***Not Just a Picture Book: An Interview with Vincent Cianni about* We Skate Hardcore**

by Barbara Tannenbam

Portrait of a Neighborhood

BT: *How did* We Skate Hardcore *begin and when did you start to think of it as a book?*

VC: I began documenting Williamsburg as a portrait project, photographing in the neighborhood handball and basketball courts. Anthony is one of the handball players I met at McCarren Park, where I went occasionally to play. About a year later I began photographing the girls. Then, in 1995, I met the rollerbladers. I periodically photographed them as they went from skate park to skate park. In 1997 I started getting to know them well. They had built a makeshift skate park in Public School 84, just down the block from where I live. I photographed them quite often, almost on a daily basis during that summer.

As we got to know each other better, they became interested in the project and in what I was doing. I would occasionally loan them my camera, and they also started videotaping themselves. Some of the bladers would come over to my studio to learn photography. Or they would stop by to see prints or bring over photos they had done themselves. They started calling me "*their* photographer," sensing that they were being acknowledged, and that they could have a voice.

Around that time, I was invited to do an exhibition and workshop with students from an art school in Epinal, France. Because I would be working with teenagers there, my idea was to bring pictures of some of the bladers I'd been photographing in Williamsburg over to them. Instead of my talking about the bladers, I thought I'd ask them to talk about their own lives by writing on the photographs. That was the genesis of how the rollerbladers began writing on the photographs I had made of them.

The idea of a book had not taken form at that point. I was still in the midst of trying to identify what the project was—trying to understand what it was about. The bladers lives – their resolve and determination - became interesting to me, and I felt it would be interesting to communicate this to others. I needed to find out who they were, how they thought, what obstacles they faced growing up in the Southside, and what their hopes and dreams were.

BT: *How did you go about shooting photographs in your own neighborhood?*

VC: I used Polaroid black-and-white negative film because of its immediacy. It opened up and established communication very quickly with the people I was getting to know in the neighborhood. When I pulled the print apart and put the negative in the bucket in which I had to store the processed negatives, people became curious. They wanted to know what I was doing and see the pictures I was making. They were able to respond to the picture I'd taken almost immediately.

I thought the muted and crude quality of the Polaroid negative was essential to the feel of the neighborhood. There's something about the

negative not being perfect. And, there's the limpid quality of the tones. There's no grain structure to a Polaroid, so it gives this softness to the image.

BT: *What kind of camera did you use?*

VC: It was a Polaroid 600 SE camera with interchangeable lenses - so the camera was fairly large and it had a pistol grip. I also carried the bucket of sodium sulfite solution around with me. I wasn't walking around with a small handheld camera "stealing" shots. It was very obvious that I was a photographer.

I think in the beginning, with the portraits, one can see a very strong sense of recognition of me, of my being present, of my making the photograph—and a very strong relationship and communication with the people I was photographing. It became a kind of collaboration. When I began to get to know the rollerbladers more, I started to become more like a part of the landscape. It became less and less an issue that a camera was present, that I was present.

BT: *When you're shooting with a large camera like that, the goal is clearly not a snapshot but something a little more momentous, something meant for posterity. Yet, you seem to be able to catch some very fluid motion shots. Is it a very fast film?*

VC: As a matter of fact, it's one of the *slowest* films I've ever used: ASA 80, and I rate it ASA 50, which is very slow. It limits the range of scene brightness and how deep the shadows are in relation to the highlights. I particularly have to be aware of the type of lighting, of

the intensity of light, and of place, whether I'm photographing inside or outside.

Over the course of the project—having used this camera with its pistol grip for so long—I could use it like a 35mm. That all came into place the day I shot the photograph of Anthony backing Giselle up against the fence, with Vivien and the baby carriage in the background. I was looking away, then turned around, saw the scene, and made an instant decision to take the photograph. That's basically the realm of 35mm shooting. I got to know the different lenses so well that I didn't even have to put the camera up to my eye. I was able to react quickly, to be present as things were taking place instead of putting the camera between me and what was happening.

Building a Narrative

BT: *Can you explain for me how the narrative advances—what is the "plot" or structure of the book?*

VC: The book's not arranged chronologically. I felt it would have more impact, work better aesthetically, if it were not organized along a strict timeline. It starts out with a description of the neighborhood: who are the people; what are the structures shaping the community, for example, its street life, its family life, its religious life; and what is the look of the neighborhood, the city itself. At the beginning of the book I introduce myself in an introduction—how I began the project and how it evolved. My reflections on the project and my experience is then interspersed throughout the book. Soon after is a photograph of Richie standing in P.S. 84. It was taken in 1997, a couple of years

after I met the skaters, but it was one of the first images that Richie wrote on. Richie's words are an overview, introducing readers to what they'll be seeing: What it's like growing up in a neighborhood that's primarily Hispanic and doesn't have a lot of resources, basically a poor neighborhood; how he connects with his family and how strong his family ties are; his connection with his friends and how important they are in his life; and how his passion for rollerblading defines his life, shapes him in some way. For Richie rollerblading was a way to let go of the stress. He also had dreams of becoming a professional, which he is today, of attaining his goals, and of making money at something he does really well.

From there, I go on to introduce Uly, another primary figure in the book. Uly and Richie are best friends and, in some ways, polar opposites. Richie was always very motivated, very determined; he was the leader of the group, the organizer in establishing the skate parks and promoting neighborhood competitions. Richie had this direct line for achieving and attaining his goals—he was very mature for his age.

On one photograph with his girlfriend Dee, Uly writes that she is the one who gives him the strength to realize who he is. In another he talks about Richie giving him the motivation to achieve the things he wants, like going back to school. There were times, after he dropped out of school, that Uly was involved in drugs. After he moved out of the neighborhood and went to Florida, he realized that his life wasn't working out the way he wanted and he decided he needed some discipline, so he joined the army.

This difference between Richie and Uly also exists in the neighborhood.

The community, the people who live in the neighborhood, accept the good and the bad. There's no judgment. The two exist together, almost on the same level. And that same dichotomy exists in the book.

The book then turns to the whole clan. They called themselves the Pu-Tang Clan. The group fluctuated from five or seven kids to fifteen, twenty, or even thirty, depending on the day. They'd stay all day long, practicing, trying out new tricks, all the while building a strong social life with an established group of friends. Richie talks a lot about hanging out with his friends, having good times, as part of his reasons for skating.

BT: *What's amazing to me, and makes their story much richer, is that their association became more than just hanging out. Thanks in large part to Richie, it started having a focus, a very positive goal: to establish a permanent neighborhood skate park. The next section of the book explores why and where they were able to build skate parks, even though all of them were eventually torn down. This part includes color images.*

VC: The color shots are from video interviews I shot in 1997. The bladers were trying to get the community board to build a skate park for them. At that point they had been kicked out twice from skate parks that they'd built. The park where I met them originally sat on a vacant lot right on the pier near the East River. A developer bought the lot and put up a fence to keep them out.

So they went to another place beneath the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and built another park. It was illegal to have a skate park there, and some

people in the neighborhood didn't like having them there. The skaters would stay until 11 o'clock at night. Even though they cleaned up after themselves, even though they didn't make a lot of noise, and even though there was some amount of supervision, they kept getting kicked out. They talked about these experiences in the first interview I did with them. Issues of class and race came out as well. Their determination to keep going also began to take form and is captured in this early video.

BT: *The next section shows them going outside their community to skate in other parts of the city.*

VC: Not having any skate park in the neighborhood and wanting something more, they would go to different parts of the city where they could skate—public spaces with good steps and rails—at the Brooklyn Banks or Stuyvesant Rail. This part of the book shows them taking the subway to Mullaly Skate Park in the Bronx. Mullolly has big ramps, big rails, and big spires. They could skate as though they were professional skaters. It's right next to Yankee Stadium—very visible, a bit different from this neighborhood.

BT: *You didn't just photograph the group skating. You also spent other times with them and attended some of their social events.*

VC: Yes, there's a section in the book that establishes the boys' relationships with their girlfriends. One image from a birthday party is of two guys watching two girls—one guy is whispering something into the ear of his friend. The photograph shows the separation of the sexes, and how they are socialized into the dating scene, into the relationship scene; it also shows a little bit of their immaturity. The sixteenth

birthday is very important, especially for girls. It comes from the Hispanic tradition of the *quince años* or fifteenth year, but here in the Southside it's been adapted to the American tradition of the Sweet Sixteen party. Even the guys have similar rituals that they go through.

BT: *There are two sixteenth birthday parties shown in the book. One is "sweet," but the other seems a more ominous rite of passage.*

VC: Right, two different parties. The first one is Johnny's. He was a friend of the skaters but not a rollerblader himself. The picture was taken in a church basement, where the walls were all pasted up with images of Johnny from his birth to the present, a big, traditional Sweet Sixteen celebration. Whereas the party for Juanito was just a group of guys getting together in Uly's small bedroom, drinking and smoking pot. At the stroke of midnight they started going through this ritual they call "ghetto birthday punches." Very different celebrations.

There are other paradoxes. There's an image of a girl named Sugeiry who was not part of the rollerbladers' group but lives in the neighborhood. She's standing with "Scarface," and she's touching his face with a switchblade. There's a very thin line between tenderness and violence in the neighborhood. The book takes the reader back and forth between these opposites, mimicking the gentleness and harshness that exist in the culture of the neighborhood.

The rollerbladers didn't want to get involved with violence or drugs—and really the violence comes from the drugs. There are neighborhood memorials made by the friends and families of the people who've died. Most of them were young people, anywhere from fifteen to twenty-four

years old, who died typically for one of three reasons: fighting over drug money and drug territory, arguing over girlfriends, or as a result of family arguments.

BT: *You say the rollerbladers weren't involved with all that, yet a number of your photographs seem purposely ambiguous on that issue.*

VC: That ambiguity is important. There's a photograph where two of the bladders, Jamie and Stephen are actually putting a stereo *into* their car, but it's ambiguous, some may perceive it as stealing the radio. There's another image that shows a skater doing a "Misty"—skating up a platform or a ramp and doing a flip at the highest point-after smoking a blunt. (Sometimes it's a 360-degree flip, sometimes a 480 flip.) Adrian in mid-air in the picture is important because it conveys freedom and suspension and risk. It's symbolic of a certain suspension in the lives of kids in the neighborhood. You know, at that age, in adolescence, nothing is really clear or definite.

BT: *Richie really changed his life. For me, his leaving home, growing into a man, and starting a family define the main "plot action" and make him the book's protagonist. He's also the one who gets to live out his dream of making a living through his love of skating.*

VC: Richie and Pam met at a national skate competition. Pam moved to Brooklyn around 1999 to be with him, and she became pregnant in early 2000. They then moved to the town in Ohio where Pam grew up. They had the baby there because they thought it would be a better place to raise a child. In 2001 they got married. In the book, there's a picture that Richie and Pam write on—a picture of their baby shower. Richie relates

how he has come full circle. He's moved away and talks about missing his friends, about his memories of hanging out with them, about learning to rollerblade and building the skate parks. More importantly, he knows that he can't go back, that he has to leave the Southside to achieve what he wants. His neighborhood, his family, and friends will always remain in his heart. This feeling goes back to the first image he wrote on. Richie later moved to California, where he and his wife run an X-treme sports camp.

BT: *What happened to Uly?*

VC: Uly moved to Florida, moved back to the Southside and then kept going back and forth to Florida trying to establish himself. He joined the army and is stationed at Hunter air Force Base in Savannah after completing basic training. He unit was stationed in Iraq last year and returned just before Christmas 2003. He speaks about his experiences in the army and his anticipation and reflections on going to Iraq towards the end of the book.

Uly and Richie give an idea of the different paths that people can take and yet end up in the same place—adulthood. Richie getting married and Uly joining the army are two ways to make that transition successfully.

Another blader who appears in the book and on the video is Mike Ruiz. He ended up living here in the Southside. He didn't move away like Uly and Richie. Mike really wanted to make something out of rollerblading. He wasn't as good as Richie (Richie was the one who really shone) but Mike had something else—determination and passion, and the dream of making films—his own films—about rollerblading. I think a lot of his passion

came from using my video camera. Whenever I gave the bladers my camera, it was usually Mike who took it. Some of Mike's (and Richie's) photos and video stills are in the book, and footage he shot appears in the video on this DVD.

It's not really clear what will happen to some of these kids. Some are still here; some are involved in drugs; and some have left but still have a strong connection to the neighborhood. Richie speaks about these changes in a few of the book's last pictures.

BT: *There are images in the book of neighborhood memorials to some of those kids who died from drug, family, and girlfriend-related incidents. These boys took a different path from Richie, Uly, and most of their rollerblader friends. Why did you include those photographs?*

VC: The images of the memorials are a kind of ballast. In the beginning some images give you an idea of positive aspects of the neighborhood. Then there are the memorials—a more painful reality. The pictures highlight this dichotomy in their lives, the tough circumstances they're up against.

Designing the Book and Exhibition

BT: *Once you decided on a book, how did you come to incorporate all the different media—still photos, video stills, and video?*

VC: In 2000, I had a residency at LightWork in Syracuse. That's when I started putting the pictures together in a very rough book dummy using photocopies. I realized that there needed to be more than photographs. I

wanted to build a narrative -- it became more of a story than a picture book.

I also realized that to tell the story I needed to include text and the photos the kids had written on, and I also wanted to use the video I had done. I began to capture video stills on a computer and build an archive of images that could be incorporated into the book. The idea for the DVD came later.

The emphasis on narrative affected how I went about the second step of making a book dummy. After my residency, I worked in my studio on the computer, using Quark, and I got past the limits of only using photocopies pasted in a book. That's when the whole idea really began to take form.

BT: *The layout now includes pages with ruled lines, which suggests a journal. This is a departure from your earlier concept. What inspired that?*

VC: I took my book dummy to Yolanda Cuomo**,** and she had an enormous impact on the design. One of her ideas was to use ruled pages in the color sections to give the idea of a notebook or journal because kids have these kinds of notebooks in high school. Yolanda also decided to use different types of paper for the color sections. Her decision to call attention to the shift from the black-and-white sections to color sections strengthens the differences and produces
a more dynamic design.

BT: *Let's talk about the aesthetic of the prints and the way the images*

appear in the book. One of the things that I love about your work is the richness and beauty of your prints. I wonder how you feel about that transition from the fine print to the book.

VC: I teach at Parsons School of Design. One thing I always talk to my students about is the need to think about their photographs in new ways depending on the mode of presentation. For example, when you develop a portfolio, or a set of prints for exhibition where you're putting pictures up on a wall, you have to be able to take different approaches to the sequencing and the editing. I look at the book as evolving from my images, but the book became something unto itself. In making the initial dummy, I was able to think much more deeply about the process that I went through in making the photographs and about the ideas that were most important to me. The book actually led me to reconsider the presentation of the images for exhibition.

BT: *Do you include the kids' writings in the exhibitions?*

VC: I usually don't—the shows I've had before were not large enough to do that. And the photographs that are written on are unique objects, so I found it very hard to send these photographs out to the venues where I've had shows. That's why I started thinking about digital images--scanning the original photos with writing and printing large mural digital prints. The exhibition that will coincide with the book's publication is a big, expansive show. It will have large mural prints, large digital prints, more traditional gelatin silver prints, ranging from 8x10" to 20x24", and it will have video stills as well as an edited video. I also want to use objects and the bladers' snapshots, so that's a real departure from the ways I have exhibited parts of this work

before. I see it in a much bigger framework now.

In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee says that the important things are the objects—the plates, the forks, the clothing—every item that belongs to the people depicted is important. In the exhibition of *Raised by Wolves*, Jim Goldberg and Philip Brookman incorporated objects—clothing, writing, letters, notes, and various forms of photography—so the exhibition became a visual interpretation of a book. When I started doing my book, I looked again at *Raised by Wolves*, and also at Bill Burke's *I Want to Take Picture* and *Mine Fields*, as well as some books by Larry Clark because these photographers incorporate different media and don't hold onto ideas of the preciousness of the photograph or place print quality above the importance of the image's content.

Developing a Sense of Community

BT: *One of the most important issues inherent in social documentary photography is the photographer's relationship to the subject. Are you on the inside or the outside? Are you trying to be objective or an advocate? I admire the way the book interweaves your voice (primarily through the photos) and the kids' voices, portraying very complex relationships. Did your sense of yourself as photographer, your sense of self, change over the course of the project?*

VC: I've always felt that the photographs I take will communicate why they were made and what my approach is. I didn't go in there as a missionary. I was going in there to discover something about the neighborhood I lived in and the people there.

In a very intimate project like this, one wouldn't want to be on the outside, solely an observer, so I became involved in the neighborhood on various levels. I started volunteering at an organization called Musica Against Drugs—an AIDS service organization that provides the Latino community with education, referrals, meals, and art and therapy workshops. I started teaching a photography workshop to people who were drug users; they made pictures of themselves and their families—pictures about who they were and about drug use and HIV. The workshop also incorporated writing.

BT: *It seems to me that such volunteer work, and the depth of your involvement with your subjects, may relate to your undergraduate degree, which was in Community Development. Can you tell me what that is?*

VC: Community Development at Penn State University in the early 1970's was a program geared toward radical social change. One could focus on specific types of communities; I focused on youth. I took what the department called a "practicum" (a field study or internship) working with the drug and alcohol coordinator in Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, the same county where I grew up. I evaluated drug education programs and worked in crisis intervention drop-in centers and with kids who were hanging out on the street. I also began to organize a group of kids in my hometown to start a drop-in center. I ended up doing a full year of the practicum, instead of course work, and saw the drop-in center through until it was funded by the state and someone else took over its directorship.

BT: *How did art come into your life?*

VC: From the time I was pretty young, I was interested in drawing and constructing things. I was very ill from the age of nine, and spent three years in bed and in and out of hospitals. I think it was at that time that I developed a sense of independence and risk-taking, and I also developed an interest in working with my hands, to construct things and to draw.

All through college I took non-credit drawing courses at night. In my senior year, I decided that I'd be bold enough to take a sculpture class in the art department. I enjoyed it so much I took another class the next semester. I had planned to go to law school, but by the time I graduated, I didn't want to go. I remember visiting my father in the hospital right after the commencement ceremony to show him my diploma. I remember saying, "Look, I'm not going to law school. I'm taking a job in a sculpture studio at a local college." While I studied sculpture, I became more and more interested in photography. I began to teach myself. From there, I went down to the Maryland Institute College of Art, still intending to study sculpture. By the time I arrived at MICA as a non-matriculated student, I ended up taking mostly photography classes.

BT: *Is* We Skate Hardcore *your first project to combine art with your interest in social development and the structure of social communities?*

VC: At the State University of New York at New Platz, where I did my graduate degree, I began concentrating on documentary projects and my photographs were in the social documentary tradition and reflected that aesthetic. One of my first projects was photographing men at a homeless

shelter in the nearby city of Newburg. I spent an entire semester working on this project and volunteering at the center, sometimes staying over, spending a lot of time there, and building up a body of images from my association with the homeless men. What's most important to me in my work is that whatever I do is an extension of my experience.

In a way, it’s very organic. For my thesis project at New Paltz I documented wedding rituals—these were weddings I had been invited to—looking at them almost as theater. At the time, I was reading structuralist philosophy (mostly Roland Barthes) and a lot of post-modern theory. These ideas influenced my approach to making pictures, so I didn’t consider myself a pure social documentary photographer. Four years later, the next experience that really had an impact on me was documenting what was happening in Berlin after the Wall came down in November 1989 and during Unification in late 1990. I was living in East Berlin as a squatter and was photographing other squatters, their battles with police and neo-Nazis, and the changeover from the communist regime and culture. I was documenting history and the change of a way of life.

Then I came back to New York in 1992 and worked in a gallery, not really doing much photography, trying to get established here. That’s when I started getting to know the neighborhood and began playing handball, and that’s how this project came into being.

This interview took place in the artist’s studio in Brooklyn, New York, on September 27, 2003, and lasted over three hours. The text here is a distilled, edited, and somewhat restructured version of that

conversation.