my book *Higher Ground*, and my brother Joel asked me if I bought a lottery ticket. "No," I said, and he asked, "why not?" I said, "I don't buy lottery tickets because I don't want to win." "What do you mean, you don't want to win?" he asked. "Well," I said, "I don't want to hope to win. I don't want to be in the condition of hope because hope is a condition of the last resort. As long as I can keep making everything I want, I don't have to hope for anything. What would I do with all that money? What would I do if I had 100 million dollars — photograph from a limousine instead of from a train? Would I hire someone else to take the pictures? What good is that money?" What's more interesting than your own life? Yes, it's a struggle. And, yes, when you do something dumb, or expose yourself as someone with yearnings or fears, people are going to see it, and frankly, nobody wants to do that. What everyone wants to do, especially in a university, is let everyone know how smart and resourceful they are, and I can't blame them, but it just has nothing to do with making art, as far as I'm concerned. ▲

Thomas Roma, from "Interior Topography," 2000, Brooklyn, NY





beginning, there can be something unsettling about my class, in that the students are free to create the agenda. I give no assignments. In fact, I actually give a list of things not to photograph because they're traps and they're just a waste of time: no mimes, no cats, no bicycle wheels in the sun casting a shadow, no fire hydrants with snow on top of them, no babies, no old people, don't go to Chinatown and photograph fish or ducks hanging in the window. And I ask people to be sensitive to certain racial and ethnic things, to not photograph the Other. This is not a safari where you're going around looking for the exotic. I find that it's much richer to point the camera within the world you occupy.

**AK:** Where are you right now in your own projects?

**TR:** I have a bunch of books that are finished or almost finished. I've been working in the book format for a long time now. For one project, I've been going through every photograph that I've ever done, then I make selections for my nine-year-old son, and he chooses photographs to write about. He's written about thirty-six pictures, and now, he'll write about the experience of doing it. So it'll be his book. The working title is *You Come Too* after a Robert Frost poem.

But now, I'm really stretching myself. I'm photographing in ways that I never even imagined I'd photograph and I have tremendous energy and appetite for it, which is informing my teaching. For example, I went to my machine shop and built a counterweighted arm that floats my camera up to the ceiling and looks straight down. "What can I photograph from the ceiling?" I thought. "What does it look like after people get up in the morning?" "Don't make the bed," I told my neighbors, "I'm coming over." "Or, what does it look like when people are preparing a meal? Or when a kid is doing homework?" I'm still learning where the frame ends, so I'm a beginner, and it's exciting to think that I'm letting go of looking through the camera and that I'm giving more over to photography and the world. This technique keeps me from making pictures that I already know how to make.