

## AN UNLIKELY TRADE

Why a photographer exchanged Wall Street for art  
Interviewed by Fiona Gardner and Prem Krishnamurthy



From *Found In Brooklyn*, Brooklyn, NY, 1988

Thomas Roma is a Professor of Photography at Columbia University. His photographs have earned him two Guggenheim Fellowships and exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the International Center of Photography. He has taught at Yale University, Fordham University, Cooper Union, and the School of Visual Arts. Before becoming a photographer, Roma worked on Wall Street. He recently told this story to *Work's* Prem Krishnamurthy and Fiona Gardner.

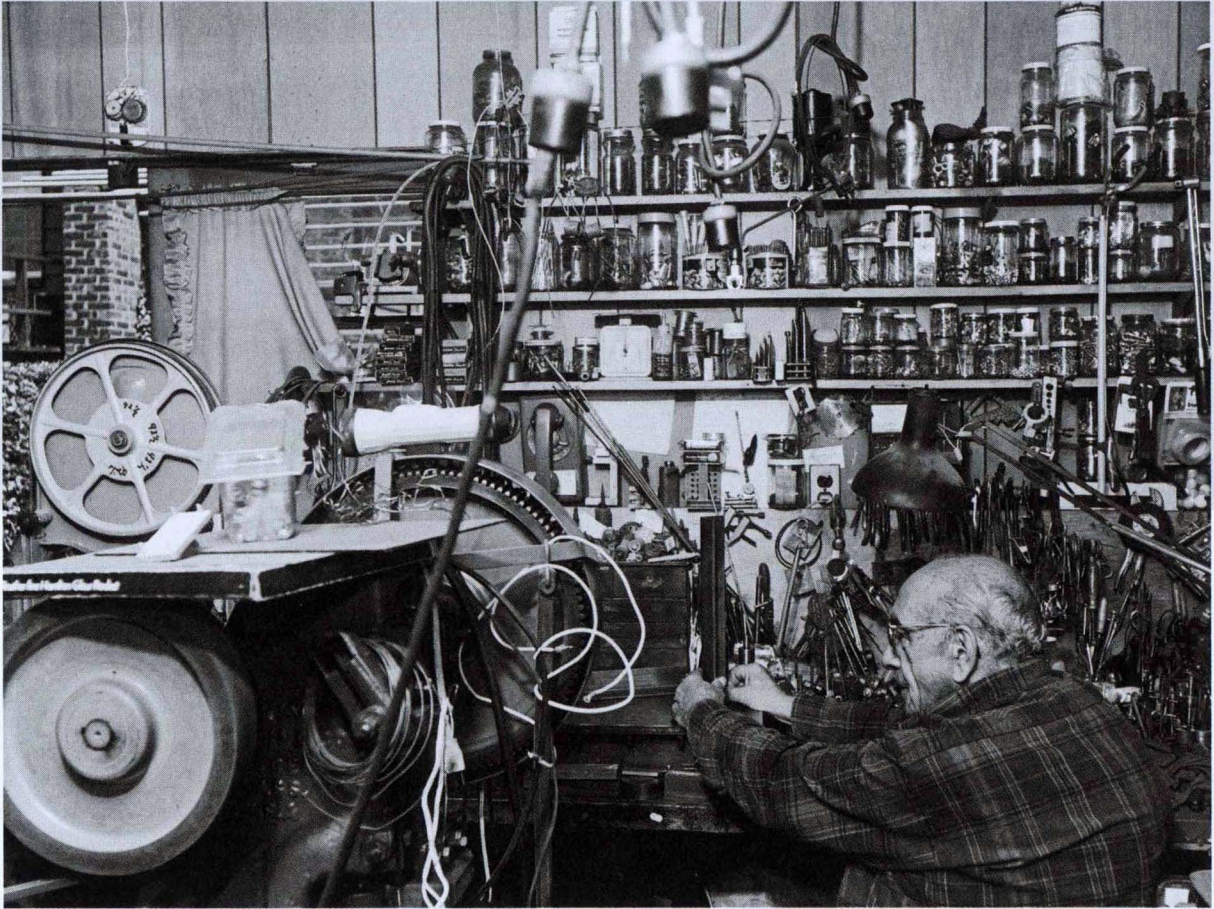
Did I tell you how I began working on Wall Street? In the spring of 1967, I [was 17 years old] and met a girl and was really crazy about her. I heard about a summer job on Wall Street. I thought, I'll go and interview for this job. I didn't have any clothes, I had to borrow a jacket and shoes—we were ridiculously poor, insanely poor.

[Going to the interview], I was a nervous wreck. I reached down and grabbed the doorknob—a big brass oval doorknob, a huge door—and I realized I can't be the person I am on this side of the door. So I just decided to change myself all of a sudden I was outgoing, funny. I had a great interview; he hired me on the spot.

It was a really idiotic job at the American Stock Exchange. My job was to rip off [orders that came over the teletype machine]. First thing they told me is don't read the orders. Well, of course that meant to me read them! So I read everything and my first day on the job I learned all the hand signals. I [learned] everything there was about trading, I watched everything, I read the tickertape, I read *The Wall Street Journal*. I had an incredible memory for visual information.

[Eventually] I became the darling of the company. I was an independent agent, a senior trading clerk or whatever. Now I was invited to all these parties at Delmonico's and the big joke was I was too young to drink. I was making good money for back then.

In December of 1969, I was supposed to take that girlfriend out on a Friday night, but I stopped for a drink [instead]. She was mad at me in the morning and I went to go buy her flowers. I was driving along 19th Avenue in Brooklyn right by the Sanitation Depot and my mind was wandering. It was sleeting. These garbage trucks were double parked with salt spreaders and my car slammed right into them. I hit three garbage trucks, got thrown from the vehicle, hit my head.



From *Old and On Their Own*, Joseph Pellicano, Brooklyn, NY, 1994

I was in the hospital for a number of days. Back then, all they did was give me blood thinners and keep me awake. I'd drift off to sleep and they'd shine a light in my eyes. A beautiful part of the story is the partners from the firm came to Brooklyn and they said they were going to keep me on the payroll for my whole life, even if I never did another day's work. I think it was the first time I really felt loved and appreciated.

While I was recuperating, I wasn't allowed to lie down or to walk around so I had to sit and look out the window. My brother, Joel, came to visit me and he happened to have a camera. This was a new thing that was happening—all of a sudden everyone had 35mm cameras. So I asked my brother if he could get me a camera; he came back a week later with an East German Praktica Nova 1B with a 50mm Meyer Oreston lens. I didn't know anything about it. I started to take pictures and my mother would get the black and white film developed. As I started to feel better I asked my mother to get me a camera magazine and I read every word. I discovered something.

Now this girlfriend, she broke my heart multiple times, but she enrolled me in a commercial photography class at night near

Wall Street. I [made a friend who] took me under his wing and introduced me to Walker Evans and Helen Levitt. I bought *A Way of Seeing*, books by Edward Weston, *The Photographer's Eye*.

More and more and more I couldn't take what we were doing [on Wall Street]—the Vietnam War was on and we were harvesting money. We weren't earning money, we were making it. And I realized my mother was on her feet and didn't need me [to make money] anymore. And I walked into work one day and I saw my boss and I said "I quit." I went to work that day like any other. Quit on the spot, walked out, never went back.

[A friend] told me about a job at Pratt Institute as a darkroom technician. I went down there and they said, "You're way over qualified for this job," but I got the job anyways. It wasn't really enough to live on, so I got a job at a studio that mounted wedding photographs to driftwood and I quickly rose through the ranks. I photographed every single day, I developed film every single day, I made contact sheets every single day, and I printed every day. I promised that if I was going to stay away from Wall Street I had to work every day like everyone else. It was my work.