

**THE ART OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY**

**Eric Kim**

# THE ART OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

Dear friend,

I wanted to write you a letter on the art of street photography, based on my personal experiences, my personal passion, and things I've learned along the way:

## 1. Street photography is more than photos

First of all, I think street photography is not just taking photos. Rather, it is a lifestyle. It is a way of seeing the world, of appreciating the beauty in the mundane, and a way of finding more peace, tranquility, and zen in your life.

I discovered street photography by accident. I started off shooting landscapes and architecture, but I just started getting bored. I wanted to take my photography to the next level, and I found that I was always more interested in photos with people.

I then started to add people into my landscape photos. And they were more interesting.

Yet they still felt distant— I wanted to get closer to my subjects.

I then started to switch up my style, focusing less on the Henri Cartier-Bresson 'decisive moment' type of photography, and shooting more 'street portraits.' I craved to get closer to my subjects, not only physically, but emotionally.

My personal is that of an extreme extrovert. I find energy when interacting with others. For me, street photography was an excuse for me to talk to strangers, hear their life story, and open up my heart to them (and have them open up their heart to me).

I have so much to be grateful for street photography. It helped me be less prejudiced towards others, it helped me open up my mind to the cultures of others, and it helped me find more contentment in my life.

The thing I loved most about street photography is how democratic it was. Street photography didn't require a fancy camera. In fact, it was better to use a smaller, simpler, more 'lo-fi' camera. Grit and grain was beautiful.

## **2. Minimalism in street photography**

Through street photography, I also discovered minimalism. That less was more. That having more was less.

For example, I've experimented with so many different cameras and lenses over the years. Ultimately I discovered that the smaller, more compact, and the lighter (and cheaper) the camera— the better. The smaller my camera, the more likely I was to fit it in my front pocket, and always have it ready to shoot 'decisive moments.' The lighter my camera, the longer I could walk and shoot street photography without fatigue. The smaller and less obtrusive the camera, the more I could actually focus on living— rather than just taking photos. Not only that, but the simpler the camera, the less 'friction' I had in shooting street photos, and the more generic the camera looked— the less intimidated my subjects were.

## **3. Street photography has helped me become a better person**

Street photography was also a practical way of me overcoming my fears of strangers, and my fears in life.

Street photography has helped me become a lot more courageous, by forcing me to step outside of my comfort zone, by taking photos that scared me, and by pushing my limits to the next level. I tried to constantly challenge myself in street photography — trying out different techniques (shooting with wider lenses, getting closer, 'working the scene', as well as using a flash, and creating more complex compositions). Not only that, but street photography realize that often the scariest looking people were the nicest people. Some of the nicest people I've met on the street had face tattoos, and looked like gang members. Street photography let me realize: "Don't judge a book by its cover."

#### **4. Discover yourself through street photography**

Street photography also taught me the value of experimentation. I used to think there was only one 'right' way to shoot street photography (like Henri Cartier-Bresson, not talking to my subjects, looking invisible, being creepy, etc). However in reality, I realized that street photography was a personal pursuit for me — and I had to discover how street photography worked for me, not others.

I experimented much in street photography: shooting candidly, with permission, without permission, with different focal lengths (200mm, 50mm, 35mm, 28mm, 24mm) and with different approaches. I would sometimes wait for my subject to enter my frame and take a photo (the 'fishing' technique), and other times I would be more like a hunter on the streets (hunting for 'decisive moments') and being more aggressive.

By experimenting, I realized that most of my fears in street photography were silly. I used to be frightened when strangers would make eye contact with me, and perhaps give me a dirty look. Now, I no longer have any awkward feelings making eye contact with strangers. I don't have fears of making myself look like a fool or idiot.

#### **5. Small forward progress in your street photography**

I think that one of the best things that has helped me in street photography was mastering the art of small talk. I think that small talk is often necessary to 'grease the grooves' of meeting a stranger, before you can talk about deeper subjects.

We've all had that situation, when we always go to the same coffee shop, or stand in an elevator with a stranger. Whenever I feel awkward around strangers, I always try to break the ice and say: "Hello" and ask simple subjects like the weather, how their day is going, etc. Once I open up my mouth, the other person often gets excited, and it breaks the ice.

I can allude this approach to the art of taking 'small steps' in your street photography, or 'small photos'. You often have to take a few photos to get the engine going.

When I first hit the streets to shoot street photography, I am like a car that hasn't been turned on for a while. I need to turn on my engine, and I have to let my engine warm up. Then I perform far better shooting on the streets— with less hesitation, and with more personal confidence.

So when you're starting shooting in the streets, start off by warming up by taking a few small photos. The point of the photos isn't to make good photos, but to have you warm up your fingers, to prepare yourself to shoot street photography.

## **6. Turn off your brain when you're shooting street photography**

I think street photography is an art— both in terms of *how* you shoot, *how* you walk the streets, and also *how* the photos look.

For example, I like to see street photography as walking meditation. Shooting street photography is taking a tranquil walk, camera-in-hand, enjoying the city around you, the people around you, and feeling the pavement under your feet with each step.

Not only that, but when I'm shooting street photography, I like to empty my mind. I turn off my phone, I don't listen to music, or listen to podcasts. I try to empty my mind as much as possible, so I can let my environment soak into my mind. This helps me become more sensitive around my environment, and spot more potentially good 'decisive moments' in street photography.

What I am seeking is to be in the 'zone' in street photography — when I lose consciousness of my body and mind. When the camera becomes an extension of my body, and I just take photos instinctually, from the gut, without thinking.

Essentially you don't want to think when you're shooting street photography. Turn off your brain when you're shooting, and only use your brain when you go home and choose your best photos. Even the poet Horace encouraged his friend to *not* think when writing poetry — because an individual can't do two things at once.

## **7. Street photography is subtraction**

I think the best street photos are the simplest ones. As a street photographer, think of yourself as a sculptor. You're trying to chip away the clutter of reality, and to find the beauty that remains.

The biggest problem we have in our street photos is that there is too much clutter and noise. Therefore, the viewer has no idea what to look in our photos.

The best street photos are the simple ones. And to make a photo simple is more difficult than making a complicated photo.

But a simple photo can often be emotionally complex. Compositionally, you might only have one subject, but the photo might have many different interpretations, and complexity of the soul in the photo.

When in doubt when shooting in the streets, subtract.

## **8. Shoot the streets with your soul**

What we're lacking in our street photography is shooting with our soul. Shooting with every fibre of our being. To insert our souls into our photos.

I think the best compliment that you can tell a photographer is this:

*I can see your soul in your photos.*

When I look at street photographers I admire, I can see who they are as humans (just by looking at their photos). When I look at the photos of Daido Moriyama, I can get his sense of loss, melancholy, and nostalgia. When I look at the photos of my friend Josh White, I also can feel a sense of longing, and of hope. When I look at the street photos of my friend Junku Nishimura, I see his personal past and history, filtered through the grain of his black and white Tri-X film, pushed to 1600.

When you take a photo of a stranger, you're really taking a photo of yourself.

We all see the world filtered through our own lenses. Through our own perspective.

For example, I might walk down the same street as you, yet we might see totally different things. I might be drawn to the more depressing and isolated individuals, whereas you might be drawn to more joyful and happy individuals. This is because I am generally a social critic and cynic, and I often see more gloom than happiness in the streets.

But there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to see the world. You just see the world that you do. And it is your duty as a street photographer to show *your* personal vision and interpretation of the streets with your viewers.

## **9. Composition in street photography**

One of the best ways to judge the compositions of your street photos *after* you've shot them is this: look at them as small thumbnails.

This is a technique that Henri Cartier-Bresson did. He looked at photos as small thumbnails or 'contact sheets' — in order to judge the compositions. He would flip the images upside down as well, to make them not look like photos but just forms and shapes.

We can also do the same digitally — flipping our photos upside down, making them small thumbnails, or taking a step back from our screens— to judge the compositions of our photos.

I have a practice of looking at my photos as small thumbnails, because it helps me judge the compositions — in terms of if I have dynamic diagonal lines in a photo, if I have a simple and clear subject, or if the light in the photos look good.

Not only that, but when I'm judging my photos, I follow my gut. I only choose photos that I feel a visceral, and emotional reaction. If my photos don't stir my heart, I know they have no soul, and there probably won't be any emotion conveyed to the viewer.

## **10. Let the photos come to you**

One of the things that changed in my street photography is this: I no longer “hunt” for street photos anymore. Rather, I keep my mind open, and I let the street photo opportunities come to me.

For example, when I go out to shoot ‘street photography’ — I just go on a walk. I spend too much time sitting at cafes or at home, so I like to go on walks with my camera in-hand.

I will enjoy my walk, and if I see anything interesting, I will take a photo of it. If I go an entire walk and don’t see anything interesting, that is okay.

Therefore I don’t tell myself that I’m going to go out and shoot street photography anymore. I treat it like ‘taking my camera on a walk’ — just how you would take your dog for a walk.

So there are different ways you can incorporate this in your street photography.

First of all, just try to walk more. And whenever you go on a walk, always make it a practice of having your camera in your hand (via wrist strap), around your neck, and ready to shoot. You don’t even need to use a fancy camera, just use your smartphone.

Secondly, you want to eliminate all sources of distractions. Personally, I spend too much time looking at my phone. When I look at my photos, I don’t look around at my environment. Therefore I miss out on potentially good street photos. This especially happens when I’m riding the bus, or on the subway. Therefore if you want to shoot more street photos, turn off your phone.

Thirdly, I no longer call my street photography ‘street photography’ — I just call it taking photos. This way, I don’t close off good potential photo opportunities. Personally, when I was too caught up on the definition of ‘street photography’ — it paralyzed me. I wouldn’t take photos of things I found interesting, because I told myself: “But this isn’t street photography.” No definitions. Just follow your gut, and photograph anything in public that interests you.

## **11. Each photo should be self-contained**



I believe that a good street photograph should be able to stand on both its legs, without being in the context of being in a project, without needing a long caption, or without putting a white border around it.

I think that the best street photos are the ones that have a strong composition and strong soul. A composition that is simple, not too cluttered, and dynamic. A soul that pours out emotions, through hand-gestures, body language, through the light, or anything that evokes a feeling in your heart.

I think the best analogy I would give in street photography is this: try to make each street photograph into a perfect pearl. Then to make a project in your street photography, just 'string your pearls' together (I learned this analogy from a writer, I forget who).

## **12. Make each street photograph you share a little better**

A suggestion when it comes to sharing your street photos with others: **try to make each new street photograph you share a little better than ones you've shared in the past.**

That doesn't mean that every time you click the shutter, you will make a better photograph. I've found for myself personally, the more experienced I've got in street photography, the harder it is for me to make a good street photograph that pleases me.

But at the same time, it isn't the quantity of street photos you make, it is the quality.

For example, if you can make at least 3 good street photos before you've died, you've done a damn good job.

If you can make 1 good street photograph a month, you're doing well. If you can make 1 personally-meaningful street photograph once a year, you're also doing very well.

For example, as I write these lines (Feb 2017) I've lived in Hanoi for about 4 months. I've only shot 2 street photographs in Hanoi that I'm proud of. But I think these photos are damn good (by my own standards). So that is a good street photograph every 2 months.

The same happens in my writing— I try to make each new essay, letter, or book a little bit better than what I've published in the past. I try to aim for 1% improvement for each iteration.

Treat your street photos the same way — make sure that each street photograph you share or upload is 1% better than your older street photographs.

Think about it, if you make constant 1% progress, consider how great your gains will be in the course of weeks, months, years, decades, and your entire lifetime.

### **13. Don't eat before shooting street photography**

There is this common misconception that we need to eat in order to have “energy” or “fuel” before doing any sort of physical exercise.

The misconception is this: we think that the human body is like a gas tank for a car. We need to fill the gas tank, in order for the car to run.

But in reality, our human biology is far more complex. We don't need to eat in order to have energy. In-fact, I am convinced that we have *more* energy when we are hungry. Because hunger motivates movement.

Think about it this way: a lion doesn't eat a granola bar before hunting a gazelle. Rather, the lion harnesses its hunger in order to hunt, and to capture the gazelle, and *then* it will eat as a reward.

I treat the same in my personal life. If I want to get good writing done, I know I cannot eat *before* I write. I can only eat *after* I've written something. It trains my body and mind the following: you will eat as a reward *after* you've written something.

The same goes in my photography. When I am physically hungry, I am more alert, just like a predator. I walk longer, with less fatigue. I am like hunting for food, so I have heightened awareness of my environment around myself.

Whenever I try to take photos after I've eaten, I feel sluggish, slow, and want to take a nap. Think about lions once again — after they've hunted and killed a gazelle, and feasted, they take a nice nap.

As humans, our biology is the same as most other animals.

So practical tip: if you want to be a more keen street photographer, don't eat before you shoot. And if you're lacking inspiration, drink coffee before shooting (espresso and street photography go hand-in-hand).

## **14. How to make artistic street photographs**

I feel that in order to make more artistic street photographs, we should look at more great art.

Don't limit yourself to just photos. Consume the best art from history. Consume inspiration from the great sculptures from antiquity, from great renaissance art, from the surrealists and the impressionists, great poetry from Horace and Ovid, the stories of Homer and Virgil, the works of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

Study lines, forms, geometry, shapes, angles, colors, light and dark, hues, repetition and rhythm in art, contrast, and figure-to-ground.

Study how great painters arrange their paintings, in terms of where they paint their subjects. Where their subjects are located. Does the eyes of the subjects in a painting look directly at you, or away?

I find great inspiration from minimalist Zen art. I also find inspiration from typography, fashion, hip hop music, interior design, and any source of aesthetics that appeal to me.

To be an artist is to create something while imbuing your soul into it. The art you create can be anything. No art is 'good' or 'bad' — but there is certainly art which is personal and un-personal.

To make great art in your street photography is to integrate everything you know about beautiful aesthetics into your images. And also one of the most important things in street photography is to select your best work.

## **15. How to choose your best street photos**

Time is your best counselor when choosing your best street photos.

So my suggestion is this: sit on your photos for a long time before deciding whether you like them or not.

Another suggestion: your photos should either be a 'fuck yes' if you think they're good or not. If your personal response to your photo is a luke-warm 'it is okay' — it isn't a good photo.

Therefore, trust your intuition and your heart when judging your street photographs — but also combine it with time.

For example, when I look at my photos, I will make a quick selection of my favorites, and then save them. I will wait a week or so before looking at them again. And often after about a week, I get a more objective sense whether the photo is good or not.

For me, I am only interested in my street photos that tugs at my heart strings. I only choose my street photos that gives me a sense of awe, a sense of beauty, or a punch-in-the-chest. By sitting on my photos (sometimes a few months, or a year) — I look at my photos like someone else shot them. And it is always easier to judge the photos of others, than judging your own photos.

## **16. Your street photos are poems**

*"A picture is a poem without words." - Horace*

The poet Horace once said that a picture is a poem without words.

I love to think the same of photos — make your street photos poetic.

Poetry is the best when it is spare, when it flows, when it is personal, and when it has the soul of the poet imbued in it.

Treat your street photos the same: only share your best street photos, make your street photos elegant (according to your own vision), and make your street photography autobiographical.

## **17. Street photography is always a work in progress**

I've learned and grown as a street photographer, by learning from the masters of street photography, and through practicing.

A lot of my personal life philosophies have been informed from street photography. I learn from the streets. I learn by roaming the streets, by taking photos, by sharing them, and by meeting other street photographers.

Realize your street photography is always a work in progress. You will never reach perfection in your street photography. But always aim for forward progress, and one day you will become a master in street photography.

Always, Eric

Learn more: [Street Photography 101 >](#)