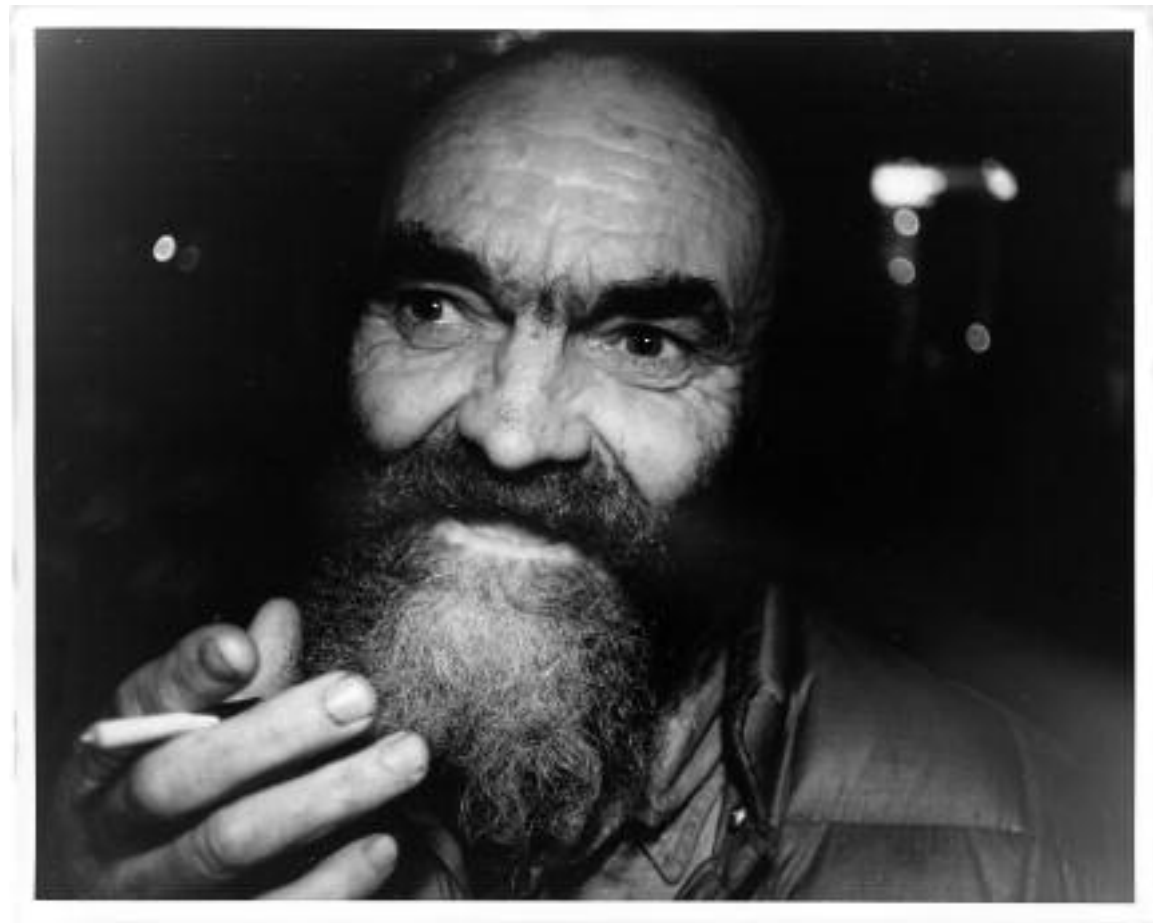


THE SIXTH STREET PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

BY RICHARD PITNICK



Sixth Street in San Francisco is like the traditional skid row. There is a lot of homelessness there, and even the people who are living in the transient hotels are really pretty close to the street. There is a need in this community for art, for people to be able to express themselves and to make their lives better and richer," explains Tom Ferentz, a

long-time documentary and fine art photographer based in Berkeley, California.

When Ferentz first came up with the idea in 1992 to teach photography to the impoverished and oftentimes homeless residents along Sixth Street and in the Tenderloin, two chronically poor neighborhoods in downtown San Francisco, he thought it might be a six-month

project. He never imagined that close to twenty years later the Sixth Street Photography Workshop (SSPW) would still be around, and even more, would have become a sustaining and driving force in the lives of its participants and the community-at-large.

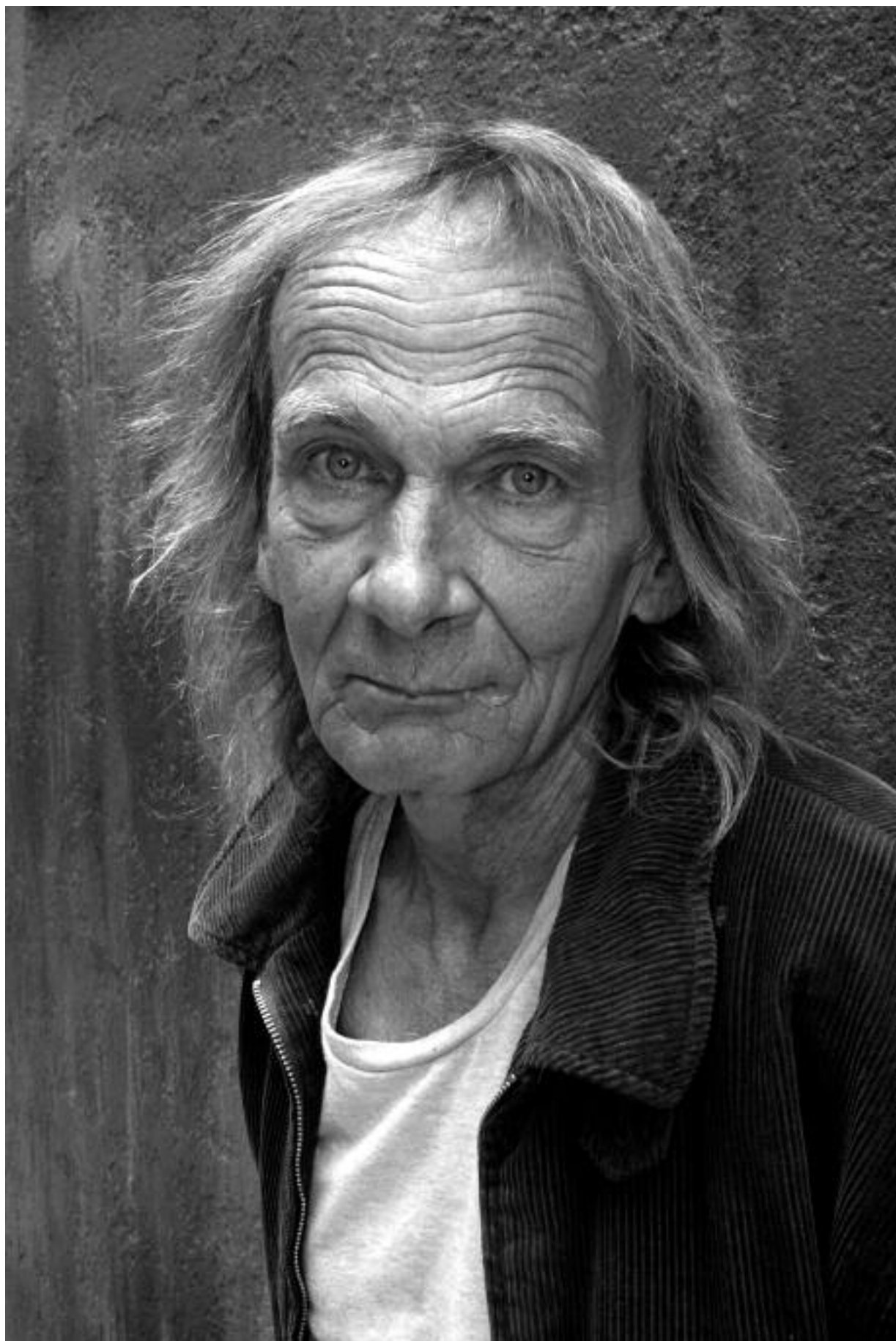
SSPW grew out of Ferentz's own photographic work documenting health care services for

residents of the transient hotels along Sixth Street. After participating in an exhibition of professional photographers at one of the hotels, he learned that there was a small amount of funding available to do a project with the hotel's residents, and Ferentz, who already had experience as an arts administrator running the Eye Gallery in San Francisco, decided to give it a try.

UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF FOUNDER, TOM FERENTZ—ARTIST, TEACHER AND CURATOR—THE SIXTH STREET PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP HAS WORKED WITH THE HOMELESS AND RESIDENTS OF TRANSIENT HOTELS, MENTORING MORE THAN 300 OF THEM SINCE THE WORKSHOP BEGAN IN 1992 IN A UNIQUE BRAND OF DOCUMENTARY PHOTOJOURNALISM.



Above: S. Renée Jones, *Laundromat Man*—2006
Opposite page: photograph by Barry Cunningham—1998



**Above: Collaborative photograph, *Haight Street Theatric #1*—1998
Opposite page: photograph by Tom Ferentz—2010**

There were four men who really hooked into the project," Ferentz recalls. "We were meeting once a week at a darkroom, and the four of them were always waiting for me when I got there. Photography just took over their lives."

While photographers have long documented the lives of the poor, Ferentz' idea was to reconfigure the role of the photographer within the community. He combined the practice of photography with a teaching/mentoring role. He placed cameras in the hands of those

who were more commonly the subjects of such photographs.

One of the four original participants was Robert Farrell, who recounts how he got involved: "Before the photo workshop my life was confused. I had just finished a serious bout of drug addiction and jail. When I got this camera, I made myself a promise that every time I had the urge for drugs, instead of buying the drugs I'd buy a roll of film. And that was my beginning.

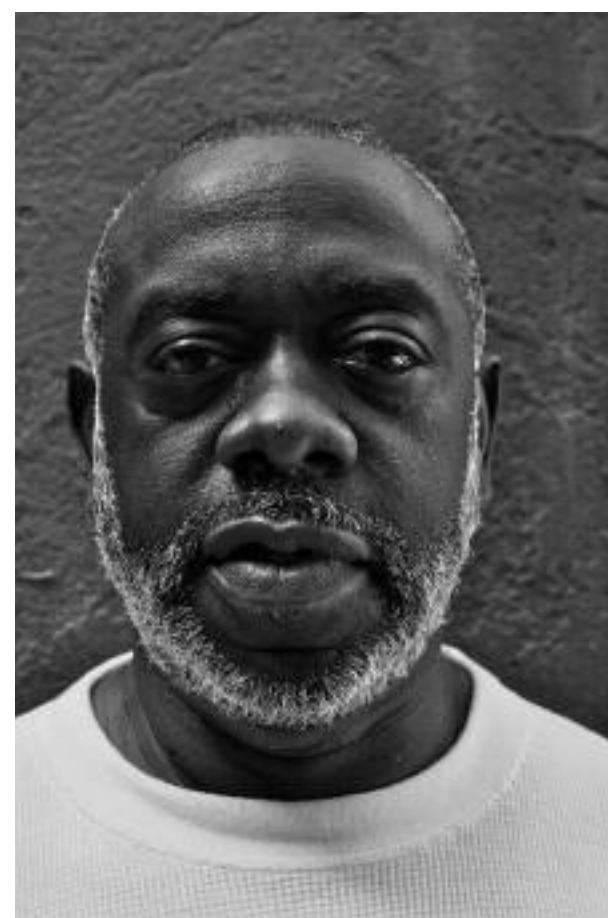
"When you develop a roll of film and you see the results...

you see that image on the film...that whole thing inside that says 'You did this, you can do this'...that just woke what I call this hunger for more. Photography was a bridge to a life I had given up on."

"Our project brings an authenticity of voice, an informed character to the work that I don't think you could achieve any other way," notes Ferentz. "Residents see a character to their neighborhood that an outsider doesn't see the same way. There is access, a sense of connection and trust

that brings an informed quality to the photographs our participants produce.

SSPW currently operates out of the South of Market Cultural Center, one of four city-owned cultural facilities in San Francisco. The cultural centers were established through the support and advocacy of cultural communities who made a successful case that the city was not providing equitable funding to arts organizations that were multicultural and served populations that did not historically have equal access to the arts.



Committed to passing on the technical and artistic elements of photography through ongoing instruction, Ferentz and his staff of volunteers offer classes for field sessions and darkroom work supplemented by occasional museum and gallery trips. SSPW operates a full film processing and printmaking facility that includes a seven-station group darkroom, three individual darkrooms, a film room, and digital imaging capability. The program has cameras, a classroom, and an archive of prints,

negatives and image files that document the program since its inception.

Prospective participants are recruited from shelters, residential hotels, social service agencies and community organizations in and around downtown San Francisco. Most participants receive financial assistance such as SSI, due to disability; some are recovering from drug or alcohol addiction. They are provided with cameras, both film and digital, and access to the darkrooms. Longtime member S. Renée

Jones was homeless, living in her car, when she first encountered the Workshop. Twelve years later, she is one of the main instructors, teaching photography to all the newcomers.

As they advance in SSPW, returning students are invited to continue in the advanced photo program where they work on personal portfolio projects, photograph in the community, print images and mount exhibits. They also become involved in artistically directed group collaborations that are designed by Ferentz. Sometimes these

are based in photographic history. One such project, *Secret San Francisco*, a yearlong foray into night photography on the streets, was modeled on Brassai's photographs in *Secret Paris of the Thirties*.

In this project, a team worked to create all the final images. One person would handle the camera, often an old 1950s 4x5; one to three other people would hold hand-fired flashes. The camera would use a long shutter speed that, in conjunction with the action of the flashes, would

This page, clockwise from top:
 Photograph by Barry Cunningham—2010
 Tom Ferentz, Barry Cunningham in action—2010
 Photograph by Barry Cunningham—2009

Opposite page:
 Photograph by Andrell Taylor—1993



capture light movement in different parts of the photograph and often create some ghosting. "It's more like a kind of theater that we are involved with in this collaborative work," notes Ferentz. "Our method reduces the emphasis on 'primary artist,' and the photograph becomes more of a group effort."

Many of the photo projects are displayed in public areas and hotels in the Tenderloin where project participants and area residents work and live, thereby creating a sense of pride and self-worth among the photographers and their subjects.

In addition to local exhibitions, SSPW projects have been exhibited throughout San Francisco and the greater Bay Area, as well as in venues in Los Angeles, Chicago and China. Several catalogues have been published on SSPW projects and SSPW photographers have participated in artist panels at University of San Francisco, Society for Photographic Education and College Art Association.

"Our shows and panel presentations build culture and identity in a community known for its social problems, not its creativity," says Ferentz. "Images made by residents and exhibited publicly help the community to see and celebrate itself. SSPW brings a participatory program that empowers the neighborhood as it faces challenges and changes typical of inner city areas facing redevelopment and increased costs of living."

"As the project has evolved, our goals have clarified themselves as being primarily artistically driven. We strive each year to create work at as high a level as we can," Ferentz adds. "We don't expect to change anybody's life economically, or conditions, generally, so much as to give people the opportunity to participate in photography as



This page, clockwise from top:
S. Renée Jones, *The Funeral #1*—1987
S. Renée Jones—2009
collaborative photograph—2003

Opposite page, clockwise from upper left:
Tom Ferentz, *S. Renée Jones in action*—2008
S. Renée Jones and Tom Ferentz, *The Rite Spot #2*—1998
S. Renée Jones and Tom Ferentz, *The Raymond Hotel*—1998



This page, clockwise from upper left:
Photograph by Tom Ferentz—2002
S. Renée Jones, Brothers—1984
SSPW in action, on roof of Warfield Theater—2007

Opposite page:
collaborative portrait—1998



an art form at a reasonably high level.”

The artistry of the photography produced by Workshop participants has garnered widespread recognition. SSPW has been featured in *American Photo*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *SF Camerawork Quarterly*, *Poor* magazine, and has received extensive magazine coverage in China. It has appeared on the NBC and ABC news, and was the sub-

ject of a documentary on SPARK, which aired on PBS. SSPW has also garnered funding from major donors like the National Endowment for the Arts, San Francisco Arts Commission, California Arts Council, LEF Foundation, Walter and Elise Haas Foundation, and the Zellerbach Family Fund.

“From its beginning, the SSPW has put down roots and grown,” says Ferentz. “Over

the years, the Workshop has established a productive and unique artistic community. It remains committed to bringing valuable opportunities to a neighborhood with limited resources that tends to be socially isolated.

“Programs like this for adults in poverty are rare,” adds Ferentz. “Ours offers dependable, long-term involvement in photography. It demonstrates a special commitment to open

artistic possibilities and addresses who represents neighborhoods like this, and how. This is something there has been a growing concern for in the field of documentary photography over the years. Involved in its own representation, the community participates both in front of and behind the camera.”

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