

# THE MAGAZINE



Social Documentary: The Unabridged Truth

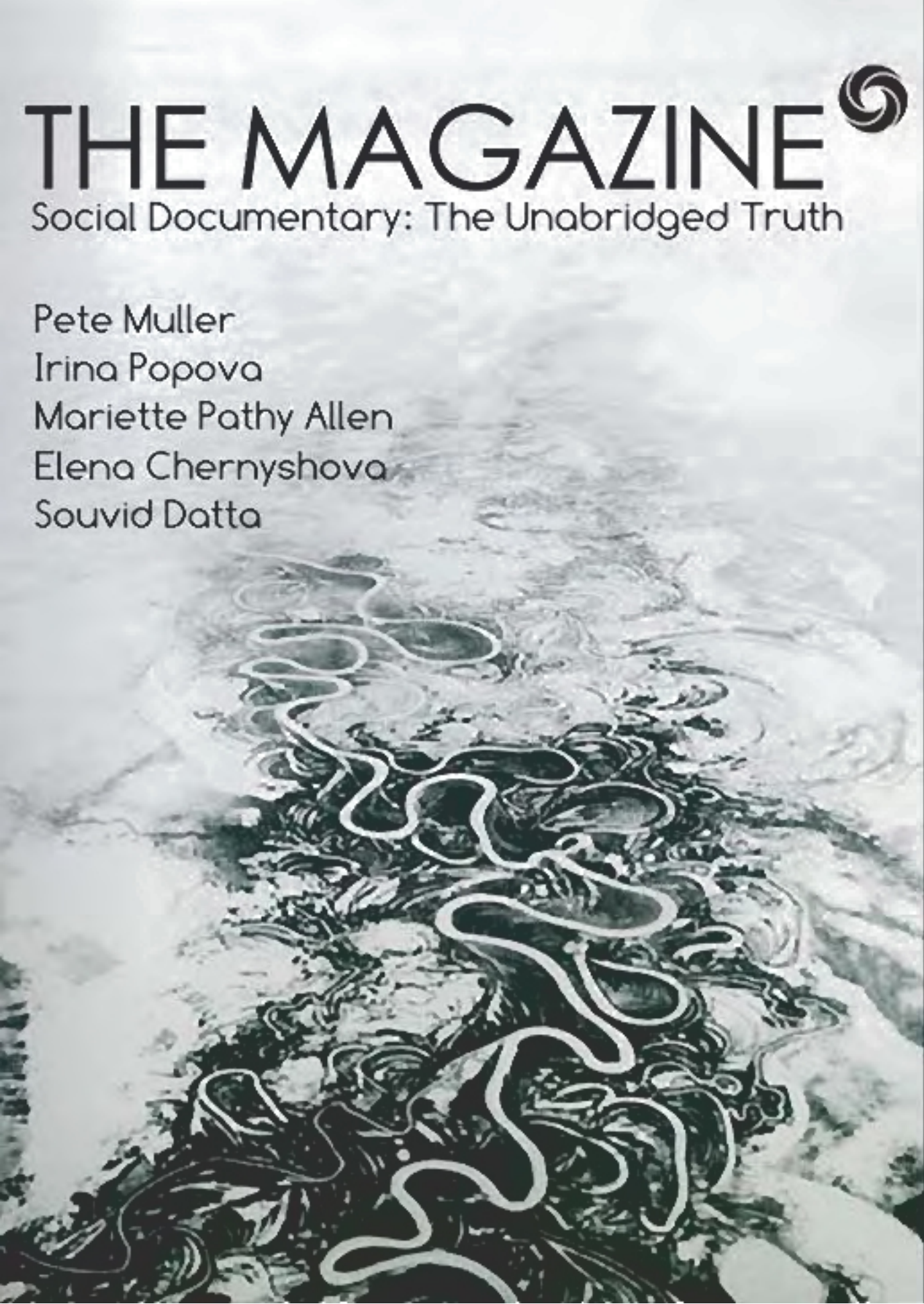
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# Mariette Pathy Allen: Three Decades of Humanising the Spectrum of Gender Roles

There's something about long form storytelling that brings a new essence to a topic - following a single subject as the world continues turning around it.

Mariette Pathy Allen is an exemplary photographer who has been rallying behind the transgender community for over 35 years. Embedding herself in the community, she not only humanised her subjects, but portrayed the shifting culture amidst the past four decades' changing social landscape. Mariette's work is driven through art, not political engagement, to portray the non-binary genders in a beautiful, natural way to face down discrimination.

Mariette followed the transgender community from the beginning when the biggest obstacle in her work was giving her subjects permission to be themselves in front of the camera. She was the first to substantially cover the

lives of transgender people and the relationships they had with others. As men of her subject had never before been photographed as their feminine selves, Mariette made every effort to make them feel as comfortable as possible - to be unafraid, experiment, and even have fun showing off.

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“They didn't really see themselves as having three dimensions, didn't understand that they had the right to take up space, to move their bodies, to

play, to discover who they were as women,” Mariette said.

The images that came from her work gave proof that they were lovable. Mariette captures her subjects in the most human way; they go about their daily lives as if the camera is simply a friend tagging along.

“I gain access because people understand that I'm on their side. I can't stay neutral. I have feelings and opinions,” said Mariette. “If people see that I'm there, over and over, they know I'm not an opportunist; they know I like being with them.”

From the very beginning, Mariette wanted to change what cisgender people think about people who are gender non-conformists. She wanted to “de-freakify,” humanise, and inspire people to free themselves from the necessity of conforming to traditional gender roles. By believing in her own work, she

inspired others to help her cause and question what gender roles are.

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Mariette was changed by her work. From early on, she felt like she was more than just a documentarian.

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“Sometimes I didn't like a particular person or [didn't like] hearing what I considered ridiculous ideas about femininity, but I also felt I was given so many gifts in the process of doing the work,” Mariette said. “I have always been a shy person, and suddenly, I learned to be a speaker. I spoke on the radio, participated in television shows, and out of need, became a writer. All of this happened because I realised that the work I was doing wasn't just about me; I was the vehicle through which this knowledge and these images could come out into the world, moving people, changing their perceptions.”



Despite aiming to stop discrimination, her work still exposes Mariette to the heartbreaks that occur. Many transgender people commit suicide, others are murdered violently. The loss of spouses, children, jobs, and homes are common occurrences. Children who don't fit gender stereotypes are beaten and bullied in school, many are homeless. There are medical problems, struggles in

prison, and ridicule to contend with. As a photographer, Mariette cannot protect them from the ridicule and discrimination they face when they come out, but she can try to help make the situation better for the future.

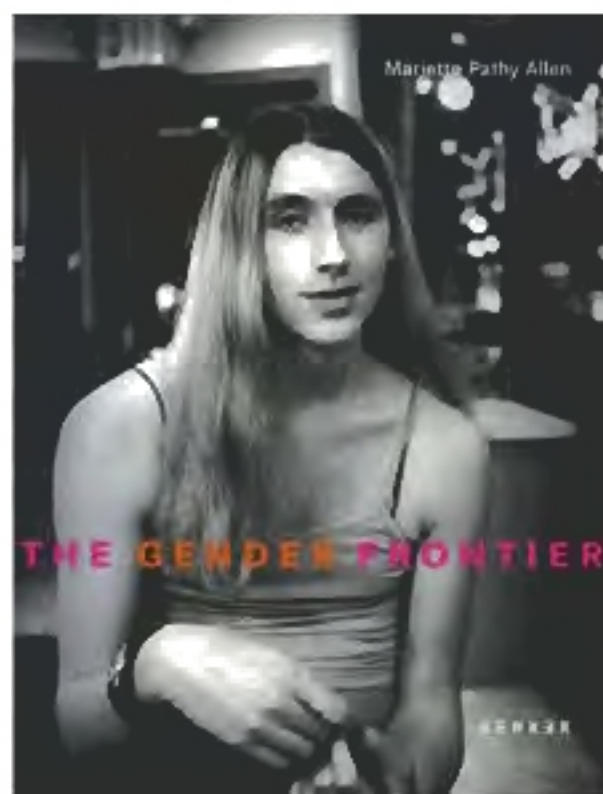
The biggest challenge to photographing the transgender community is to make sure they act solely to help her subjects better understand and accept themselves.

“Transgender people can have heightened

emotions and sometimes act in ways they might regret later. I feel I have to be more than a photographer when I am with them. Often, I have found myself in the role of counselor, or photo-therapist!” Mariette said.

While tackling these issues throughout her work, Mariette has seen many changes take place as non-binary genders have become more accepted and people have become more vocal about the cause.





In her first book, "Transformations: Crossdressers and Those Who Love Them," published in 1990, Mariette covered the early coming out and exploration of the community. The book showed mainly male-to-female crossdressers, as the female-to-male crossdressers were still closeted. This was when Mariette still had to focus on making her subjects feel comfortable as their feminine selves in front of others. non-binary gender community and others beyond the US.

Technology changed the game in gaining acceptance of the transgender community. Mariette found her work was less needed as online forums and sites connected people and information. The community began to photograph themselves and each other.

For this book, Mariette travelled to Cuba four times, spending just under two weeks each time. There she travelled with transwomen and their friends. Each time she visited them, things had changed and new stories had developed.

"People died or got sick, one person went to prison, others found new boyfriends, or broke up with the one they had," Mariette said. "Over time, they got to know me better too. I got teased, my weak spots were uncovered, I was just another character."

Now, Mariette is researching communities where gender variant people are an intrinsic part of that community. This project is in collaboration with Professor Eli Coleman, the head of the Department of Human Sexuality at the University of Minnesota. They have been to Mexico,

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Despite feeling less needed, the change allowed Mariette to look at the broader non-binary gender community and others beyond the US.

"The Gender Frontier", published in 2004, presented the political action that went from street demonstrations to lobbying Congress, and the new visibility of both female-to-males and gender non-conforming youth.

In 2014, "TransCuba" was published, which offered a new vision of transgender women in Cuba. Mariette found a parallel between the loosening grip of strict communism in the area and the lessening of gendered discrimination.

French Polynesia, Myanmar, and Thailand.

"So far, I find I'm most interested in the Spirit Mediums in Myanmar and Thailand, and may choose to do a bigger project there," Mariette said. "The greatest pleasure I've had is through the intimacy I feel and the beauty I see when I'm making a portrait and there's real collaboration. Sometimes I feel I'm looking into someone's soul, and happily forget gender issues altogether."

For more on Mariette Pathy Allen, visit her website [here](#).