

STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Dear friend,

I am writing you this book to encapsulate everything I have learned about street photography in the last 10 years. Consider this as a distillation of my own personal lessons in street photography. There are no “right” and “wrong’s” in this book. This is all just my opinion. But I hope that you will cherry-pick what resonates with you, and throw away the rest.

Ultimately, I want your street photography to be personal. For your street photos to have your soul embedded in them. It means to photograph others who you can empathize with; people who you can feel their suffering or their happiness.

Shoot with your heart, Eric

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction
- Table of contents
- Chapter 1: What is street photography?
- Chapter 2: Why shoot street photography?
 - Why do I shoot street photography?
 - Why do you shoot street photography?
- Chapter 3: The tools of street photography
- Chapter 4: How to shoot street photography
- Chapter 5: Composition
 - Simple is better
 - Remove distractions
 - Don't crop
 - Use a fixed-focal (prime) lens
 - "The decisive moment"
 - Don't just take 1-2 photos
- Chapter 6: How to choose your best street photos
 - Is this photograph personally meaningful?
 - Does the photo have emotion?
 - Does the photo have any social significance?
 - Let your photo "marinate"
- Chapter 7: How to stay inspired in street photography
 - Document your own life
 - Embrace "creative constraints"
 - Don't force it
- Conclusion

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS STREET PHOTOGRAPHY?

To start off, street photography is whatever you make of it.

There are no “right” and “wrong” definitions in street photography.

Street photography is simply the art of wandering in public places, and taking photos of whatever interests you.

You don't need to adhere yourself to any “rules.” Street photography is the most democratic form of photography— because all you need is a public place, and a camera, to document whatever you find interesting, and personally-meaningful to you.

If I could define street photography, it would simply be: “*Documenting humanity.*” “Humanity” can be defined however you want.

I document humanity by photographing people, buildings, things I find on the street, and any object that makes me feel the human condition.

I think above all, street photography is about documenting others, places, and the streets with your heart. Street photography is about having an open mind, and wandering the streets, and exploring— with no pre-conceived ideas, notions, or concepts.

I generally tend to agree that the “best” street photographs generally include people, and are candid (without permission). Because generally these photos feel more authentic, real, and “un-posed.”

However on the other hand, some of the best street photos I've seen are with permission and even sometimes without people.

What matters the most is whether I can relate to a photograph with my soul. Whether I can empathize with a subject in a photograph. Whether the photograph reminds me of my humanity.

So don't worry whether you photograph people (or buildings), whether you photograph with permission or without permission, and don't worry whether you photograph in a busy downtown area or inside a shopping mall.

Street photography is open to everyone, open to shoot anywhere, and open to your own interpretation. Don't let anyone define street photography to you. Define street photography for yourself.

CHAPTER 2: WHY SHOOT STREET PHOTOGRAPHY?

Moving on, a better question is to consider: “*Why* shoot street photography?”

Street photography is for you, if you love to explore, see the world, interact with people, are curious of strangers, and want to find some more meaning in the world as a human being.

Why do I shoot street photography?

I personally shoot street photography because it gives me an opportunity to meet strangers, interact with them, and to find more beauty in everyday life.

To me, street photography isn't pretentious. And street photography has helped me become a more confident individual.

Before shooting street photography, I was deathly afraid of photographing strangers. Now, I can do it without nervousness, fear, or anxiety. Not only that, but the more comfortable I am shooting street photography, the more comfortable I am with interacting with anybody.

Above all, the reason I am interested in street photography is that I want to connect with people. **I am less interested in making photos; I am more interested in making connections.**

I studied sociology in college, and I see street photography as “applied” sociology. Instead of having a notepad and pen, I use the camera as my sociological research tool. So in a sense, I consider myself as a “street sociologist”.

Why do you shoot street photography?

There are many different reasons why you might shoot street photography.

Perhaps street photography for you is documenting history. Perhaps shooting street photography is about exploring the world, especially when you're traveling. Perhaps street photography helps you relieve some anxiety in life, and stress from the 9-5 grind. Perhaps street photography is about visual gymnastics— you have fun arranging things in the frame, in fun and novel ways.

I know that most people have started “street photography” without even knowing what it was. Many of us have an urge to document strangers, for some strange reason.

For me, all street photographers are universally compassionate, loving, and empathetic human beings. I've never met a street photographer who is an asshole. Because if you're interested in shooting street photography, you must have a genuine interest in humanity. And it takes a unique human being to be interested in street photography.

CHAPTER 3: THE TOOLS OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

To shoot street photography, all you need is a camera. My suggestion: use the smallest, most discrete, and easy-to-use camera possible for your street photography.

That can be your smartphone, a compact camera, or a mirrorless camera. You can even use bigger cameras— DSLR's or any other bulky camera. It doesn't really matter, as long as your camera has a shutter-button.

I've personally found that the best street photography opportunities present themselves when you're paying attention. When I walk around, and have my camera in my hand, I pay more attention.

To be a better street photographer, learn how to pay better attention. That means to kill distractions.

When I am shooting street photography, I generally turn off my phone (or switch it to mute, or airplane mode). I don't listen to music. I try not to think about my personal stresses, anxieties, regrets, concerns of finances, or my future.

The secret to shooting good street photography is to empty your mind. To not think of anything. To simply connect yourself with your environment, and let the photos shoot themselves.

I see street photography as a zen-meditation practice. To be a great street photographer, you must appreciate the subtle beauty of everything around you. You need to walk slowly, and enjoy every step of the way. You need to enjoy the process of shooting street photography, and not be attached to the results.

Because in street photography, you cannot control whether you make a good photo or not. Luck plays a huge role in street photography, as any good fisherman would say. You can be the most skilled fisherman in the world, but if one day there are no fish in the lake, you won't catch any fish.

So when it comes to walking around and shooting street photography, don't expect to make any good photos. Just think to yourself, "I'm going to go on a nice walk, and bring my camera along. If I see something interesting to me, I will take some photos. If I don't see anything interesting, and don't take any photos, that is okay too."

I also have found that by putting no pressure on myself when shooting street photography, I am less stressed, less anxious, and more creative.

Above all, **street photography should be fun**. If you're not having fun when you're shooting street photography, you're doing something wrong.

You should also try to embrace "child's mind" or "beginner's mind" when you're shooting in the streets. You don't pay a kid money to play in a playground and "have fun." Similarly, your street photography should be motivated by a sense of wonderment, excitement, and fun. You shouldn't censor yourself when you're shooting on the streets. You should just wander with your camera, and put together things in the frame which you find interesting.

CHAPTER 4: HOW TO SHOOT STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

Honestly, you don't need any instruction for *how* to shoot street photography. All you need is your camera, your curiosity, and an instinct when to hit the shutter.

I don't think there are any "good" or "bad" street photos. Street photography is all subjective. What you might find interesting in street photography (from the perspective of a westerner) will be very different for what is "interesting" from the perspective of someone from the east.

We all filter reality through our own eyes, through our own perceptions, and our own tinted glasses. We will only find things "interesting" based on our own life experiences.

If you're from Tokyo, you will find yellow taxi cabs interesting in NYC. If you're from NYC, you will find the vending machines in Tokyo as interesting.

My suggestion when you're shooting street photography: **have an open mind**. Try to walk slowly, look around, and don't forget to look up and down.

When I'm shooting street photography, I generally look for emotion. I find emotion through the people in the streets. By their body language, hand-gestures, and facial expressions.

I tend to be a bit of a social critic. I am very optimistic about the world, but also very pessimistic about society. I have a great love of humanity, yet I see so many individuals oppressed by society. I feel this the most when I see people in Tokyo, squished into these subway cars, working 80 hour weeks, just in order to make a living, and not "lose face" in society.

Therefore I use my pessimistic sociological lenses to color my street photography. When I shoot street photography, my images tend to be dark, depressing, and critical. I don't do this to only show the negative side of society — I do this to shed light on social issues, and to perhaps empathize with my subjects. My biggest hope

in my street photography is to show the viewer and tell them: “Don’t be like these guys in my photos who are sad and miserable. Live a life true to yourself, full of happiness, love, and passion.”

Of course, how and why you shoot street photography is unique to you.

I also suggest to shoot street photography in a way which is personal and authentic to you.

If you consider yourself an extrovert, talk to your subjects and interact with them when photographing them.

If you consider yourself an introvert, don’t feel obliged to interact with your subjects. It might be better for you to simply observe, rather than interact.

I also feel street photography is a form of self-exploration; of figuring out who *you* are as a human being. What makes your perspective of the world unique? What is your opinion?

There is no “right” and “wrong” (in the objective sense). But there is a “right” and “wrong” for you — in terms of what works for you, and what doesn’t work for you.

So don’t study other street photographers. Only study yourself, and work hard to find out what works for *you*.

CHAPTER 5: COMPOSITION

I am obsessed with composition in street photography. I have my own personal theories, which I help can be useful to you.

Simple is better

First of all, composition is all about how you arrange a frame. What you decide to include in a photograph, and more importantly — what you decide to *exclude* from your frame.

I believe the best photos are the simplest photos. In street photography, the biggest challenge is to *reduce* complication and complexity from the frame. To make a simple street photograph is actually much more difficult than making a complicated street photograph.

Remove distractions

I personally try to remove distractions from the frame, in order to make a better composition. When I'm shooting, I am always conscious of the background of the photo, and the *edges* of the frame. I try to make the background as simple as possible, and the edges of the frame as clean as possible.

When we're shooting street photography, it is easy to get tunnel-visioned. We generally tend to look at the inner-30% of the frame. We never look at the edges of the background of the frame. This is why a lot of us tend to crop our photos afterwards; because we didn't think about the edges of the frame.

Don't crop

If you want to improve your composition and framing in street photography, my biggest tip is to **not crop**. I think cropping in itself is fine, but if you really want to make the best framing possible when you're shooting on the street— *not* cropping is the best “creative constraint” you can give yourself.

I personally used to be a crop-a-holic. I would take photos without much concern for framing, knowing that I could just “crop it later.” Yet the problem of cropping photos afterwards is that it makes you lazy when you're framing, and also it changes the perspective of your photos. If you shoot a scene with a 35mm lens, and crop the inner 50% afterwards, it won't look like it was shot with a wide-angle lens. Photos shot with a wide-angle lens (28mm-35mm) tend to feel more intimate, and less distant. The more you crop a photo, the more distant you feel from the subjects in your photos.

Use a fixed-focal (prime) lens

Furthermore, to improve your composition, I recommend using a fixed-focal (prime) lens. I think a 35mm lens is ideal for most street photographers (not too wide, or not too close). By *not* having a zoom lens, you are less distracted. By sticking with one fixed-focal prime lens for a long time, you learn how to see the world in that focal length. Therefore you know how to frame a scene before even bringing up a camera to your eye.

Personally, I've shot with a 35mm lens for almost 8 years. I know a 35mm frame like the back of my hand. Recently, I've been shooting more with a 28mm lens (with a point-and-shoot camera), as it is easier to extend your arm to frame with an LCD screen (compared to using a camera with a viewfinder, and always bringing it up to your eye).

“The decisive moment”

One of the key tips in composition is timing. When to hit the shutter.

The biggest misconception in street photography is that you only take 1-2 photos of a scene. I recommend if you see something interesting, try to take as many photos of that scene as humanly possible. There is no bravado for a “one shot, one kill” mentality in street photography. The most important thing is to capture a meaningful, interesting, or emotional moment— and to share that moment with others.

Don't just take 1-2 photos

Often when it comes to shooting street photography, I don't know what the best moment will be, until I start clicking.

For example, I might see an interesting person or a scene. I try to take as many photos as possible, from different angles, perspectives, and with different timing. Then when I go home, I look at all the photos I shot of the scene (sometimes up to 50 photos of the same scene), and then decide the best photo or moment afterwards.

Also realize that when you see something interesting, there can be a lot of potentially great “decisive moments.” Don't just limit yourself to 1-2 photos. Keep “working the scene”, and use your judgement and gut to choose the best photo of the scene.

CHAPTER 6: HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR BEST STREET PHOTOS

One of the most challenging things in street photography is knowing which photos to keep (and which to ditch).

Here are some practical suggestions in terms of knowing how to choose your “best” street photographs:

Is this photograph personally meaningful?

First of all, think about the personal significance of your photo. Do you really care about the photo? Does the photograph say something about you, and how you see the world?

If you don't love your own photograph, nobody else will.

Because the sad reality is nobody cares about your photos, but you.

As photographers, we make the wrong assumption that everyone else will be as enthusiastic about our own photos (as much as we are). A good example: when parents upload photos of their kids to Facebook, they assume everyone else will think their children are beautiful (not true).

Our photos are our babies. We think all of our children and photos are beautiful, no matter how ugly.

Ultimately you should shoot street photography for yourself. Don't shoot street photography to impress or please anybody else.

Does the photo have emotion?

I feel that the best street photographs are the ones which have emotion. The best street photographs are the ones in which you can empathize with the subject in your frame.

A photograph without emotion is dead. If your photograph doesn't have any emotion, it will be easily forgettable. And if you want to create an interesting and memorable photo, you need to tug at the heart-strings of your viewer.

I generally can see whether a photograph has emotions or not based on the body language, the hand gestures, or the facial expression of a subject in a photo. If you have a street photograph where your subject isn't expressive or doing anything — it probably won't evoke much emotions.

Does the photo have any social significance?

Another thing to consider— does this street photograph have any social significance? Does it say anything about the human condition? Does the photo have any social commentary or critique? Is it a historical document? Does the photograph matter on a larger scale?

Let your photo “marinate”

The last tip in terms of choosing your best street photographs is to let time be the ultimate counselor. For me, I never know which are my best street photographs unless I have let them sit and “marinate” for weeks, months, and sometimes even years.

I am often too emotionally attached to street photographs (where I know the backstory).

I do believe a street photograph should be able to stand on its own two legs. It shouldn't need an elaborate backstory or description for it to be a good image.

So when in doubt, let your photos sit. Re-visit the photo every few days or few weeks. Print them out, or keep them on your smartphone, laptop, or tablet. Ask others for their honest opinion.

Another tip, when you want honest feedback, show your photos to other photographers you trust and admire and ask them: “Please help me kill my babies.”

CHAPTER 7: HOW TO STAY INSPIRED IN STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

This happens to everyone — we will eventually lose steam, enthusiasm, or passion in our street photography.

A lot of us who live in the suburbs, or any other place where it is difficult to shoot “street photography” will find this as a challenge.

Document your own life

The biggest tip I would give is to remind yourself, it doesn’t have to be “street photography.” Just live your life, and document your own life.

Photograph your children, co-workers, friends, and family. Photograph trees, things you find on the ground, and anything that piques your interest.

Often whenever you define yourself within a sub-genre of photography, you become trapped. You become a prisoner.

I know that when I overly identified as a “street photographer”, it hurt me creatively. When I wasn’t shooting “street photography”, I felt like a phony.

But remember— the point of life isn’t to be a great “street photographer” or even a “photographer.” The point of life is to live a fulfilling, exciting, and personally-meaningful life. Whether or not you make photos is irrelevant.

But in terms of practical tips to stay inspired in your street photography, here are some suggestions:

Embrace “creative constraints”

The biggest mistake we think in street photography is that if we want to make better street photos — we need to be in a more “exotic” or “interesting” city. We think we could make better street photos in Tokyo, NYC, or LA. But in reality, every street photographer I’ve met have a hard time being inspired in their own city (even in Tokyo, NYC, and LA).

Therefore choose your geographic location as a “creative constraint.” Give yourself an assignment that you’re only allowed to shoot street photography in your own city, and you’re not allowed to leave.

Find a certain neighborhood, city block, or area you find interesting in your own city. Then for a month, only shoot that area. This will force you to be creative within your boundaries and limits.

Furthermore, another good way to re-inspire yourself in street photography is to use the simplest camera possible — in most cases, a smartphone.

A lot of us think that if we only bought a new camera, lens, or piece of equipment — we would be “re-inspired.” But rather, try to constrain yourself to a “worse” camera. For an entire month, only shoot street photography on your smartphone. I know for me, this helped liberate me, and helped me realize that it wasn’t my own equipment limiting me in street photography — it was my own mindset.

Don’t force it

I also think that creative slumps are good for us. If you aren’t feeling “inspired” in your street photography, take a break. Put down your camera. Pick up a different hobby. Perhaps read more, write more, or reflect more. Listen to more music, watch some theater, or pick up dancing, sculpture, painting, or drawing.

Once again, the point of life isn't to be a great photographer. It is to be an enthusiastic artist of life. Why limit yourself to just photography?

I also think that boredom is good for us — it forces us to try out new things, to innovate, and to find more excitement in life. So if you're bored in your street photography— switch things up. Try only shooting black and white for a year, or only color for a year. Try to only photograph one subject matter, or pursue a new photography project. Often small day trips outside of your city are a good way to refresh your enthusiasm for your own city. I know whenever my friends visit my city, I feel re-inspired (because they see your city with new eyes, rather than your own jaded eyes).

CONCLUSION

Know that your skill as a photographer doesn't matter. First aim to be a curious, interested, and compassionate human being. Photography comes later. The happier you are, the better your photos will be. The more curious you are, the more enthusiastic you will be with your photography.

Have fun, be like a child in your photography, and never stop exploring.

Always, Eric