

Street Photography Aphorisms, Heuristics, and Sayings

by Eric Kim

Life/Philosophy:

- Shoot as if each day were your last.
- “Taking pictures is savouring life intensely, every hundredth of a second.” - Marc Riboud
- “Taking photographs is a way of shouting, or freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one’s own originality. It is a way of life.” - Henri Cartier-Bresson
- Discovering your style in photography is discovering what interests you in life.
- Don’t be so hard on yourself: Remember: photography should be fun.
- Photography is about the way you look at things, not the way things look.
- “The camera gives you a reason (purpose) to be in a place and to take pictures.” - Eleanor Owen
- It is really complicated to make a photograph simple.

Overcoming your fear of shooting street photography:

- When in doubt, say “hello”.
- The best way to conquer your fear of shooting street photography: ask yourself what the realistic worst case scenario is.
- The fear of rejection in street photography is often worse than the rejection itself.
- Approaching a stranger to take his or her photo is like approaching someone at a bar. The moment you hesitate to approach them, you won't talk to that person. The same goes for street photography.
- Often shooting multiple subjects will lead to fewer confrontations.
- With physical proximity comes emotional proximity.
- Whenever I'm scared to shoot a street photo I remind myself: this isn't war photography.
- When taking a photo of a stranger, a smile goes a long way.
- Street photography wouldn't be fun (or challenging) if it weren't so scary.
- Whenever I am afraid to take a photograph– that is when I must take the photograph.

Creativity/Inspiration:

- Creativity is all about constraints.
- Having fewer options in photography makes you more creative (think of the benefits of shooting with a prime lens).
- Hunger breeds sophistication.

- Don't feel fooled that traveling somewhere exotic will help your photography if you are stuck in a creative rut. The best place to shoot is your own backyard.
- A tip to become a better photographer: take a photo of something boring and make it look interesting. (inspired by Martin Parr)
- The more unpopular, boring, and uninteresting your neighborhood, the better. This will make your work all the more original!
- "You need a change of soul rather than a change of climate" - Seneca
- We shouldn't praise the great photographers that came before us as our masters and follow them blindly, but consider them our guides.
- To find things more interesting in your everyday life, imagine you were an alien viewing your life from the outside.
- "Never have I found the limits of the photographic potential. Every horizon, upon being reached, reveals another beckoning in the distance. Always, I am on the threshold." - W. Eugene Smith
- A case for having a day job and working on your photography as a passion: "Be regular and ordinary in your bourgeoisie life so you can be violent and original in your work" - Flaubert
- Buying a new camera format (35mm, medium-format, TLR, DSLR) won't make you a better photographer, but it will change the way you shoot.
- To break the rules in photography, you first must know the rules.

Motivation:

- Never be discouraged when missing "the Decisive moment." realize there are millions of Decisive moments happening every second all around the world.

- Going out to take photos is a lot like going to the gym. The hardest part is leaving your house. Once you're there, you are glad that you went. (Also a benefit of having a "gym buddy" or a "photo buddy" to keep you inspired and active).
- To stay motivated to shoot, you need to have a deep sense of purpose *why* you're out shooting. Without a deeper calling, you won't have that burning passion.
- "Photography depends on the three p's: passion, persistence, and patience." - Bruce Davidson
- "What move those of genius, what inspires their work is not new ideas, but their obsession with the idea that what has already been said is still not enough." – Eugène Delacroix, painter.
- Don't wait for inspiration before you shoot. Shoot then find inspiration.
- If you wait to feel "inspired" before shooting, you will never go out and shoot.
- Going out to shoot is like going to the gym; leaving is always the hardest part. But at the end, you're always glad that you went.
- If you could never share any of your photos with anybody else, would you still take photos?

Aesthetics:

- Just learned that musicians often add a "warming filter" to their music, like how photographers add grain to a photo after.
- All photography is subjective. After all, you decide what to include in the frame and what not to include in the frame.
- Shooting film isn't so much about the end result, but the process

that makes it wonderful.

- “Art is the objectification of feeling.” - Herman Melville
- “I make the kinds of pictures that I like to look at.” - Harry Callahan
- “Grain is the brush stroke of photography.”- Constantine Manos
- Looking at great photography is like doing “visual push-ups” –they keep you fit and healthy. (credit Jay Maisel)
- The importance of consuming great photographs: you are what you eat.
- I think grainy street photos are more aesthetically appealing than super-sharp street photos.
- I hate bokeh in street photography.
- HDR’ing your photos are equivalent like adding massive amounts of MSG to all of your food (it is hazardous to your health).
- Post processing to a photograph is a lot like salt to food. A dash of salt will make a dish taste better, but too much salt will make you want to throw it away.

When shooting on the streets:

- “When in doubt, click.” - Charlie Kirk
- Knowing what not to photograph is more important than knowing what to photograph.
- What you decide to include in the frame is more important than what you decide to exclude from the frame.
- “Shoot with your gut, and edit with your brain.” - Anders Petersen
- Filter out the noise in the streets, and seek the signal.
- In street photography, it is often better to find an interesting background and wait for people to enter then shoot (than vice

versa).

- “Killers shoot twice.” (The importance of taking more than one photo per scene) - Thomas Leuthard
- “We get tunnel vision when photographing, so pay attention to the edges. The inside tends to take care of itself!” -Richard Bram
- Constantine Manos tip: Use the top of cars as a color wall to fill the bottom of a frame to simplify your photos.
- It is logical to always have a camera with you; you have limited downside, which is a little bit added weight in your bag. But unlimited upside, you can capture an incredible image or moment.
- The best street photography opportunities always appear when you leave your camera at home.
- It is better to make a “not to shoot” list rather than making a “shooting list”.
- I often take my best shots when I don’t try to make good shots.
- Whenever you find anything remotely interesting, just shoot it. You can always edit it out later.
- The best photos shoot themselves.
- How to make a good photo: simply don’t include everything in the frame that isn’t interesting.
- The more bad photos you take, the more likely you are to take a few good ones.
- It is better to take a bad photo than no photo at all.
- Don’t just take photos; make photos.
- You can only control the effort you put into shooting, not the results. (inspired by Ryan Holiday)
- Don’t just create photos. Create meaning.
- I’ve taken some of my most “interesting” photos in the most boring places, and some of my most boring photos in the most “interesting” places.

- One of the biggest benefits of shooting film; the prevention of chimping and forced application of letting yourself sit on your photos for a long time before judging them.
- There is a difference between “taking” a photo versus “making” a photo
- Shooting from the hip is like texting over dinner. Not as personal.
- When you have your camera around your neck or in your hand, you will see more photo opportunities.
- Only shoot what you find “interesting”, rather than what you think others will find “interesting”.
- Street photographers tend to warp reality, while documentary and photojournalist photographers try to show "reality.”
- Photograph others how you would like to be photographed.
- “You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.” - Wayne Gretzky
- Shoot the opposite direction tourists shoot.
- There are only two things you can control in street photography: where to stand and when to click the shutter. (via David Hurn)
- The common mistake most street photographers make: only taking one photograph of a scene. Instead, try to shoot as many photos of a scene as humanly possible.

Photography books:

- Buy books, not gear.
- Heuristic: don’t buy a photography book unless you plan to read it more than once.
- It is better to show off your book collection than your gear collection.

- There is a difference between looking at photo books and reading photo books. One is to just see; the other is to analyze.

Equipment:

- Do not judge a photographer by how many cameras he or she owns, but by how many photography books he or she owns
- Realize a digital camera is a computer. How often do you have to upgrade or replace your computer?
- On wanting less: “It is not the man who has too little who is poor, but the one who hankers after more.”
- Never buy a camera thinking it is “the last camera I will buy.”
- If you need more than one reason to buy a new camera don’t buy it. That is just your mind trying to justify making a purchase you don’t really need. (credit Nassim Taleb)
- A good way to appreciate the gear you own: imagine how you would feel if you lost it all or if it were stolen from you. What regrets would you have? (It is like the overwhelming joy of recovering a lost wallet, or realizing that the wallet you thought you lost, wasn’t truly lost)
- Realize that any digital camera you buy today will be “outdated” in two years. Film cameras will never become “outdated” in the same sense (because they already are and forever will be). It is like the difference between buying a new BMW M3 and a classic Mustang from the 70s.
- Money buys you happiness only when you buy experiences, not physical things. A \$1000 trip will bring you more happiness (and better photos) than a new \$1000 camera.
- The best camera bag is no camera bag.

- It is important to own more than one knife if you are a chef. But do you really need two, three, or four knives to fillet a fish?
- The bigger your camera, the less likely you are to carry it with you, and the less likely you are to shoot photographs.
- Don't judge a photographer on the quality of their camera, but the quality of their images.
- A simple rule of thumb to reduce the amount of gear you own: if you haven't used a camera or lens for more than 6 months, either sell it or give it away. It will liberate you.
- The more time you spend on gear-oriented websites, the less motivated you will be to shoot with the gear you already own.
- A good way to overcome GAS: instead of reading gear reviews of cameras you want, read old reviews of the camera you already own and be grateful.
- Whenever you want to buy a new camera remind yourself: photographers a century ago would die to have what camera you shoot with today.
- Nobody on their deathbed ever regrets not having obtained more cameras; but I'm sure they may regret not having obtained more photos.
- A good rule of thumb to get rid of cameras you don't use (or "need"): think of the camera you use 80% of the time, and get rid of the rest.
- Realize some of the best street photos taken in history were at ISO 25 (or slower). You don't need a camera with clean ISO 64,000.
- Never fully trust a camera review unless the photographer has bought the camera with his/her own money.
- Do we own our gear or does our gear own us?
- Desire the cameras you already own.
- A strategy to avoid the lust for new gear: install a website blocker for gear review and rumor sites, and don't hang out with gear heads.

- If you are torn between buying two different cameras, don't buy either. (via Nassim Taleb)
- No camera is "forever".
- Just as buying a new exercise machine won't make you any fitter, buying a new camera won't make you a better photographer.
- Realize that buying a camera double the price of your current camera won't double your skills or happiness in photography.
- Don't worry about how sharp your lenses are. Nobody looks at a Henri Cartier-Bresson photo and says: "Wow that's sharp!" (In fact, many are quite soft— but still great)
- I often find the more obsessed a photographer is with cameras, the more insecure they are about their photography.
- Shooting film won't make you a better photographer, but it will make you a more disciplined photographer.
- Digital cameras are like smartphones: it is hard to own one for longer than a year without upgrading.
- "If your photos aren't good enough, your camera isn't expensive enough" - (joke, via Charlie Kirk)
- Adding your camera equipment info in a photo is the equivalent to a cook telling you which knives or pots he used to cook a meal.
- What is the most important gear in street photography? A good pair of shoes. (Matt Stuart)
- The question isn't *if* your hard drive will crash; the question is *when* will your hard drive crash.

Success:

- To double your success rate in street photography, double your

failure rate.

- Street photography is all about luck. But the more you shoot, the luckier you will get.
- It is impossible to please everyone with your photos.
- How to fail as a photographer: try to please everyone with your photos.
- I don't know the secret to success as a photographer, but I know the secret of failure as a photographer is trying to please everybody.
(credit to Bill Cosby)
- A precondition to becoming a great photographer is by avoiding looking at bad work.
- To measure your success as a photographer, count the number of critics you have.
- "Seek to please many, and you will seek a failure."
- "To depend on another's nod for a livelihood is a sad destiny."
- How to be successful as a photographer: don't compare yourself with anybody else (but yourself).
- Do you really want to be the best photographer in the world before you die? Or do you just want to enjoy the process?
- It is better to have people ferociously hate your photos than to mildly like your photos.
- Once people start hating your photos, you know you've made it.
- If you get one good street photograph a month, you are doing well.
- You can't control whether people like your shots or not. But you can control what you shoot, how to shoot, and which images to publish.

Definitions:

- I find it ironic that purists of street photography claim that street photographers should shoot like Henri Cartier-Bresson, when he never even called himself a “street photographer.”
- Don’t worry about the definition of street photography. Remember, Henri Cartier-Bresson never even called himself a “street photographer.”
- Don’t ask if your photo is a “street photograph” or not. Ask if it is a meaningful photograph.

Feedback/critique:

- Don’t take negative criticism seriously from photographers whose work you don’t admire.
- Critique the work of others how you would like your work to be critiqued.
- When people say “nice shot” on social media, what they are really saying is, “Please look at my photos, like them, and follow me.”
- Heuristic: try to give someone at least four sentences of feedback or critique (or don’t leave one at all).
- One in-person critique is worth more than a hundred online critiques.
- Don’t take critique from anonymous people online without seeing their work.
- Often the most critical photographers are the ones that are the most critical of their own work.
- You don’t need to be the best photographer to be the best critic (think about sports team coaches). But then again, not everyone is a good critic (or coach).

- Don't trust photographers' opinions of your work (without looking at their work).
- A harsh critique is better than a pat on the back.
- Never half ass the comments or critiques you give other photographers; always full-ass it.
- There will always be someone who hates your photos, if you love them.
- One in-depth comment or critique on my photograph is more meaningful than getting hundreds of "likes" or "favorites".
- Realize that when people criticize your photos, they aren't criticizing you as a human being. Separate your ego from your photos.
- In photography you have two choices: to be judged or ignored. You can only choose one. (inspired by Seth Godin)
- Don't leave home without your portfolio (either in your phone, tablet, as small prints). You never know whom you might meet.
- It is more useful to ask people what they don't like about your shots, rather than asking them what they like about your shots.
- How people react to your photos is a reflection of them.

Editing:

- Let your photos marinate like a good steak or a fine wine. Would you serve your guests frozen meat or have them drink wine without letting it breathe? Don't serve your audience photos that you haven't sat on for a long time.
- Your portfolio is only as strong as your weakest photo.
- The photos you decide not to show are more important than the photos you decide to show.

- A good photo asks more questions than provides answers.
- When editing your work, remember that you must kill your babies.
- Editing tip: When in doubt, ditch.
- Putting a weak photo in your portfolio is equivalent to putting in a red sweater in a laundry machine full of white clothes.
- Even a mediocre photographer can look like a decent photographer if he/she refuses to share their bad photos.
- Don't upload photos without getting a second opinion.

Fame:

- It's better to have a small and dedicated following than a large and somewhat interested following.
- It's better to have a lot of people really hate your work and a few people to really love your work.
- Don't worry about the number of followers, favorites, views, or likes you have on social media. "Only the poor man counts his flock" - Seneca
- Don't worry if your photos aren't being exhibited in famous places all around the wall. At the end of the day, an exhibition is only photos hung on a wall.
- Social media fame is a fruitless thing to chase after; will it really matter 100 years from now that you had a million followers on Facebook, Twitter, or Flickr? Will these networks still be around then? I highly doubt it.
- The importance of publishing a book of your work: will your Flickr Pro account still be around after you die?
- Rather than creating photos to please your audience, find an

audience that will be pleased by your photos.

- Do you shoot to please yourself, or to please others?
- Realize photography isn't a competitive sport: It isn't a numbers or a zero-sum game.

Happiness:

- The only key to happiness and satisfaction as a photographer is to not have your happiness depend on others. This means don't let the amount of favorites or likes dictate how you feel about your own photos. In the end, you should aim to please yourself, and not others.
- What I value most about street photography isn't the photos I take, but the incredible people I meet which I value the most.
- Giving away your cameras will bring you more pleasure than selling them.
- How to never be disappointed when shooting street photography: never expect to make good photographs.
- Photographers often think that owning more gear will make them happier. Rarely do they think that owning less gear will make them happier.
- The secret to happiness? Buy experiences, not gear. You can always lose the gear (sell it, trade it, get it stolen) but memories from experiences will forever stay with you.
- Enjoy the present moment when you photograph in the streets, and remember to shoot only to impress yourself.
- The amount of followers, likes, favorites, views, you get is just like money– there is never enough.

- The journey in street photography is the reward.