

METAL

MARIE TOMANOVA: NEW YORK STATE OF KIND

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For Marie Tomanova, New York is a place of becoming. Striking deep into the heart of identity, the photographer showcases a city and its inhabitants in all their raw mythic glory. After a period of universal inaction, Marie stepped out into town and embarked on a project that began purely as an act of self-care. An isolation vacation and communal celebration. Marie Tomanova shares with METAL what it means to be free in the city of dreams.

Marie, painter in the Czech Republic, au pair in North Carolina, and now photographer of the people that make a city so nice they named it twice; what first drew you to New York, and was it the cronut?

I went to the United States because I didn't know what else to do after I finished my MFA in painting in Czech Republic. I felt very discouraged by the male-dominated art environment in Czechia at that time, so I decided to leave for America. I didn't have any particular dream. I felt kind of lost. But I liked the promise of travel and adventure, so I got on the plane and ended up in North Carolina. My idea of the US was quite naive, I didn't understand how big this country is, and I thought that it's the same everywhere. North Carolina was great - beautiful weather, nature, huge highways and big American style coffee - I definitely had a serious culture shock, but I decided to move to NY the next year.



That impulse to move to New York was actually triggered by seeing a photograph by Ryan McGinley of a girl holding a wolf (and I always saw the wolf as my spirit animal). So I wanted to move to New York, thinking that I could maybe get photographed by Ryan McGinley. I also used to be obsessed with *Sex and the City* that I watched on bootleg DVDs growing up in my small town in Czech, and so New York City always sort of resonated with me. And I actually never tried the cronut. But I am crazy about the eclairs and donuts from SuperMoon Bakehouse! Those are my favorite!

Does *New York New York* build upon or respond to any of the themes presented in your work on returning to Mikulov; *It Was Once My Universe*?

This is a great question because it really gets at the heart of what has been going on with me lately. I have these two very different lives and bodies of work now. One existing in the Czech Republic, and one here in New York. And on the face of it, they couldn't be more different, in a sense. I take pictures of all these kids in New York. And in Czech, I take pictures of my home, my family, really close friends that I have known for decades, places that I have gone for decades. And yet, there is some connection, some deep connection between these two places and these two bodies of work. They are both really me.

And what's interesting is how we can be so many things. We are not just this or that. And I guess this really speaks to the idea of identity and that, in a sense, we are made up of multiple identities. I think you could also say that about culture, that culture is not some sort of immovable thing, but it is open and porous, maybe we should really say cultures, and there are lots of different cultures. I feel like I belong to different cultures, so, I guess I have multiple identities, and I am in between cultures.



Great, and this relates strongly to your photography.

In a sense, a lot of my work is really about belonging, and it is also about freedom and identity. And sometimes these things sort of clash into one another. I know that I have felt incredibly free in New York City, but I've also felt really lonely and like I don't belong. And I have felt the same things when I went back to my hometown. I have felt like I don't belong. I have felt like I'm not at home. I have felt like I do not know where home is.

So I think these bodies of New York work, such as *New York New York* (2021) and the Czech work, *It Was Once My Universe* (2018), for example, interact with one another in a very interesting way, and they reveal multiple identities that sometimes can coexist but also can sometimes bump into one another. And I wonder sometimes whether or not this is really just life. *New York New York* is really about coming to New York to follow your dreams, and so many of these kids are really here to do just that. It's why I came as well. But I didn't even really know it at the time.

Yes, exactly.

Kim Gordon writes about this in the foreword. She shares her experience of how she comes to New York to follow her dreams. And this is really what New York is about for me, and maybe for all of these kids. It's about freedom, it's New York, it's mythic. And many people come from places like where I came from, and maybe it's hard for them to go back, or maybe it's hard for them to stay and be in New York. It's a tough city. So this idea of moving, of becoming, of coming to and finding yourself—all of this is *New York New York*.

But it's also *It Was Once My Universe*, and it is also *Live for the Weather* (2005-10/2017), the work I shot between 2005-2010 on a little digital camera in my little hometown. And it is also *Young American* (2019), and all of these projects fit into one another. It is also my self-portrait series (2014-), which is about seeing myself in this new place, literally picturing myself there so I could believe it, so I could see it, so I could belong. Portrait in place, place and portrait, portrait and place and landscape. These are the things that really mean something to me. These are the things which sort of really define our lives, right? Where we are, who we are and who we are with. Our fluid identities emerge from and are formed by place and people, right? That's the essence for me.

Why *New York New York*? The place, the name, and the images they evoke are vast and pervasive. Is it a homage to the city or a reframing of New York?

I love the way you say the images are vast and pervasive. I guess the way I think about *New York New York* is double something. It's almost alliterative. After I started putting the project together, I kept hearing the song, which was "New York New York big city of dreams", and really in a way, it just kind of says it all, right? It's a homage to the city and the people, and I don't know if it is a reframing of New York? Who can reframe New York? New York is. I can say that for me, and Thomas Beachdel does mention this, and Kim Gordon does mention this too, that New York is a very special place. It is sort of this mythic entity. It is a place you come to and become in. And I really relate to this idea of coming to and becoming in.

I came to New York, and I have to say, I didn't exactly know who I was. I was who I am. But I also became who I wanted to be here, maybe who I always wanted to be, and didn't even know it. New York is transformative. And I think this idea of becoming who you want to be is so important. You can wear whatever you want to wear and walk down the street. Try that in my little, small town. You can express yourself however you want, and nobody's really going to bat an eye [in NY]. And you can find communities that support you and with whom you identify closely. New York has that. Maybe the Internet does now too, and social media. Maybe. But really, physically, it's all in New York City. New York New York. It's an homage. This city is amazing, its people are amazing, its identities and communities and energy are all so amazing.

Thomas Beachdel once described your work as being about "connections between people". Does the removal of the comma in the book title, between *New York State* and *New York City*, reflect this unifying thread?

Beachdel is right in that it really is about connections; all my work is about connections. That was what *Young American* was all about. It was about connections between me and all of these people; people who I admire, people who I relate to. These photographs were shot during the years when my immigration status was very complicated, and I couldn't travel. I was an immigrant living in New York City during a really tough time of immigration policy under Trump administration. It was very scary and uncertain at times, and so, *Young American* stood for all of this "America" that I identified with—this youthful energy, all of these people, my hopes and dreams for an America that was free and tolerant and loving and open. And it wasn't like the "America" that was being portrayed in terms of building borders, and conservative politics, and racism, and sexism, and all of that stuff.



So *Young American* was my America, and I guess *New York New York* is kind of my New York. The decision to remove the comma really is just a restatement about New York, New York. And again, I said earlier, it's alliterative, or it feels alliterative to me—the doubling makes it very strong. It's a beautiful sound. It is almost poetic. And New York is a poetic place. Maybe it has lots of different poetics in it. For me, the book shows all of these different poetics, all of these different, wonderful people, all of these different, wonderful places.

Do the people make the place, or does the place make the people?

I think it is definitely both. Sometimes you can be around beautiful people, and I don't mean just physically beautiful, I mean beautiful in spirit, and it's spectacular. And sometimes you can be in beautiful places that may not even be physically beautiful but are beautiful because of memories associated with them, and they can be spectacular. So, people and place. Both are important. Both interact. And I like your question because really this book, *New York New York*, is a merging of people and places, portrait and landscape. It is like a portrait of youth, and a landscape of place. But it is also a landscape of youth, and a portrait of place.

Did you first encounter Thomas Beachdel when curating your *Live for The Weather* exhibition?

No, I famously met Dr Beachdel at the Metropolitan Museum, in my second week after I moved to New York in 2012, in front of a Gauguin painting, of all things. *Two Tahitian Women*. We then went on to see some shows together and went on to curate some shows and started working together. It's been the most influential collaboration for me. I feel that we have similar vision yet enrich each other. We constantly talk about art and ideas. Thomas's support and mentorship has been essential for me on so many levels. He has been the first person who truly believed in my photography before anyone else, and that encouraged me to grow professionally in a significant way.



Your debut book *Young American* was published on the precipice of our collective dive into worldwide hibernation mode. The interactions in *New York New York* between Harley & Poster Boy, Sharpie & George etc. stir strong emotions that have been stuck fast, unnurtured, and at the sight of these photos, are rearing. Does the launch of this collection, now in book form, feel like a reintroduction of human interaction as a prerequisite for life fulfillment?

Yes. Such a great observation, yes. Definitely yes. I will tell you a little bit about this book process because it all happened leading up to, and during, the pandemic. I had been shooting in 2019 in preparation for this book project and I wanted the title for the book to be *New York New York* from the beginning. We started speaking with one publisher who really didn't love that title and who wanted something a little different. So, in the end, we didn't end up working together.

But I had a big exhibition for the European Month of Photography in Berlin in October 2020, which was during the pandemic. It was really funny because we weren't even sure up until a week before the show opening whether or not we would have the exhibition. It ended up closing about three weeks after we opened, because of new restrictions, so we had this beautiful window where we were in Berlin and had this big show. And at that show, we met Nadine Barth from Hatje Cantz, and she was excited to do a book, and so we started to work on it. And, of course, I wanted to get Kim Gordon to do the introduction, and she agreed to do it, so dreams really come true.

Wonderful.

So, to the answer your question, I worked on this book from 2019 to 2021, and I was quite depressed when the pandemic hit in March 2020, I basically stopped shooting for a few months. I'm a person who really likes to connect with people and there was so much anxiety and fear during the pandemic. It was impossible to keep working for a while... And so, you asking about this idea of human interaction as a prerequisite for life fulfillment is so, so true. I think people need people. And so slowly, over the summer of 2020, I started going out with my mask, taking pictures of people, seeing these groups of kids in Tompkins Square Park.



It seemed like everybody who wasn't from New York had left and all that remained were just the people who grew up here. All of the international students were gone. All of the people who wanted to leave and could leave had left, and it was really just kind of this raw New York City. And it felt extremely real in a certain way. There would be these groups of kids hanging out going between Washington Square Park and Tompkins Square Park. And in a way, the summer of 2020 was a really wonderful and beautiful time because you saw those interactions between people come out again; you saw people coming together again.

There were beautiful moments in the park with this singer, Pink Cloudz, who would perform in the park, and hundreds of kids would come, and they would dance. New York City really emerged powerfully as New York City. People were doing whatever they wanted, and it felt really good. On the other hand, there were all of these fireworks, all of these protests, all of these helicopters and police everywhere. It was crazy, and sometimes it was really scary. I've never experienced anything like it. But there was a real sense of coming together, and I'm so glad that you see it in these pictures. It's really important to me. This idea of human connection, it's really the most important thing in the world. I know it sounds like something out of some poster on a therapist's wall or something, but it really is important, connecting with people. And that had been kind of what my work is really about. It's about celebrating people as people for who they are or who they want to be. We're all different in some ways, but we're all the same as people.

The book launch is being held at Dashwood Books. Does the store hold any significance to you?

Yes. Dashwood Books is extremely important to me. It is the place that I always wanted to have a book launch. It is the most important photo bookstore, I think, in the world. And David, who owns it, has been incredibly supportive, not only with the book launches but also in terms of helping me develop the books themselves. I discussed, with him, drafts of *Young American* (Paradigm, 2019) and he gave me great guidance and I did so with *New York New York* (Hatje Cantz, 2021) as well. He is an expert on photography, and I like working with him. And so, we had the event there and it was really the only place it could have been for me. It is very close to my heart.



This year marks your tenth anniversary living in the States. Has your time there changed your perception of concepts such as identity?

My perception of everything, more or less, is constantly changing, I think, and I have for sure struggled with identity. It's been a journey. I really feel like my work is something that is deeply tied to the idea of identity, specifically youth identity. But in a real way. It is tied to identity, not clearly, but as a process of becoming. I guess, the process of becoming who you are, who you want to be. This is what I have gone through, and go through, and it is what so many of the people in the book do too. Even Kim Gordon, who writes about this in her Foreword to *New York New York*. I've been thinking about this a lot lately, and it's not just identity, but it's identities - plural.

I know I came to New York a different person than I am now, although in certain ways, I am very much the same person. But my identity has changed. I have become comfortable with who I am. Maybe identity is just a fluid thing. And this fluidity may even be kind of part of the struggle of identity. Maybe it is all sorts of in-betweens. Maybe it is magical. I know I feel like a different person when I go home to Czech Republic than I feel here in New York. And some of that is a real struggle. I feel more like a daughter when I am around my mother and my home. And so, maybe identity is not just connected to self, but it is also connected to place. I think that's why portrait and place all fit together so well and why they are hard to separate. Our identities are so much about who we are and where we are.

As someone with a fairly loose grip on memory, I was fascinated to learn about the lucidity of your recollections with some East Village chance encounters in Document. Which is the earliest photo of yours that sparks nostalgia?

Such a tough question. There's a picture I took upon my return to Czech—my first return to Czech in eight years, to my home—of me standing in a field, wearing my father's sweater. He died when I was 16 years old, and this is all I really have left of him, the sweater. So that, for me, is a very nostalgic photograph. But it's not the earliest photograph that sparks nostalgia.

Maybe that might be the picture I took of myself with all of my things when I first moved into the East Village with a Yugoslavian woman Ljuba, who ended up committing suicide on the bridge above East River a couple of years after that. She was such a wonderful woman, and she opened her home to me. She was part of an early generation of Eastern European immigrants in the East Village. There was a bit of a feeling of home there that I would not have had otherwise.

I used to sleep on this wooden chest on a really thin piece of foam, and I would put all my pictures up above my bed, lots of little snapshots. And this was my first little East Village home that I treasured. And I treasured my relationship with Ljuba so deeply. And so, when I look at myself squatting down with everything that I had and these bags in a corner of the room, it brings back a lot of nostalgia. It brings back happiness, but it also brings back sadness. It brings back freedom, but it also brings back loss. It brings back connection to another person. It brings back a connection to another place, connection to another time.

On your website, I noted that many of your projects are still ongoing. Will we get to see *Young American* grow old, and do you plan on making more *New York New York* memories for us to treasure?

I was just putting together a portfolio for a big potential exhibition in Europe. It was hundreds of pages long, and I was doing the table of contents, and I was putting the dates of the projects, and I have been leaving *Young American* open, as well as *New York New York* and my self-portraits. But just then, with *Young American*, I actually went and I closed the date with the year 2019. I feel like some of these projects have been done, *Young American* for one. But there are so many other images from *Young American* that have never been seen or shown, and I suppose could even, maybe, be added to. And yes, there will probably be more *New York New York*. And new projects that are already brewing in my head.

<https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/interview/marie-tomanova>