

THE DAYS OF YORE

10 January 2011

interviews artists about the years before they had money, fame, or road maps to success, and inspires you to find your own.

Tim Davis



Tim Davis is one of the most exciting and prolific contemporary American photographers. His work has been exhibited widely in the United States and abroad. Recent solo shows include "The New Antiquity," at the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery in New York City (2009), and "My Life in Politics," at the Ruffin Gallery at the University of Virginia (2009). His work can be found in the public collections of a long list of prominent institutions, including the four New York pillars: the Guggenheim, the MoMA, the Metropolitan, and the Whitney. He is represented by the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery and Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York City. He was awarded a 2007-2008 Joseph H. Hazen Rome Prize, which brought him to the American Academy in Rome for a year.

Davis received his B.A. from Bard College and his M.F.A. from Yale University. He currently teaches photography at Bard. Prone to off-the-cuff philosophical rhapsodies, his magnetism is matched only by his fierce intelligence.

When did you first become interested in photography?

My father was an amateur photographer. He had a darkroom off our kitchen. When I was very young, about eight, I asked him if I could borrow his camera. My idea was to go outside and walk around and photograph. I remember the pictures that I took. They weren't of people, they were just of things in the neighborhood. They were very direct. And I've been thinking a lot about that lately, because I've been trying to theorize a little bit about the idea of the photo expedition. The part about being a photographer that is about going out and communing with the world— as opposed to working in a studio. I think somehow, innately, from the beginning, that is what I thought photography was.

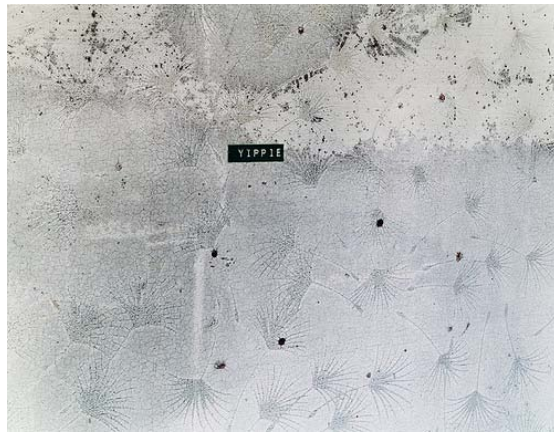
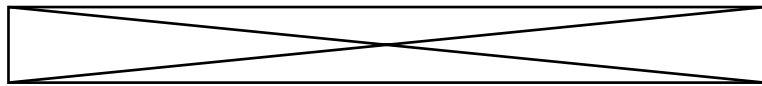
Was that your father's approach to photographing as well?

He likes portraits. Still, to this day, he looks at my pictures and says [does a scruffy-voiced impersonation], "This is really great, but I like a portrait, with a guy's eye right in the middle. Boom!" Alright, Dad. I know that's what you like.

Any early photographic memories, maybe from the off-the-kitchen darkroom?

No, no great photographic primal scene. But my earliest memory of all does involve photography. I saw my father and his friends looking through cigarette ads, into the folds of the clothing, looking for subliminal messages. And they were really high, if I recall now. There was blue pot smoke. It was maybe 1972. This idea of subliminal messages had just come into public consciousness at the time. I think it really had a big influence on me in that I had the sense that a photograph is something that can be read. That it can contain other meanings.

I do think there is something metaphysical in the idea that an image, especially a photograph, a commercial thing made by a machine, can contain deep and psychic and resonant meaning. It is something I really believe in. Maybe one of the only metaphysical things I believe in.



Tell me more about that.

I've always felt that if photographers are honest, they recognize that the majority of what is in every photograph they make is unknown to them at the time. No matter how stunning the work is. Almost all of my photographs have been made on a tripod, with a large format camera. I've studied the subject matter really deeply, but still, the majority of what is actually in there, the actual, physical content, is stuff that I wasn't aware of, that I couldn't have been aware of. And there is something very powerful in that.

I think the idea that the image you make is mostly not comprehended by you speaks to this idea I keep thinking about that the amount of significance in the world is infinite. Maybe the amount of people, the amount of objects, the amount of cameras, the amount of information might be limitable, but the amount of significance that we recognize in the world, is unlimited. That seems to be something very fundamental to the idea of being a photographer.

So, what happened after you borrowed your dad's camera?

I started to take photography classes in junior high. I managed to wrangle it so I could take it every semester of high school. I had to get special permission because I was so into it. And from there came the idea of the expedition; that I could, on one hand, on the most banal level, get school credit, and on the most evocative level, I could get life, meaning, experience, by just wandering around outside and looking at things.



When you began with photography, did you have a sense right away that you wanted to pursue it more seriously in your life?

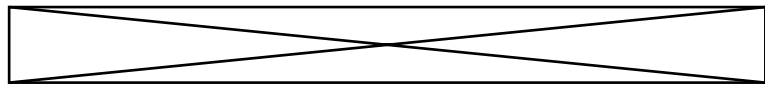
Oh yeah. It was easy for me, instantly. If you can imagine spending all of your time doing something, and more time than you thought you had doing that thing, then you know you've found something that's good for you.

Did you have an image of what it meant to be a photographer?

Oh, I had no idea. I didn't know that there was an art world. I always had a job. I've basically had a job since I was fourteen or fifteen.

What kind of jobs?

Working in a deli, being a stock boy, a dishwasher in an inn, I worked for a union, picketing a super market. When I had this stock boy job in high school, I would go to the local library in Amherst, Mass, after school and read photography books. I had a vision that there were these books, that there was a place that these things I made might end up, and that they would be there forever. That was very powerful.



When you were looking at these photography books, did you find a conversation that you wanted to be a part of?

Absolutely. Harry Callahan was the first photographer that I really, really loved. He had an experimental quality, an openness. He seemed to derive the form of his pictures from the specific story he wanted to tell, as opposed to having a pre-set form for the picture. Artists in all mediums tend to develop a form that feels right for them and kind of stick to that, and Harry Callahan seemed to be the kind of artist who thought: "Oh, I have this problem to solve, so the image needs to have this form." It's maybe best expressed by the poet Robert Creeley who said, "Form is never more than the extension of content," which in poetic terms means there is no reason for a line of poetry to be a certain length except to express the content of that particular line.

There was also something illicit about reading those photography books. I told the deli where I worked that I could only show up at 3 and school got out at 2.15. So I would go to the library in-between, and it was this secret, illicit time by myself when I was looking at photography books. It was almost this sexual, private thing.

After you graduated high school you went to Bard College. Did you study photography there?

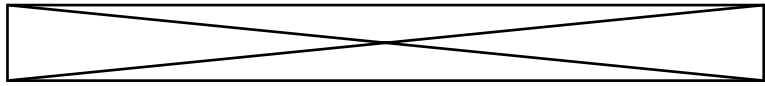
I did. It was interesting. I went there feeling like this hot shot. I had won awards and things in high school. I studied with Stephen Shore there, who is now my boss. He looked at my first pictures. I had made them driving to Albany, making street photographs. He looked at them and said, "I think you ought to take pictures of trees." What he was doing was kind of breaking down my pre-determined sense of what a photograph was. I may have been better studied than a lot of people there, but he probably still thought that I had to have my assumptions of what a photograph is broken down. So he directed me completely against my instinct.



How did that work out?

I dove right into it. I don't know if I knew that was what he was doing, but I knew it was a real challenge, and it may have been the first time I was really challenged. I think some people when severed from their lineage or their learning panic, don't know what to do, and I, instead, felt totally liberated. It turns out that every picture is a problem to solve, and I wanted to see if I could solve it without the cheat sheet— the cheat sheet being my previous experience.

Then a really interesting thing happened. There was a show at the school museum. It was called "Sequence (Con)sequence," and it was a show of post-modern photography. This guy Mac Adams was in it, and he had pictures of scenes of domestic violence staged and reflected in household kitchen items. He was there and gave critiques for the students. So I showed up with my kind of intentionally boring landscapes,



which was kind of what Stephen [Shore] had everybody doing. He pointed to them and said, "This one is good, and this one is good, but the rest of them are terrible." And he said, "With me, every picture is just the expression of an idea. And so, each picture is as good as the next one." I was shocked and immediately internalized the difference between a modernist and a post-modernist in picture-making. One would be: have a way of interfacing with the world, a formal way, go out and make photos and go home and edit them. The other one would be: have an idea and make expressions of that idea.

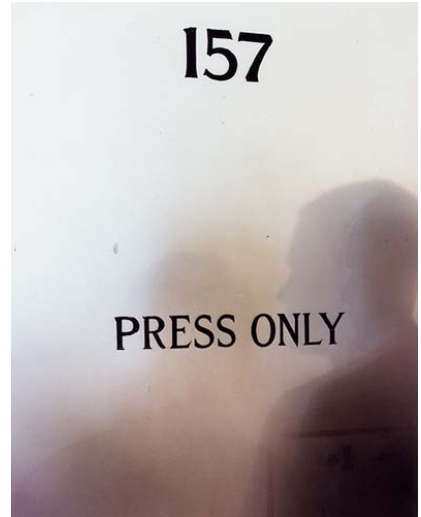
So I went to Stephen and was sort of whimpering and said, "Mac said every picture is just the expression of an idea and so every picture is just as good as the next one!" And he looked at me and said, "Yeah, well he didn't have any good ideas for ten years." Immediately, at that moment, I knew that I had to synthesize those two practices somehow. That was my lot in life.

The Bard experience seems to have been important in terms of finding your voice.

It was huge.

College is often a four-year incubation of creative freedom and possibility. Then reality slams its hard fist in your face.

That happened to me. But it was a little bit of a different time back then in terms of the professional world and the inevitability of joining it. It was 1991. The classic slacker time, the year that movie Slacker came out, actually. When I graduated from college, I never considered the idea that I should get some kind of internship, that I might start working on "having a career." I didn't know anybody who was doing that. Everybody was like, "I'm going to a city." San Francisco, or Austin, Texas. "I'm just going to go somewhere and hang out; drink coffee and read books."



What was your city?

San Francisco. I drove across the country. Got a job in a weird little after school program as a gym teacher, just in the afternoons, three days a week. Perfectly enough to survive, because the rent was cheap back then in San Francisco, it was before the Internet boom. I would sit in cafés all day reading poetry books.



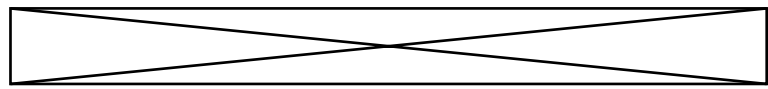
At one of the recent Venice Biennales, Raymond Pettibon did a piece where he painted on the walls in ugly graffiti, and one of the things he wrote was: "Professionalism is a hate crime." I feel like in the course of my adult life that is a sentiment that has become more and more marginalized. Everybody is so professional now.

Tell me what the living was like for you in this pre-cult-of-professionalism world.

I lived in San Francisco for about a year. Then I moved to New York. The day I arrived, I called every commercial photographer in the Yellow Pages until I got a job. It took 'til the 1s. But I did get a job that day. So, for a few years I was a photo assistant. I did learn a lot, much more about photography, technically, than I had in school, that's for sure.

But all this time, I had also been a poet. I studied poetry in college, I founded a poetry magazine in college. And when I got to New York, I found that poetry was a much better medium for a poor person than photography, because pencils, you can steal them from the bank. But all that photography equipment... I didn't have any money and I fell in with a group of downtown, avant-garde poets. They became my friends, and lovers, and





collaborators. So I really became a writer, seriously, for four or five years. In the early to mid nineties. I really didn't photograph that much. Made photography projects but never took it that seriously and never thought I should show my work to anybody.

After two or three years working as an assistant to commercial photographers, I got a job at New Directions, a small, venerable, avant-garde publishing company that's been around since the '30's. I started as a secretary but then became an editor. I stayed there much longer than I should have. I wasn't happy. I wasn't made to sit in the same place every day—I am much too wiggly. I don't think I liked it from the minute I walked in. But for someone who seems so unbelievably un-conservative, I'm very conservative— about money. Having grown up without any money, I've always made sure that I had enough money. I've always had a job. So I stayed there [New Directions] longer than I liked.

Then I started photographing in the office. And that is how I really came back to photography. I ended up staying at New Directions for a whole year longer than I would have if I hadn't started the project, because I was going in on nights and weekends to a place that I hated being so that I could make these pictures. I thought of it as a kind of reclamation project. I don't like being in this place, but there are things that are beautiful about it, so can I capture those things? It worked. It made me happy to be there—for a whole year. And it really started my career as an artist.



When did your mindset about not wanting to show your work change?

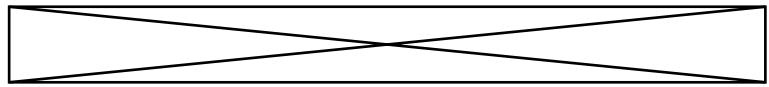
Part of it for me was that a group of my friends had gone to get their masters at Yale and had started careers as artists. I was around them. And they were looking at my work. And they told me I should make big prints and get them out there. So I did that.

How did you go from wanting to doing?

When I was in college, my poetry teacher said: "Never try to get published." He said, "When you're ready, your friends will publish you." In this case, I took the same advice. I had met a photographer named John O'Reilly— who is a fascinating, amazing artist— through a friend of mine. I went to him and showed him my work, just to get his advice. When I liked a poet, I had been in the habit of looking them up in the phone book and calling them up. Most times they love to hear from you. So, I did that again— I went and visited John O'Reilly and showed him my work. A week later, Julie Saul, who is John's gallerist, called me and said that she had heard about my work from John. So I showed her my work and that is kind of how it started.

What happened after that?

I took that body of work and applied to graduate school for photography, at Yale. I started showing right away while I was in graduate school.



What was your graduate school experience like?

Oh, I was like a cheetah released back into the wild! I had been working for ten years, really scraping by most of the time. I felt like a kid, and I acted a little like a kid too [laughs]. But I really thrived. And I made so much work, an embarrassing amount of work.



Where were you living during your time in New York?

I lived on the Lower East Side. I only lived in one apartment all those years in New York. I hated it, all that time.

It's like the publishing job! Why did you stay there?

I'm conservative, in a lot of ways. It had some benefits. It was very big and very cheap. So you could have good parties there. I always had roommates. It was a 5th floor walk up on avenue A. When I complained to the real estate agent who showed it to me that all the floors were at a perilous angle, he said, "Well, it's great, all the change that you drop will roll into one corner." I lived there until I left New York. I watched the East Village change from a pretty funky place to a gated community for stockbrokers. It was not a pleasant thing to behold.

Any good story from a day job you've had?



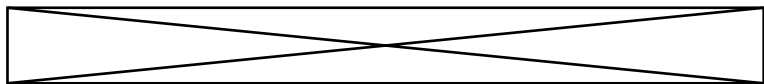
I'll never forget answering an ad in the New York Times to be a photo assistant. The photographer's name was only, Hashi, one word. He did high-end ads. His specialty was liquid coming out of bottles. Very technical. He had an army of assistants, and he was very successful. I got there at 8.30 in the morning and left at 10 at night the first day. And the next day, I walked in, and he goes right up to me, and he says [in a flamboyant, foreign accent], "If you want to work for Hashi," in the third person!, "if you want to work for Hashi, you have to do this...if you want to work for Hashi, you have to do that..." I just stood up and said, "You know what? I don't want to work for Hashi." And I walked out. I went to the Museum of Modern Art and I sat in the lobby and just watched people all day long. And it was like the happiest moment of my life.

I have often wanted to edit a book of people's writings about quitting. It is one of the most wonderful, powerful feelings you can have. I would call it, Quitting Time.

How did you spend your free time?

My friends have mostly been poets and writers all along. I used to attend a lot of readings. And I am an avid student of film. So one of the first things I got was a membership to the Museum of Modern Art. I would literally go five or six times a week and watch movies, ideally alone. I also played pick-up basketball in Tompkins Square Park. I got very good at being the shortest and Jewishest kid on the court.

My feelings of New York when I think back on it are: poetry readings, movie theaters, pick up basketball.



Do you look back on that time in New York fondly?

No, not really. I have to admit that I never felt very comfortable in New York. And I think it is for one reason: the flip side of that photo expeditionary side of me that likes to go out and look for things is a little bit of a feeling that I want to go out and see things that other people don't get to see. It's a slightly imperialistic quality. I love being in a place that feels under-seen. Los Angeles feels that way to me now. When I go to L.A. I walk everywhere, and I feel like I am the only one in the world. There are so many little microcosms, little worlds in Los Angeles that no one is paying any attention to because they're all in their vehicles. And also, everything kind of changes and is temporary and is made of such poor materials. In New York I always felt like if I know about it, it must be over already.

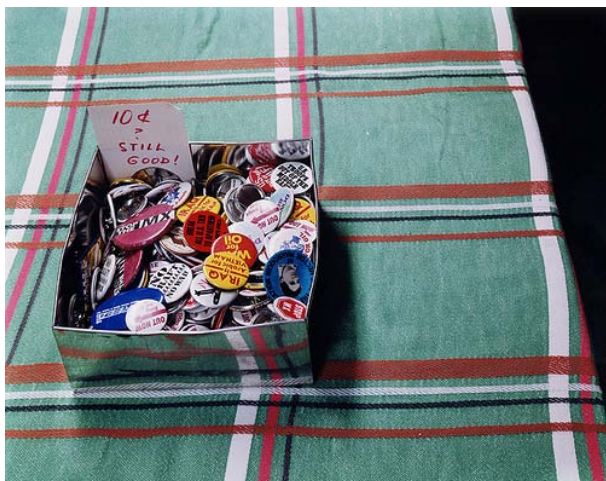


After graduate school, I moved back to that same apartment in New York. I found myself always driving out of the city to make work. To places where there was some kind of unseen or under-seen quality. That is when I really started to ask myself: Why do I live here? I don't seem to be able to make a lot of good work here.

Then I got offered a job teaching at Bard. I will never forget the moment. I was sitting in my car, in New York, waiting for the opposite side parking rules to change over, and I get the call from Stephen Shore asking if I want to come teach. And then, in that instant, it was like it all snapped into place. I would buy a house in the country! Boom! And it happened.

Do you remember the first time you were paid for your artwork and what it felt like?

I have two stories. The first is from the first time I got paid for my art, period. The second is the first time I got paid through a gallery.



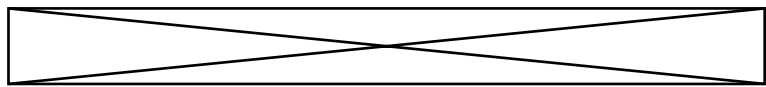
When I moved back to the East Coast from San Francisco, I first moved to the Hamptons, because I had a girlfriend who lived out there. I got a job as a gardener for this woman named Barbara Hale. Barbara Hale lived in this old house right across the street from where Jackson Pollock lived. And she was the most amazing woman. She had a couple of strokes and needed a lot of help. She had a cat named Velcro. She had a barn that everybody who was anybody in the art world had slept in. I would go work, with my shirt off, and I'm 22... I would work for twenty minutes, and then

she would yell, "Come in! Have an apricot tart!" She bought a bunch of my early photographs and gave me \$300. And that feeling was fantastic. It was so revelatory. And I have to admit that it also had to do with her. The thought that this person whom I respect so much, values me.

The other story is a good story too. I was in my first group show that John O'Reilly's gallerist had set me up with. It was the summer before I went off to graduate school. Then I went to school, and she owed me some money. I hadn't gotten it. So one day I marched in there ready to be all pissed off and "Where is my money?" And she said "Tim, I've been trying to get in touch with you! We sold all this work and I want to write you a check for all this money." I played it cool. Then I went out, jumped into the elevator and went, "Woohoo!!" [pumping his fist in the air]. I didn't see that there was someone else in the elevator. That person was Lisa Sanditz [his wife, a painter also interviewed for the Days of Yore here]. And that is how we met.

Tell me about photographing Obama.

I got an assignment to photograph the Obama campaign in the summer of 2008. I'd been living in luxury at the American Academy in Rome for a year and then the first thing I know, I'm in the middle of Missouri, waiting



to photograph Barack Obama in an elementary school. I wasn't told where I was going to be photographing him, and I wasn't allowed to see it in advance—which is a big problem if you're a photographer.

I remember walking into the room, which turned out to be the elementary school band room, and, before I even really looked at Barack Obama, I looked where the light was coming from. The next thing was where I was going to put the camera—the form of the picture. I noticed that there was one of those blue curtains set up, taped to the wall, and lights, because previously all these local news people had been there to interview him. I knew immediately that if I pulled back and turned the camera a little bit, I would see the edge of the blue thing and the lights, and it would be like pulling back the curtain. So that was the form.



All this pre-hello... So, then I said hello, and he said, "What do you want me to do? Want me to look happy? Smile? Look solemn?" I said, "The story is about the economy." So he goes, "OK, solemn."

I watched him for a long time. And he was so talented at maintaining a façade. I couldn't outstare the guy. One strategy I often use when photographing people is, you just wait long enough until they are uncomfortable, and then they suddenly lose track of the fact that they're posing. But it didn't work. He just stared and looked into the camera with a fake solemn look for a really long time. Then a moment happened when he looked down, and I realized that he had just come back from Germany, he was giving four or five speeches a day, and he was tired. He looked down, and in that moment I clicked the shutter. And that was the picture.

You teach now. Any differences you've noticed in the photography aspirants from when you were a student?

I feel that the students are smarter and more well-informed, and wealthier, and more grown-up than I was in college by leaps and bounds, but one thing they are not is physically intrepid. They are not capable of going out and failing. They don't want to fail. It's very hard to get them to be physically bold. Like, telling them, "Maybe you ought to go around the back of that building and look what's going on on the other side, or maybe you should have thought of climbing up on the roof..."

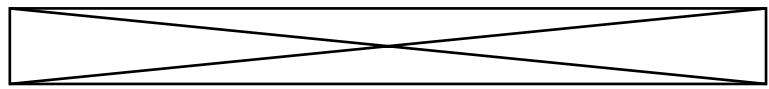
I really think it has to do with the fact that they've grown up in a world where they always know where to go, physically, to find out what they want to know. Anything they want to know. There is a terminal, a portal, to find it. For the kind of photography that I am doing for the most part, you have to be willing to follow your gut instinct, that maybe walking down this road for two or three miles—there might be something down there, but there might not be. You have to be able to fail, and you have to be curious about what the world might look like in an un-mapped, un-map-quested, way. And I think that is really, really hard for them.



Do you have any advice for young artists?

Don't try to get published. Sometimes I use the examples of the several books of poetry I published before I started working seriously with photography. Looking back, I'm not sure that those books should've been published. It may have been a little early. I say to students who ask me how to get a show: "You don't want to show this work you are doing now." Not that it isn't good for what it is, but you want to have some time to figure out what to make art about.

So I say, build a community. My advice always has to do with building a community. When I went to John O'Reilly to show him my work, I wasn't trying to get shown; I was just trying to get advice from somebody I respected, who was already in my community, in my purview. Get all the



artists that you like that are your age and all move to one place. And maybe it doesn't have to be Brooklyn. Maybe it could be Baltimore, or some other place that is a little more cheap and conducive to making art. And then show it yourself. Get together.

To photographers I say: you can get a computer, a scanner, and a printer, for a reasonable amount of money. So pool your resources with your friends. Make your shared space into a gallery space. Show your work there. You make your own community, and then you develop a context for the work and it automatically gets deeper. And they [the art world] will come find you.

Interview by Astri von Arbin Ahlander

Images courtesy of the artist: Yippee; Texaco Eye; Keep Right, Keep Left; Light Pole; Press Only; Photography Club; Little Strong Jaw; Hydroponics; Evocation of Love; Cat and Charlie Chaplin; Airholes; 10 Cents Still Good; Barack Obama, Springfield, MO, 2008, Thanks to ArtforObama.net; McDonalds 2