THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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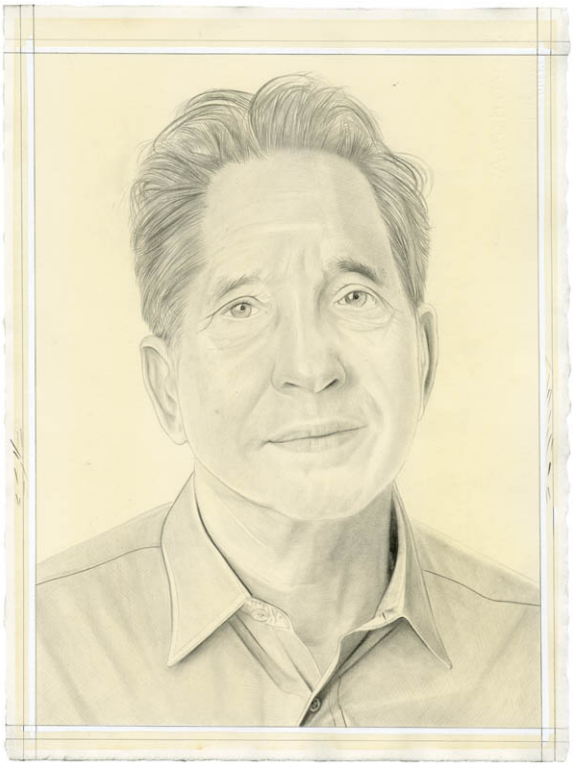
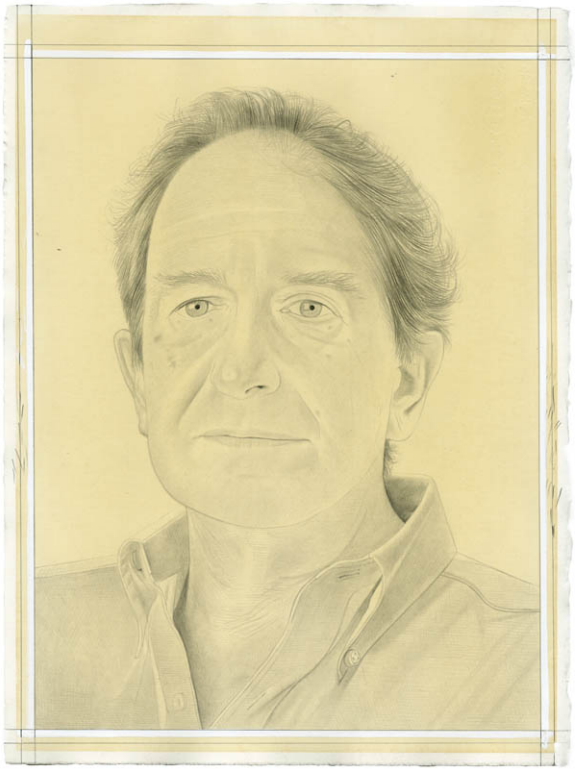
INCONVERSATION

THOMAS ROMA and LEO RUBINFIEN with Sara Christoph

For Thomas Roma and Leo Rubinfien, two photographers who came of age when American giants like Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, and Garry Winogrand were redefining the black-and-white medium, conversations around the practice of photography are fist-shaking discussions of life, tears, vulnerability, and ethics. What does it mean to move through the streets making two-dimensional pictures, in all their potentialities and limitations, of other people? Can photography be seen as an act of contrition, an art that grounds us in this harsh, chaotic world? On the eve of a November exhibition of Roma's photographs at Steven Kasher Gallery, and the first phase of Rubinfien's commissioned project for the Festival Internazionale di Roma, the *Rail*'s Sara Christoph sat down with the long-time colleagues and friends to talk through the ways in which their practices intertwine and bolster each other's art.



Portrait of Thomas Roma. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Zack Garlitos.



Portrait of Leo Rubinfien. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Zack Garlitos.

Sara Christoph (Rail): Tom and Leo, you've known each other for decades, and one of the many things you share is a connection to the photographer Garry Winogrand. You both knew him personally, and worked on posthumous exhibitions of his work. Tom, you assisted John Szarkowski with the 1988 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and Leo, you were the guest curator of the 2013 retrospective organized by SFMOMA. Winogrand spoke about the very particular positioning of a photographer in the world at large, and I thought we'd start there. I'm thinking of his famous statement, "When I photograph, it's the closest I come to not existing."

Thomas Roma: We knew Garry. The trouble with Garry saying, "It's the closest I get to not existing," is that, directly after, he said, "which I find attractive." So what is he saying? What he's talking about, really, is that he doesn't want to be limited to the neurosis—to the Bronx, the Lower East Side, the Upper East Side—he wants to be the *medium*. He wants the world to inform him and his next response. If you saw Garry work, he was present. He was supremely present. When he's saying "not existing" I don't believe he meant he was just a leaf blowing in the wind, I think it meant that he was connecting—the

way mathematicians speak of losing themselves and then, all of sudden, seeing the solution to a theorem.

As far as being present, when I edited Garry's unfinished work, I did it with John Szarkowski across the table. John was holding a contact sheet, and he said, "Look at this!" The people in the pictures look the way they do *because* they noticed Garry. He had an enormous presence. Garry was in the ether, he was tuned into the frequency of the place.

Rail: Leo, you were also immersed in Winogrand's work for many years, re-editing something like twenty thousand contact sheets for the retrospective that traveled here to the Metropolitan. Would you say there are aspects of his work that have seeped into yours?

Leo Rubinfien: Certainly, I've always photographed a great deal in city streets, and Winogrand's general aim, "to learn who we are and how we feel, from seeing what we look like," has also been mine. Although the more I've contemplated the man, Garry, the more I've been struck by how different from him I am. I'm much more concerned with the finished product, the book, the print, the way it appears in a show, than he ever was. But at bottom there's probably one shared enterprise: one tries, through making an object, to take hold of some piece of life, which, in its natural form, is changing constantly from second to second and can't be pinned down, while still retaining enough freedom, randomness, enough uncertainty in the thing you've made so that it seems true, not false.

Garry was able to live, as Tom calls it, "in the ether," in a world of floating and drifting phenomena, to a much greater degree than I can. He had a kind of freedom that I envy. On the other hand, his freedom may also have been a weakness, something that got in the way of his fully understanding what he had done, and of completing his work.

Roma: Where people get lost is when they speak of work being personal. It's never personal. It's always subjective, but that doesn't mean it's personal. A lot of what's personal is inconsequential.

Rubinfien: That's true. Take, for example, the work of Diane Arbus. People continually say how very personal it is. And it is, in that no one else could have

done this work except her, but when looking at any of her newest pictures, I can't help thinking that she was mystified, enchanted, or surprised by them. One knows oneself less well than one might think and one is ultimately engaged not in confession, but in making objects.

Thomas Roma, *Untitled (from The Waters of Our Time)*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Steven Kasher Gallery.

Rail: There's an interesting distinction here between what is subjective and what is personal. An artist's work is, inescapably, subjective, but that is very different from making work that begins and ends with your personal self. Rather, you're both talking about a form of subjectivity that maintains a kind of openness. Is that right?

Rubinfien: There's a mountain of so-called "personal" work out there that is so generic you can't tell the difference between one person and the next. Pictures of the photographer's feet. Or of the photographer naked.

Roma: People think that if it's personal—as in nude self-portraits—personal therefore means vulnerable. One is much more vulnerable telling the truth. The real vulnerability is saying "I really care for this. Look—I took this picture of this

rock next to this tree." "What are you, an idiot? It's a rock and a tree." That's personal: to present it as something significant.

Rubinfien: To stand up instead of sitting down.

Roma: Right. Not to show yourself naked but to find your nakedness on a city street.

Rail: Where would you place portraiture in this dynamic? Both of you make pictures that could be termed "portraits." Do you think of your work in this regard? We expect that in a portrait, the artist reveals some aspect of the person's character or vulnerability—something personal—to the viewer.

Rubinfien: There are some interesting paradoxes here. Long ago, we're told, a prosperous person would have a "portrait" made so that his descendants would know who he or she was. The use of the word has broadened since then and now it indicates a genre, but it also means little more than any picture of any person. I would say that if the term is useful at all, we should use it for pictures that ask of specific people, "Who are you?" You run into trouble quickly here because, of course, a photograph can never say who the person in it is. It can never be anything but a set of suggestions that we take from someone's physiognomy.

Rail: Tom, I'd like to talk about *In the Vale of Cashmere*, which was shown last fall. The photographs capture a very specific place—the Vale of Cashmere—a hidden enclave of Prospect Park that over the course of a few decades has become a somewhat legendary spot for cruising. The project evolved over years of visiting and talking with the visitors of the Vale, and finally, asking to take their picture. When you started this project, did you see it as a book, or was it more curiosity? How personal was it, for you?

Roma: I visited the Vale over a period of years without photographing, without a camera. You used a word that I'm very cautious of; you said "capture a place"—that's not what I was trying to do. I was trying to *create* a place. These are creations. The world doesn't exist in black and white. When I finally began to photograph in the Vale, I was already in the process of editing and sequencing photographs taken over my entire life as a photographer. That became my book *The Waters of Our Time*, which is the most overtly autobiographical of

anything I've ever done; in fact, the photograph on the cover is from the first roll of film I ever shot. I'm sure doing that informed how I approached what I was doing in the Vale.

Rail: And there were some real-life, complicated dynamics of race and sexuality you had to navigate. How aware of this were you in making the photographs?

Roma: I recently watched a documentary about Method actors, and I thought, maybe that's what I am, a Method photographer. I'm not the same person each time I do things.

Because of the dynamics you bring up, I had to be clear about my motivation. My personal reason for going to the Vale of Cashmere in the first place was that one of my dearest friends used to go there. He's gone, and I wanted to create something like a love letter to that community. A driving force, and very few people know about it, is revealed in the strips at the bottom of the pages. Helen Levitt, who has always inspired me, showed me some footage of a film she never completed of gay men cruising in Central Park.

Rubinfien: How long ago was this?

Roma: In the '70s. You could see from the shorts the men are wearing. I don't want to implicate Helen too much, but the strips that run along the bottom of the page are my homage to Helen. It's the closest I can get to filmmaking. Robert Frost calls it the "wild free ways of wit and art"—can anyone be less wild than I am? I'm the most conservative, traditional person I know. When I think I'm being wild, it's only by degrees. I never shot color. I don't use wide-angle lenses. But I feel wild.

Thomas Roma, *Untitled (from In the Vale of Cashmere)*, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Steven Kasher Gallery.

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Rubinfien: We were educated in a moment in which a premium was placed on the idea that we should read a photograph without regard to any information that was external to it—whatever we might know of the subject, or the artist's intentions, or history, or related work, etc. This was an admirable, puristic, high-modernist idea. It also doesn't work a great deal of the time. If one didn't know what the Vale of Cashmere was, a secret cruising ground for gay men, Tom's book wouldn't mean what it does. One thing I like is how this book expresses the sense of not-knowing, uncertainty, being among these men who are utterly different from oneself. If one didn't know who they were, one wouldn't have that sense.

Roma: But Leo, a photograph has to have its own reason for existing. Ultimately, I'm trying to make things that don't get thrown away, something that someone wants to be buried with. Our earliest understanding of human beings—when is an animal a human being? It's when they are buried ritualistically. Elephants mourn each other and walk away, because what are you going to do? Humans bury their loved ones, and when we open it up, the stuff they were buried with are the things they couldn't bear to let go of. That's what I'm doing.

When I teach, I talk about living in thirteen different places with my mother; I'd be given a cardboard box and told we're moving this Saturday. We had to get out, always abruptly. What do you take with you to the next stage?

Rail: Tom, this leads me to another project of yours that centers on place: *In Prison Air*, published in 2005, but begun many years before. We could even think of this book as a collection of portraits, albeit without the bodies that formerly occupied the empty cells. Can you talk about the evolution of *In Prison Air*? This is a rare book for you in that the photographs were shot outside of Brooklyn.

Roma: Steve Buscemi, a neighbor and friend, was shooting a movie called *Animal Factory* on location, and he asked me to be in it. It was being shot at a closed prison, Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia. I was completely miscast—I was supposed to be a white supremacist gang leader. [*Laughter*.]It's a panopticon prison, but it's very important that I didn't show that in the book.

Rail: Why?

Roma: Because I'm not an illustrator or documentarian. And while I was exploring, something happened to me. I stepped inside one of the cells—most of which remain as they were when the prison closed fourteen months earlier—and I realized: I could hear myself breathe. Because of the shape and size of the room, each breath echoed off the walls. And I started to hyperventilate.

Before I left, I thought, I know people from Pennsylvania and someone should photograph this. I went to a few people, and they all said no. Meanwhile, it continued to haunt me. What haunted me was not what the prison looked like—I had no idea what to do with that—but the sound. I did a little bit of research; it was Pennsylvania, they were Quakers, and it was founded not as a prison but a penitentiary, meaning you were there to do penance. The doorways are very low, and you're meant to bow your head when you go in. If you go to the monasteries, I think it's San Marco—

Rail: With the Fra Angelicos?

Roma: Yes! The penitentiary cells of Holmesburg mimic monk cells, as if you're meant to have a revelation of some kind. Holmesburg is also a site where human experimentation was done right up to the 1970s—everything from cosmetics and pharmaceutical research to weapons testing—and it's also the only place in America where the warden and deputy warden were murdered in the prison.

I think there's something subversive about these photographs. "Vilest deeds like poison weeds bloom well in prison air"—that's Oscar Wilde from jail, and it's right there on the wall. An inmate wrote that. The kind of work that Leo and I do, we have to encounter the world, put ourselves through something, and then respond with what I call a photographic gesture. You don't say, "how do I visualize something" but, "how do I actualize something?"

Rail: The word "subversive" is so apt here. On the surface, these are photographs of empty rooms, but there are decades of history vibrating beneath. When I think of a work of art being subversive, I think of the political statement first shaping the form. That's how I was thinking about *In Prison Air*—you must have had something to say about the criminal justice system in America, and so embarked upon this series. But I was mistaken! It was a visceral, physical response to the space of the cell that inspired the work, followed by the research and eventually the return to make the pictures. It's almost as if the subversive tone of the photographs was an after effect of the personal journey.

Roma: I have to ask myself, is it enough? Goddamn it, it's not enough. You know, my father was a New York City corrections officer; so is my sister. I have some kind of common cause with the people that work in these facilities, hearing all their stories, but this experience at Holmesburg haunted me. My father's response to the riots in Attica was to beat someone up in a Brooklyn house of detention. Is that right? Do I carry some guilt about it? I do, I do. I feel bad that someone I'm related to did that. Is it enough to create this oversized, skinny book of photographs? It's almost embarrassing to me. What we hope for is that by doing our work we become a changed person. The work doesn't come from a fully formed person, but from the inkling to do it.

Rail: Leo, let's talk about *Wounded Cities*, which you published in 2008, and which also began, one could say, with a haunting. The book collects your own photographs from around the world with essays you wrote after witnessing 9/11. Can you explain how the project began?

Leo Rubinfien, *Manila, off Epifanio de los Santos Boulevard*, 2005. Courtesy the artist and Steven Kasher Gallery.

Leo Rubinfien, *Kuta Beach, Bail, in Poppies Lane II*, 2007. Courtesy the artist and Steven Kasher Gallery.

Leo Rubinfien, *London, in Oxford Circus*, 2007. Courtesy the artist and Steven Kasher Gallery.

Rubinfien: How did *Wounded Cities* begin? I'd moved into an apartment in lower Manhattan on September 4, 2001, and I was in my studio looking at some things I'd written about Robert Adams when I heard a terrible sound, walked onto the terrace, and there was an American Airlines plane roaring down the West Side in the wrong direction, making a noise I'd never heard. I thought the pilot was trying to put it down in the harbor, but it was getting closer and closer, and I was shouting irrationally in my mind: "Get away from the building!" Instead, it flew right in. In moments of great violence time can slow way down, and what couldn't have been more than milliseconds opened up. There was time to think and to feel, to recall, to imagine many things, even to hope that the plane would just stay there peacefully. Of course, it blew up.

Rail: For me, the text in *Wounded Cities* has the tone of an open memoir, as if your struggle to articulate the many questions we faced in a post-9/11 world were forcing the writing forward. You've written extensively for art publications such as *Art in America*, but the text of *Wounded Cities* feels especially close. Can you talk about how this writing was different, and where the photographs came in?

Rubinfien: The text starts just before 9/11, then travels for six-odd years, through hundreds of questions that I had about what on earth could be going on. What had happened, what world we inhabited now, where were the roots of the

calamity, what it implied about who we are. What was this terrifying cliff on whose edge we were living?

The photographs took much more time than the writing, and began earlier. They come from cities that were similarly attacked—London, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Amman, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Istanbul, Moscow, Manila, New York, Jakarta, and on and on—but of course many more had been attacked, and would yet be, than I ever visited. The pictures are all close-up photographs of people and strictly contained, as close-in as the camera would let me go. And I should say that none of the people were victims, as far as I know; they were all ordinary people, like you and me, but that meant, of course, that each one was a potential victim. And I felt very strongly as motivation—if that's the word—the question, "Who are you?"

Rail: *Who are you?* Echoing our discussion of portraiture—

Rubinfien: Yes. You can ask it at any time about anybody, but all of a sudden, it seemed to be an urgent question, because although everybody was grieving and shouting in the days, months, years after 9/11, it was strangely hard to know how anyone really felt. How frightened one was, how irrational he or she might become. People were speaking in clichés, slogans, making every sort of blind assumption, expressing old, grave prejudices—it often felt as if everyone was talking and no one was making sense.

Would we invade Iraq? Would we send people to prison camps? These were decisions we would make collectively. To ask *who are you* was to ask how such questions might be decided, when of course one could never know. I think the taste of not-knowing—that's fertile ground for poetry.

And then—this is important—they seemed beautiful and precious to me as individuals, vulnerable, and full of fear and longing. And there was something defiant in this, because of course what the terrorist says is that individual people don't matter, except in how they stand for a nation, a class, a tribe, a belief.

Roma: You know what's interesting to me—this is a rabbit hole, but I promise I'll hang onto the edge—the reason Leo has to have a disclaimer is because we're embarrassed about being ethical. There is no codex, there is no rule book passed

down from Walker Evans to Robert Frank to Garry Winogrand; no, it'd be a scribble anyway. It's on each of us to define through our work how far we're going to go.

Here's one question: How dare you go into an empty prison cell and assume, or *presume,* that they're going to say something about the life of someone who was unjustly incarcerated? Fuck you! [*Laughter*.] But that's what we do!

Rubinfien: Where photography is concerned, people have been deceived again and again. You find it all the way back to Baudelaire. They think they're looking through a sheet of glass. But in truth a photograph is a colored glass, and the color of the glass is the character, knowledge, experience of the person who's holding it up, his or her own sense of irony, anger or love. Diane Arbus said: *I arrange myself. I don't arrange the subject, I arrange myself.* Which to me means that you search yourself for the moment when what you see seems most complex and true. And when you find it you do achieve a certain authenticity, and a certain authority.

Roma: Except—

Rubinfien: Ah! I knew there was something! [*Laughter*.]

Roma: Except, for all the adjusting of self, for all the colored lenses, in the end it's up to the viewer.

Rubinfien: Who's got another glass!

Rail: Leo, let's talk about your longest, and still ongoing project, *In the World City*, which for me carries an implicit questioning of the ethics of globalization. When the project began, twenty-plus years ago, was there a clear intention? Were you trying to articulate a moment of global transition?

Rubinfien: I began it in the days before people really used the word "globalization." I'd been traveling a great deal and I began to feel that at certain points in certain cities, you'd see something that expressed less of the local culture, and more with something that arrived from far away. Speaking to

myself, I would call this semi-imagined place the world city, or the global city, and I began to think, “How do you photograph such a non-existent thing?”

When I began, I had a naïve, sentimental notion of what globalization was. Some of this was the triumphant feeling of the post-Cold War, but for me, it went back even farther. I’d grown up in Tokyo in the 1960s, which was a greatly optimistic period of mixing—of Asian and Western life—and it gave me a belief that the mixing of worlds, of cultures, could only be beneficent—that it had to be.

I still believe that, but I stopped sharply in 2001 on September 11, when I stood here on the terrace and watched the buildings burn, and I felt, this effort I’ve been working on, and in which I’ve invested so much hope—I have to throw it away; I thought I knew something but I don’t know anything. I eventually came back to it, of course, I hope in a more sophisticated way.

Rail: For both of you, there must have been moments in which you felt that something you had witnessed was beyond photography. Leo, you’ve told me in other conversations that your apartment was so close to Ground Zero that your fellow photographers came to visit in the days after, presumably to shoot photographs, but when they looked down from the roof at the smoldering wreckage, the feeling was one of impotence. No one felt they could actually make a picture. Was there a period of time after 9/11 where it felt like, for you, this collective trauma was beyond the realm of art?

Rubinfien: After September 11, many people felt that the only thing that mattered was to act; the only meaningful thing would be to join the Army or the Marines. A life of contemplation can seem meaningful in a time of peace, but it seems dubious in a time of war. For a year after the attacks, I did no work at all. Neither photographing nor writing. I did begin a curatorial project on the photographer Shōmei Tōmatsu, but for me that’s a different kind of work. No, I couldn’t speak. I was silenced, stifled. But if in time certain green shoots sprout up in the wake of such an experience, it shows you how powerful the poetic impulse really is. It could be that being silenced is also valuable—that you learn that your voice is actually strong, and that you must use it.

There is a wonderful comment from Evans in which he said the aftereffects of war, the vestiges, can tell us more about the war than looking at the battle itself. There's a great example of this in one of his own photographs from a Confederates' cemetery in Mississippi [*Vicksburg Battlefield Monument* (1936)]. He saw the full madness of the Southern crusade in that bombastic statue of General Tilghman, even of the rapacious side of the American spirit in general. Evans once called the camera an "incredible instrument of symbolic actuality"—if you could see, really see, ordinary things would become extraordinary and speak for more than themselves alone. You would not just see the world, you would see into the life and the spirit of the world. And for me, really, this is where the art of photography begins. This is where the poetry starts.

Roma: Leo, remember when we were at Paris Photo together last year? I was sitting next to a woman I'd never met before. It was an enormous group of people, the bill was thousands of dollars—

Rubinfien: Well, he's exaggerating the amount, but nonetheless the bill was substantial—

Roma: And we're drinking with two hands and then all of a sudden I found out how much it costs! But I was sitting by this woman, who I was afraid to talk to before two or three single-malt scotches. I tried to make a glib joke about psychiatrists—

Rail: *You?*

Roma: Ha! Yeah. And this woman is actually a psychiatrist who deals with the criminally insane. I was completely fascinated by her, and she blurted out a question that I wasn't expecting and said, "Why do you photograph?" I was caught off guard, and I answered the way I would if I were with my analyst. "Honestly," I said, "I want to make people cry."

CONTRIBUTOR

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