

LEARN  
FROM THE  
MASTERS OF  
PHOTO  
GRAPHY

ERIC KIM



1

## ALFRED STIEGLITZ

If you went to art or photography school, you definitely know about Alfred Stieglitz—the photographer, editor, curator, and promoter of photography. During his time in the early days of photography, photography wasn't taken as a serious “art.” It was looked down on by others.

Stieglitz put his entire life on the line to help promote photography. He innovated with his photo publication: “Camera Work” and helped build a community of photography enthusiasts.

Modern photography might not be around if it weren't for him. What are some practical lessons we can learn from him? This is what I learned from him — and what you can learn for yourself:

## 1. Shoot how it feels

“I go out into the world with my camera and come across something that excites me emotionally, spiritually or aesthetically. I see the image in my mind's eye. I make the photograph and print it as the equivalent of what I saw and felt.”  
- Alfred Stieglitz

Alfred Stieglitz was really big into the idea of “pre-visualization” — meaning, you would pre-visualize your photograph in your mind before shooting it. Then after you made a photo of a scene, you would print it how you pre-visualized it in your mind.

**Assignment: Photograph what excites you**

How do you know what to photograph? Shoot what excites you. Shoot only when you feel moved— mentally, visually, or spiritually.

Also before you take a photo, pre-visualize it. Imagine what you want the final product to look like. Then after shooting your photo, post-process to express your creative vision.

## 2. Express your aesthetic feelings through your photography

During the time of Alfred Stieglitz, photography wasn't seen as a real “art.” The snobs of the time looked down at photography.

Therefore many photographers during the time would try to make photos look like paintings— to have it taken more “seriously.”

Alfred Stieglitz made this bold claim in saying that photography wasn't art — but neither was anything else. Rather, Stieglitz was more interested in self-expression, not art. He states below:

"Photography is not an art. Neither is painting, nor sculpture, literature or music. They are only different media for the individual to express his aesthetic

feelings... You do not have to be a painter or a sculptor to be an artist. You may be a shoemaker. You may be creative as such. And, if so, you are a greater artist than the majority of the painters whose work is shown in the art galleries of today." - Alfred Stieglitz

### **Assignment: Express yourself**

What do your photos say about you? Why do you make photos? What are you trying to say about the world? What is unique about your perspective?

Don't think about your photography as "art" — only your subjective vision and interpretation of the world.

Express yourself through your images.

## **3. Find freedom through your camera**

Sometime in late 1892, Alfred Stieglitz bought his first "handheld" camera (a 4x5 large-format film camera). This "handheld" camera liberated him (compared to shooting a heavy, bulky, and large 8x10 plate film camera). Dur-

ing his time, the only way to shoot was to use a tripod.

When he had his new "portable" 4x5 camera— Stieglitz found much more freedom in his photography. He was able to wander the streets, and make photos hand-held (a revolution at the time). He used this camera to make two of his most famous images: "Winter, Fifth Avenue" and "The Terminal."

### **Assignment: Use the lightest camera possible**

Funny— we look at a 4x5 camera and it is huge, heavy, and bulky by modern standards.

I feel that photography is the most liberating when we use the smallest, most compact, and light camera.

If you find yourself a slave to your camera (because it is too big, bulky, or heavy) — try to use the smallest and lightest camera possible. That might mean buying a point-and-shoot camera, or just shooting with your smartphone.

Stick with that camera for a month. See if you end up carrying it around with



you more. If you take more photos. If you feel more liberated, and feel more creative.

## 4. Utopia is now

Today's society and world is amazing. We have phenomenal digital cameras with amazing capabilities, to shoot in near-dark situations. We have the internet to publish our photos instantly, for potentially millions of people to see. We have all the digital tools at our disposal to give us great freedom in photography. Yet we still complain.

Alfred Stieglitz was a great proponent of his time for the modern day:

"I have always been a great believer in today. Most people live either in the past or in the future, so that they really never live at all. So many people are busy worrying about the future of art or society, they have no time to preserve what is. Utopia is in the moment. Not in some future time, some other place, but in the here and now, or else it is nowhere." - Alfred Stieglitz

Why do we complain about today? We are currently living in utopia. We have more money than ever, more physical security, fewer diseases, longer living expectancies, and the best technology known to man.

Utopia is right now. The camera you currently own is perfect, and would have amazed anyone from 20 years ago.

**Assignment: Don't romanticize the past, or wait for the future**

You have everything you need right now to succeed as a photographer. You don't need a new camera, a new phone, or any new devices. You have access to everything.

Don't romanticize the past and wish you lived in the 1920s and photographed people in top hats (photographers from the past saw that as boring). Don't wish you lived in the future, with some futuristic camera.

Make the best of today. Because the photos you take today will be the history of tomorrow.

## 5. Create new meanings through your photographs

The reason why I find photography so fun is because we can be creative and create new meanings through our photos. We decide what to include and what not to include in the frame. By including certain elements in our frame, we can create new meanings from reality:

“For that is the power of the camera: seize the familiar and give it new meanings, a special significance by the mark of a personality.” – Alfred Stieglitz

### **Assignment: Create extraordinary photos out of ordinary scenes**

How can you find what is familiar to you, and give it a new meaning? How can you imbue a scene with your own soul, to give it your own personality?

No matter where we live, everything is boring and cliché to us. But our job of a photographer is to take what is familiar— and make it extraordinary.

For a week— shift your mindset. Try to make the most extraordinary photos out of the ordinary scenes of your life.

Another strategy: imagine if you were a tourist in your own town. What would you find interesting? What would you photograph?

## 6. Make your photos look like photos

In the time of Alfred Stieglitz, photographers were obsessed with making their photos look like paintings, and other forms of “real art.”

Stieglitz proposed something else: make your photos look like photos:

“My aim is increasingly to make my photographs look so much like photographs [rather than paintings, etchings, etc.] that unless one has eyes and sees, they won’t be seen – and still everyone will never forget having once looked at them.” – Alfred Stieglitz

A lot of photographers during the time of Stieglitz used fancy techniques and methods to blur their photos, obscure them, and make them look more like paintings or conceptual art. Stieglitz encouraged many photographers to have pride in their work:

“Photographers must learn not to be ashamed to have their photographs look like photographs.” – Alfred Stieglitz

Stieglitz also believed that it was fine to post-process your work — but not so much that it would ruin the quality of the photo:

“I do not object to retouching, dodging, or accentuation as long as they do not interfere with the natural qualities of photographic technique.” – Alfred Stieglitz

Not only that, but during Stieglitz’s time — many photographers would argue about what photography was and what it wasn’t. What I love about Alfred Stieglitz is that he was more inclusive than exclusive. He realized that photography meant something different for everyone. He believed in having many different schools, approaches, and methods of shooting photography:

“There are many schools of painting. Why should there not be many schools of photographic art? There is hardly a right and a wrong in these matters, but there is truth, and that should

form the basis of all works of art.” – Alfred Stieglitz

**Assignment: Don’t call your photos art**

As an experiment, change your mindset— don’t think of your photos as “art” — just think of them as photos.

This way you will revel in your ability as a photographer to make photos that look like photos. This will liberate you, encourage you to be more creative with your photography, and not get trapped into any sort of artistic dogma.

## 7. Be an amateur

Why is it that being called an amateur is an insult? In reality, to be an amateur means to do something we love:

“Let me here call attention to one of the most universally popular mistakes that have to do with photography – that of classing supposedly excellent work as professional, and using the term amateur to convey the idea of immature productions and to excuse atrociously poor photographs. As a matter of fact nearly all the greatest work is being, and has al-

ways been done, by those who are following photography for the love of it, and not merely for financial reasons. As the name implies, an amateur is one who works for love; and viewed in this light the incorrectness of the popular classification is readily apparent.” – Alfred Stieglitz

Just because you are a professional doesn't mean you're a good photographer. You can take cliché photos of children at a mall, and make a living from it— yet all the photos aren't very interesting.

Just because you're a hobbyist, amateur, or dilettante in photography doesn't mean you're a bad photographer. Some of the best artists in history didn't make any money from their art.

**Assignment: Remain an amateur forever**

Do you love photography? Then you're an amateur. Don't worry whether or not you make money from your photography.

Just focus on making the best possible photos that you can. Focus on ex-

pressing yourself through your photos. And stay humble and passionate your entire life.

Revel in being an amateur; and call yourself an “amateur” proudly.

## 8. Remain a child

“The great geniuses are those who have kept their childlike spirit and have added to it breadth of vision and experience.” – Alfred Stieglitz

Children are all born as artists, and have a creative vision. They aren't trapped by rules, dogma, and restrictions. They don't follow social norms, and just follow their hearts.

The older we get, the more our inner-child dies (or gets beaten out of us by our parents, our teachers, and other adults).

**Assignment: Childlike curiosity + adult experiences**

How can you keep your childlike spirit your entire life? And how can you combine it with your adult experiences? This is the secret to life-long creativity, joy, and happiness.



Challenge conventions. Don't listen to the rules. Figure out the "truth" for yourself. Experiment, have fun, and don't treat photography like work.

Use your adult-eye to discern your best images, to edit your work, and to publish your work.

Never lose your child-like spirit.

## Conclusion

Studying the work and life of Alfred Stieglitz makes me so much more grateful for modern photography. We now do live in a generation and time where photography is treated as a real "art". Not only that, but we have all the tools necessary to liberate ourselves, and to self-express ourselves.

Let us complain as little as possible, make the best photos given our circumstances in life, and help drive the genre of photography forward.



2

## ALEC SOTH

Alec Soth is a photographer whose work I strongly admire. He is a member of Magnum, although he is not the typical "Magnum" photographer. He is generally identified in the "fine art"/documentary crowd-- and certainly isn't considered a "street photographer." However his philosophies in photography and the way he interacts and photographs his subjects in an empathetic way really helps me connect with him (in street photography).

In this article I want to share some things how Alec Soth has inspired me-- both in terms of a human being and as a street photographer:

# 1. On Titles

Alec Soth is a project-based photographer, meaning that he doesn't simply go out and shoot single images to upload to Flickr or Facebook. He generally goes out with concepts in his mind in terms of what to photograph. And of course he modifies his projects as he shoots.

One of the things I love most about Alec Soth is how poetic he is-- both in terms of his writing, his photography, and the way he talks about his work.

One of my most prized books from Alec Soth is "From Here to there: Alec Soth's America." In the book, he has a compilation of images from his most renowned projects--while inserting commentary on photography which is from his old Archived Blog.

In one of the sections in the book (also can be seen on his blog) -- is about the importance of titles for him:

"Men might think about sex every seven seconds, but I think about project titles. There is no greater pleasure than

lying on the couch, closing my eyes, and daydreaming about the perfect title.

Alec Soth also teaches photography, and one of the things he advises his students is to at least have a "working title" when it comes to working on a project:

"Titles are important. When I review student work, one of the first questions I ask is "what is the title?" More often than not I'm met with no answer. This is remarkable. I'd have a hard time getting started on anything without having some sort of working title."

Alec Soth continues by sharing how viewers perceive a project differently based on the title:

"Titles are important. They affect the way people read the work. Take Nan Goldin's "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency." The title is so urgent and unexpected. Imagine if the book was just called "Downtown." I doubt we'd think of the book in the same way."

Soth also shares the dangers of having "bad" or boring titles:

"It's a shame when a great book gets a bad name. One of my favorites of the last few years was Jem Southam's "Landscape Stories." The title is generic and lifeless-- just the opposite of his sensual and complicated pictures. (I much prefer the title of Southam's latest book, "The Painter's Pool")."

But at the end of the day, Soth would still prefer a more interesting title (than a lifeless one):

"Sometimes photographers get corny. David Heath's "Dialogue With Solitude" is an example. But I'd rather have a corny title than a boring one. I'm a sucker for DeCarava's "Sweet Flypaper of Life."

Soth also suggests that sometimes photographers don't need to have the fanciest titles though to best describe their work:

"I'm not suggesting that a title needs to be wordy and poetic. One of the most memorable titles is Winogrand's "Women are Beautiful." It's so dumb that it is smart. It sticks. This brings to mind Malcom Gladwell's book: "The Tipping

Point." He offers up some good advice for those of us daydreaming about titles:

'The hard part of communication is often figuring out how to make sure a message doesn't go in one ear and out the other. Stickiness means that a message makes an impact. You can't get it out of your head. It sticks in your memory...'

### **Takeaway point:**

I think generally in the realm of street photography, most of us are focused on single-images rather than working on projects. When I started street photography-- I was this way. I would go out everyday to "hunt" for the perfect "decisive moment." When I would get a shot that I liked, I would immediately rush home, post-process it, and upload it to social media, waiting to get lots of favorites, likes, and comments.

However over time, I have started working on projects that are much more meaningful to me. I am still not the best at titling my work -- as they tend to be generic like: "Suits", "Colors", "Downtown LA in Color". I think I need to



make more interesting and emotionally stirring titles like: "Dark Skies Over Tokyo" or "The City of Angels."

Regardless, I think that we should try to title projects we are working on. By titling a project, it gives us better clarity and direction in our work. When making a title, it can either be descriptive in terms of a place or a location. Or it can be more open-ended in terms of a project that is more poetic.

Alec Soth has some lovely titles in his work-- which are short, poetic, and not overly cheesy:

- Broken Manual
- The Last Days of W
- Paris / Minnesota
- Dog Days, Botoga
- NIAGARA
- Sleeping by the Mississippi
- Looking for Love

At the end of the day, coming up with a title is more like poetry than mathematics. Everyone has their own tastes when it comes to titles. But at the

end of the day, I think titling our work is better than not titling our work (even though it may be cheesy).

## 2. On overcoming the fear of shooting strangers

One of the biggest roadblocks many street photographers face (myself included) is getting over the fear of photographing strangers. It can be very nerve-racking-- to step outside of your comfort zone and interact with a complete stranger.

Many photos by Alec Soth include portraits. Portraits of people on the streets, in their homes, or even naked in motel rooms (like in his work in NIAGARA).

When I first saw Soth's images-- I assumed that he was the type of person who was completely fearless around strangers. But I found out that wasn't necessarily the case. Soth shares how he overcame his fear of photographing people:

"I started out with kids because that was less threatening. I eventually

worked my way up to every type of person. At first, I trembled every time I took a picture. My confidence grew, but it took a long time. I still get nervous today. When I shoot assignments I'm notorious amongst my assistants for sweating. It's very embarrassing. I did a picture for the *The New Yorker* recently and I was drenched in sweat by the end and it was the middle of winter."

### **Takeaway point:**

Even the most experienced photographers in the world (like Alec Soth) still have fear when photographing strangers. To build your confidence in photography also takes a long time-- and is a constant uphill battle.

I would say personally when I first started to shoot street photography, I was petrified. Even when making eye contact with a stranger would send cold chills going up my spine-- and cause me to sweat profusely.

However over time, as I practiced more and started to talk to more strangers-- this fear started to slowly go away. And now for the most part I don't have

that much fear when shooting in the streets. But there are still instances where I hesitate to take a photograph because I'm worried about how people may respond.

So know that overcoming your fear of shooting street photography is a slow process-- but slowly and surely, you will build your confidence over time.

## 3. On photo books

Alec Soth is a huge advocate of photography books. In-fact, he started a small enterprise he calls "Little Brown Mushroom" -- where he collaborates with other photographers and artists and publishes limited-run books and magazines.

In an interview, Soth shares some of his thoughts on photography books:

Miki Johnson: What do you think photo books will look like in 10 years?

Soth: While most print media is dying, the photo book is going through a renaissance. I can only hope the vibrancy and appreciation of this medium will increase. If we're lucky, maybe by 2020 The

New York Times Book Review will give photobooks the same attention they give, say, graphic novels.

Nowadays digital books (on iPads, etc) are becoming more popular. Soth shares his thoughts on digital vs physical books as well:

Johnson: Will they be digital or physical?

Soth: They'll be physical in my house. But then I'm getting old.

Johnson: Open-source or proprietary?

Um, really old.

Johnson: Will they be read on a Kindle or an iPhone?

Soth: I suppose, whatever. But there will also be physical books. All I care about is physical books. When I'm not making them, I'm buying them. I have zero interest in making or buying a digital book. That said, I am truly excited about the potential of new media for photographers. I'm currently experimenting with online audio slide shows and the like. But I see this as a new medium, not

a book. For me, a book is a physical object.

At the end of the day, Soth is only really interested in physical books-- but he still sees the merit in digital avenues of presenting work. Soth also shares some of his thoughts on the democratization of making books through self-publishing:

"Part of the photobook renaissance has to do with the increased ease of DIY printing and distribution. Just as musicians no longer require professional studios to cut an album, photographers have the ability to make their own books. Lately I've been dipping my toes in these waters. One of the things I've learned is that the options are really vast. New technology will only offer more options. But I should be clear that this doesn't make publishers obsolete. Gerhard Steidl has devoted his life to learning the craft of bookmaking. I'll never compete with that."

Soth also shares how nobody really knows what makes a great book. It is something you just work hard towards,

and sometimes with enough effort and luck-- magic happens:

"My aim is to try to make a great book. That's what I want to do. And what does that mean? I have no idea what a great book is. What I do know is that it isn't a formula. It's like a great album, maybe the band has to spend three years in the studio doing it or maybe it's live in one take over a weekend. Knowing it's not a formula, I know that I have to keep shaking these up, so I do something fast, then do something that takes years, trying different things. Do the stuff where I work alone, do the stuff where I work collaboratively. Sometimes it will fall flat, but hopefully magic will strike at some point."

When it comes to books versus exhibitions, Soth prefers books as well (due to the sense of control you have):

"I'm a project-based photographer; I think in narrative terms, the way a writer thinks of a book, or a filmmaker a film. The thing about a book is that you can control the entire shape of it, unlike an exhibition where the parameters al-

ways change; you might have three rooms in one and one room in the next."

### **Takeaway point:**

I have invested in many photo books the last few years, and they have been the most instrumental part of helping me learn more about photography. Even though I do love the democracy of digital books (on the iPad and such)-- at the end of the day, nothing beats a physical book.

A physical book is beautiful because it exists. You can hold it in your hands. You can lend it to a friend. You can sit down and relax on your couch with a nice coffee or a glass of wine, and leisurely look through images. When it comes to looking at photos on a computer, it doesn't have the same charm.

I am a huge fan of self-publishing, especially companies like Blurb and Magcloud. In the past there were so many gate-keepers which prevented photographers from publishing their work in book format, but now the only thing that is stopping us is our own imagination.



If you have never created a book, I highly recommend you to aim towards working on a book. And even though Blurb isn't as good quality as a traditional publisher, it is still a beautiful manifestation of your work-- in a form that exists in a physical form.

## 4. Can photos tell stories?

What I think makes a memorable photograph is an image that "tells a story." An image that makes you imagine what is happening behind-the-scenes, and causes you to interact with it.

However Soth doesn't buy this argument. He doesn't believe that a single image can tell a story. And with this I agree-- Soth says you need multiple images to tell a story. Stories need a beginning, a middle, and an end. A single image cannot show that. Soth shares some more thoughts on this problem:

"Richard Woodward pointed me to the brewing controversy surrounding this 9/11 picture by Thomas Hoepker of Magnum. The controversy was triggered by this Frank Rich editorial. I emailed Thomas to get his opinion. He said he is

giving it time (wise) and will probably write something for Slate.

For me this just reveals, once again, the biggest problem with photography. Photographs aren't good at telling stories. Stories require a beginning, middle and end. They require the progression of time. Photographs stop time. They are frozen. Mute. As viewers of the picture, we have no idea what those people on the waterfront are talking about.

However Soth does bring up the point that while photographs can't tell stories-- they are great at "suggesting" stories:

"So what are photographs good at? While they can't tell stories, they are brilliant at suggesting stories. Photographs are successful in advertising because they help suggest that if we buy X we will have the perfect lifestyle. And photographs are successful as propaganda because they can function as proof for whatever agenda someone wants to suggest.

Soth concludes by sharing how a single photograph can't provide enough context to show the real story behind an im-

age. He refers to the controversial 9/11 picture by Thomas Hoepker:

"I have no idea what is going on in that picture. And I'm pretty suspicious of anyone using it as proof of anything. You can't tell provide context in 1/500th of a second."

### **Takeaway point:**

Photography is a very powerful, but limited medium. I love the power of single images-- how they can surprise, impress, and create a sense of wonderment. Steve McCurry and Elliott Erwitt have more or less built their career on single images-- so I don't think that shooting single images is a "bad" thing.

However what Soth reminds me is the importance of working on projects. While a single image can provide a nice "suggestion" of a story-- a project with multiple images and a beginning, middle, and an end will have much more powerful and context.

## **5. On using an 8x10 camera**

Alec Soth is not only famous for his projects, but the fact that he uses a

large-format 8x10 camera to photograph his subjects. Many fine-art photographers have utilized 8x10 cameras in history-- and Soth shares why he decided on using such a big and cumbersome camera in his work:

"For the record, I don't always use this camera. But my two published books, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* and *NIAGARA* were indeed produced with an 8×10. At one point I looked at the photographers I loved and there happened to be an unusual number who use this format (Nicholas Nixon, Sally Mann, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, Roger Merten, Joel Meyerowitz). Since it worked for all of these people I figured it was worth a try. And as it turns out there is something special about the format. Beyond the resolution and tonal purity of the negative, the 300mm lens renders the world in a really unique way. But what I really love is the viewing process. The image on the ground glass is just so beautiful. While the format is pretty impractical, I don't know if I'll ever be able to give up on the view."

However Alec Soth doesn't only shoot with an 8x10 camera, but he is often pigeon-holed by others as thinking that his camera defines his work. Alec Soth gave a talk in Detroit last year, and one of the points he brought up was quite interesting.

He talked about how he didn't want to only shoot with an 8x10 for his projects. He shared how he has used different formats, like medium-format, and digital as well. He used the analogy of wanting to be like a movie director: to have the freedom to use different equipment for different movies.

### **Takeaway point:**

I think different photographic projects work better with other types of equipment. For example, if you are shooting mostly landscapes-- it might be better to have a camera with more detail and resolution. However when photographing on the street, generally having small, quick, and nimble cameras generally work better.

However it is important for us to not let our equipment define us and our

photography. I cringe whenever I see some photographers self-describe themselves as "Leica photographers." I think this is as silly as people to describe themselves as "Whole food shoppers" or "Fiji water drinkers." We should let our photography define ourselves, not the tools we use.

I think we should also have the freedom to experiment with our equipment and not only feel we have to shoot in one format (film vs digital) or either black and white vs color. But I still think there needs to be some consistency with the format and equipment when working on a certain project. But when working on different projects, I recommend trying to use different equipment (if you feel the need to be).

For example, for my "Suits" and "Colors" project I am shooting it all exclusively on Kodak Portra 400 film with a 35mm focal length on my Leica MP. But for my black & white documentary work, I prefer to work in digital with a Ricoh GRD V (like in my Gallo boxing series).

## **6. On shooting everyday**

One of the things I encourage most street photographers to do is to always carry your camera with you, and to shoot everyday.

However Alec Soth doesn't agree. He doesn't shoot everyday-- and likens photography more to film-making:

"I don't come close to shooting every day. For better or worse, I don't carry a camera with me everywhere I go. I liken my process to that of filmmaking. First I conceive of the idea. Then I do pre-production and fundraising. Then shooting. Then editing. Then distribution (books and galleries). As with most filmmakers, the shooting takes just a fraction of my time."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think that at the end of the day, I think it is a good practice to try to carry your camera with you everywhere you go, and try to take photographs everyday. I think this is good advice especially for those of us who can't find enough time to take photographs.

However Alec Soth is coming from a project-based approach, in which he uses

his camera to put together books and bodies of work. In that case, carrying a camera with you everywhere you go may not really make sense-- because you should only be photographing your project (and not get distracted by other things).

I think the main takeaway point is that depending on your goals in your photography-- location and context matter. Meaning, if you are just a hobbyist trying to find enough time to take photos-- take your camera with you everywhere you go and try to take as many shots as you can. But if you are working on a project, try not to be too distracted by photographing too many things-- which may not have cohesion and consistency in your work.

## **7. Do the work**

I think many of us have a "dream project" or some photographic concept we would like to pursue. We may have all of these plans, but none of those plans really matter until we actually do the work-- and photograph.



Alec Soth is a pragmatist in the sense that he believes the same things. Rather than just thinking of projects, we just need to go out and do it.

Soth brings up the issue that many young photographers try too much to promote themselves and their work, without having a substantial body of work yet:

"Now I'm in the position where I see a lot of young photographers pushing their work, and I think that's fine, but so often it's wasted effort before the work is ready. Everyone's running around trying to promote themselves, and you kinda have to put in those years of hard work to make something decent before you do that. Particularly that first project is the hardest thing. I always say the 20s are the hardest decade because you don't have money and you don't have a reputation. In relation to this kind of issue, I'm always wary that the advice is like "you need to put together this promo package that you send out to these 100 people." No, you need to do the work, and worry about that later."

Furthermore, sometimes we can let work and monetary constraints be excuses to prevent us from working on our photographic projects. Sometimes we are also unsure about our projects-- in terms of what direction they will take us, or how they will end up. Soth once again comes to the rescue by sharing his experiences balancing working and pursuing his personal project (*Sleeping by the Mississippi*, his first published work):

"I went shooting every weekend, more or less. In the beginning, for example, coming out of school I didn't know how to photograph other people. I was a super shy person so I was terrified, but I knew that I had to learn how to do that, so I just went out practicing, essentially. At that time, when I was working those jobs, it was really an unhappy time. My job was terrible, the first job. Then I'm going out and taking these pictures which I know are not a real project—it's like, not great work, just practice. I shot black and white because I could print black and white at work. You figure out stuff like that—it's maybe not ideally

what you would be doing, but those limitations have benefits as well.

### **Takeaway point:**

There are never perfect conditions for you to work on your project. We will always make excuses that we are too busy, our job prevents us from working on it, or that we don't have the right equipment, or that we don't have enough money. I have fallen to this trap many times before-- but I found it to just be a mental barrier of my "inner-critic." I made up excuses because I was nervous and insecure about myself.

Whenever I work on a project, I have a general concept and idea in mind. But the more I spend time thinking about it, trying to visualize it-- the less productive I am. The best way is for me to just kick myself in the ass-- and go out and work on the project. Just do the work.

## **8. On living in a certain location**

In my photography, I always told myself that my work would be much more

interesting if I lived in an exotic place like Tokyo, New York, or Paris. I always saw where I lived as boring and uninteresting.

However funny enough-- the people I know who live in those places don't feel any more inspired than I do. They find where they live to be boring-- and they wish to live somewhere else as well. For example, my friend in Tokyo wants to move to New York. My friend in New York wants to move to Paris. My friend in Paris wants to move to Tokyo. The grass is always greener on the other side.

Alec Soth is one of the most famous and commercially successful photographers out there. However he still keeps Minneapolis his home base-- rather than New York or LA. Soth shares this struggle of living in a more "interesting" place:

"I am a Minnesotan. Writers are allowed to live where they live. But there's something about being an artist that historically meant you had to move to New York. It's really stupid, if you think about it. Because the subject matter, presumably, exists out there. And all these

photographers that I know in New York can't photograph in New York, and they go other places to photograph. I am of this place. It drives me crazy, and I fantasize about living other places, but New York is not one of them. I am interested in regional art in that there are these little regional differences to things that are quite interesting."

### **Takeaway point:**

Alec Soth lives in Minneapolis, which isn't the biggest city when it comes to photography or the fine art world. However Soth still makes do with where he is-- and is still producing great art and work.

One of my favorite projects by Alec Soth is "Sleeping by the Mississippi" -- and that was done in Mississippi, which isn't nearly as exotic as Tokyo or Paris. Another interesting project he has worked on was "Paris / Minnesota" -- where he photographed in both places and directly juxtaposed them (showed their similarities and dissimilarities).

Currently I live in Berkeley, which is a pretty interesting place. But I still won-

der to myself, man-- would my photography be more interesting if I lived in SF, or possibly New York? I still get the urge to live somewhere more "interesting" -- but I have discovered that even my neighborhood has been very interesting to photograph. Even though there aren't as many people walking the streets of Berkeley, I find myself shooting more "urban landscapes." I have just adapted to my environment, and I also find it interesting to photograph here, as cities such as New York and Paris have been photographed to death.

So regardless of how boring of an area you live in-- use that to your benefit and cherish it. The more remote or boring the place you live in-- the more interesting photography you will make out there, because not as many people would have photographed the area. You can make great photography wherever you live, don't ever let the dream of moving to a bigger city fool you.

## **9. Keep things out of the frame**

In street photography, I often see people trying to cram too much information and context into a shot. I think rather than trying to make our frames more complicated and add more things into the frame-- we should try to simplify. We should try to remove things from the frame. Addition via subtraction. This is what Alec Soth shares:

"With Mississippi, in particular, I had no money. I could take a few pictures of something that really affected the photography in big ways. After that, with a bit more money to play around with, I could take multiple versions of the picture. That's part of how I got better as a photographer."

"I have this thing, the camera's on a tripod, it's like an easel "Ok, I can only take a couple, I gotta make this great." Then I tried to get everything in the frame, which, in fact, is not a good strategy for photography. Its pulling stuff out of the frame is usually what you want to do, to simplify it. But I didn't know that. So that was one of the lessons learned."

**Takeaway point:**

Know that by deciding what to leave out of the frame is more important than what to include in the frame. If you have ever seen a photograph with a fish-eye lens you will understand my point. Often having too much information and things in the frame will make the frame too overwhelming and complicated. there is simply too much stuff to look at.

So when you are taking shots in the street, think to yourself: what should I decide to include, and what to exclude in my frame? Less is more.

## 10. Have a "shot list"

Many professional photographers (especially wedding photographers I know) have a "shot list." They know what kind of shots they need to take before going into a client shoot or shooting a wedding. Of course, not all the shots go according to plan-- but at least they have a certain concept.

Alec Soth also has practical advice when it comes to working on a project and trying to find subjects: have a shot list. He shares how he put together concepts of shots he wanted for his "Sleep-



ing by the Mississippi" and "NIAGARA" project. Soth shares also [how important is to be flexible and to improvise](#) as well:

"While working on this project I made a trip down the Mississippi River. After awhile I saw the river as a metaphor for this kind of improvisational wandering. I decided to make the river the explicit subject while continuing to play all of these games beneath the surface."

"I still play these games. Now I usually have a list of subject I'm looking for. With Niagara, for example, this list included things like motels, love letters, couples, and so forth. I feel a bit lost if I don't have anything specific to search for. But the list is just a starting place. It gets me involved in the landscape. Once I'm engaged any number of things can develop."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think the beauty of street photography is that much of it is unplanned and spontaneous. We don't really know what we will get until we hit the streets and go out and shoot.

However if you are working on a certain street photography project or a concept-- I think it is good to experiment having some sort of a "shot list." Have a rough idea of what kind of images you want to shoot, and go out and pursue shooting them. And of course, don't feel like you should be "married" to your shot list. Feel free to improvise and "go with the flow."

## 12. On telling stories

I think Alec Soth is one of the best contemporary story-tellers when it comes to photography. Soth does this by working on project-based approaches, and he shares some more thoughts in detail below:

"This is the never ending struggle, I think storytelling is the most powerful art, for me. I just think there's nothing more satisfying than the narrative thrust: beginning, middle, and end, what's gonna happen. The thing I'm always bumping up against is that photography doesn't function that way. Because it's not a time-based medium, it's frozen in time, they suggest stories, they don't

tell stories. So it is not narrative. So it functions much more like poetry than it does like the novel. It's just these impressions and you leave it to the viewer to put together."

Soth also brings up the concept of "filling in the dots" when it comes to storytelling:

"One of the things I have in the lecture tonight is the Aristotelian dramatic arc, which shows an actual arc: building tension, climax, resolution. Then I did the photographic equivalent, which is just these dots, all over the place. For the viewer it's this game of filling in those dots. There's this struggle of how closely you put the dots together. I never know. Right now I'm experimenting with something else where I'm trying to tell a story, an actual story, for the viewer to figure it out what happens. Still you have to be very careful photographically, so it's not so obvious. Making those gaps, it's always the question."

### **Takeaway point:**

If you a street photographer who wants to work on a more project-based

approach, I recommend listening to Alec Soth's advice (if you want to tell a story). Consider the beginning, middle, and the end of a project in terms of your images, and the flow they tell.

Sequencing and editing is one of the most crucial things when it comes to storytelling in photography-- and something that isn't easy to explain. It is more like poetry -- you have to go with the flow and feeling of images.

However a way we can better learn storytelling is through movies and plays. Many of these stories can be put into some sort of structure: you start with an opening shot, you are introduced to the characters, the characters go through some sort of trial & tribulation, there is a climax, a resolution, then it ends. Of course not all films go this way-- but you can think of the same structure when it comes to your photographic projects.

Therefore when you are editing and sequencing a project, sometimes the best people to ask are people outside of the photographic world: writers, poets, archi-

tects, film-makers, actors, or playwrights.

### 13. On vulnerability

I think street photography is a lot about vulnerability. Making yourself vulnerable to strangers, and having strangers become vulnerable to you.

I also feel that photography is mostly a self-portrait of who we are, rather than other people. We decide to see the world in a certain way or perspective. This is why we decide to photograph certain things, while deciding not to photograph other things.

Soth shares how personal the act of photographing is:

"...Uncommon Places, is one of the books that changed me. That passage was everything for me, because in the end, it's all about the process. The fact that he added that piece to that book, I could feel being him, making those pictures, which I think is such a big part of how photography works. One of the ways I see photography as different from conventional storytelling is that in some

ways, the photographer is the protagonist. You experience their movement. I could feel it."

Furthermore Soth builds on the idea of how photography is about vulnerability:

"One thing I'm really interested in is vulnerability. When you talk about Arbus and Hujar . . . I like being exposed to vulnerabilities. I think there's something really beautiful about it. That's kind of what I've been doing with these little stories, amping up the vulnerability, but also my own vulnerabilities, exposing more of myself. Because I knew with that "journalist" line I'm exposing my own shit there. I'm trying to get down to something raw."

#### **Takeaway point:**

Even though I am a pretty cheery and friendly guy on the outside-- deep down, I am quite critical of society. I find this shows through my photography-- most of my work is pretty grim and depressing.

I have discovered photography as a way for me to personally cope with the

world. To better understand my feelings through the people I photograph.

I also feel when I am on the streets, one of the best ways to connect with strangers is to make yourself vulnerable. I try to always connect with people and share them a little about my personal background and interests in photography before I ask to take someone's photograph. If people feel comfortable and safe around you, they will be much more likely to agree to be photographed.

Also when it comes to vulnerability-- I think it takes a lot of courage to not only photograph, but to also share your work online. Sharing your work online is to make yourself vulnerable. Vulnerable to having people criticize your work or not like it at all.

Making ourselves vulnerable takes a ton of courage-- but it is this act of vulnerability which makes street photography so beautiful and open.

## 14. On creating meaningful work

Alec Soth is not your typical Magnum photographer. When most people think about Magnum, they think about raw, gritty, black & white reportage work in conflict or war zones.

However Soth is more associated with the fine-art world. So what initially drew him to Magnum? It is to find deeper meaning in his work, as he knew that the fine-art world could become self-indulgent:

"I'm often asked why, as a fine-art photographer, I would want to be part of Magnum Photos. In my application letter to associate membership of Magnum, I tried to answer this question by writing:

"I don't trust art world success. If you look at a twenty-year-old catalogue of the Whitney Biennial, you don't recognize many names. Moreover, much of the work looks empty, dated and self-indulgent. The truth is that I'm prone to self-indulgence. I could easily see myself holing up in Nova Scotia scribbling hermetic diary notes on old pictures and thinking it is great art. This is the reason I applied to Magnum."



Soth also shares the importance of creating meaningful images that will stand the test of time:

What unites Magnum photographers is that they go out into the world to make pictures. In twenty years, much fine art photography will be as relevant as this. I suppose a lot of people no longer think Magnum is relevant either. But I disagree. While there aren't many magazine venues for this kind of photography, the work itself is still important. There are a bunch of younger photographers at Magnum making fantastic pictures. And much of this work will stand the test of time. For example, take a look at Christopher Anderson. His pictures aren't just important – they're good. Not only does he do terrific work in hotspots all over the world – he is really good at photographing Republicans:

Soth acknowledges how shallow the art world can be as well:

"The artworld can seem pretty shallow sometimes. I have admiration for working photographers. Photojournalists get a lot of criticism, but they really are

brave and sometimes even heroic. Look at this picture of Christopher Anderson carrying an elderly woman through the rubble of Aitaroun, Lebanon (A related article can be read at PDN online).

That said, I'm very aware of the fact that I'm not a photojournalist. The art world is my terrain. I haven't carried anybody through rubble lately. I'm just happy to rub elbows with these folks from time to time."

### **Takeaway point:**

Even though Alec Soth will probably never become a photojournalist or photograph in conflict areas, he still greatly admires the work that they do. And Soth isn't going to quit the fine-art photography world anytime soon. But he still says he loves to "rub elbows with these folks from time to time" -- the working photojournalists, to stay grounded in his work. He is leery of the fine-art world success, and how it can become self-indulgent, and not as meaningful.

Personally I have found myself falling into this trap as well. For a long time, I was less interested in the power

of photography to change other people's perspectives and the meaning of it-- and more interested in the amount of popularity I would get via social media. Whenever I uploaded an image online, rather than asking myself: "What is the social significance of this image?" or "Will this image stand the test of time?", I asked myself: "Will this shot get a lot of favorites" or "Will this shot be popular?"

Let us all remind ourselves that our ultimate aim in photography shouldn't be just to get lots of love on social media-- but rather, to create meaningful work. Work that affects, influences, and emotionally touches others.

## Conclusion

Even though Alec Soth isn't a street photographer-- I think his background and experience in the fine-art world and working on projects gives us great insights. Alec Soth has personally challenged me to switch from working on single-images to a more project-based approach. He challenged me to go past self-indulgence in photography, and to create more socially meaningful work.

Alec Soth is seriously a photographer's photographer-- and this article doesn't do justice to how much inspiration he has given me. But I recommend for you to check out more his books, interviews, and features to find out about him. He will easily be one of the most influential photographers in the 21st century and go down in the books of photographic history.



3

## ALEX WEBB

One of the street photographers who have had a strong impact on my street photography is Alex Webb. Webb is a Magnum photographer who uses strong colors, light, and emotion to capture beautifully complex images. After picking up a copy of Alex Webb's "The Suffering of Light" I fell in love with his work and his use of color and started to also make the transition from black and white to color.

### 1. Layer your photographs

Depth is a strong element in the work of Alex Webb. In many of his photographs, they have a strong foreground, mid-ground, and background. The great



thing about this is that it leads you (the viewer) to invite yourself into the frame. You see what he sees. You enter the frame by looking at the things closest to you, and then you slowly make your way into the mid-ground, and then slowly out into the background.

### **Suggestion:**

When you are out shooting on the streets, try to get subjects in your foreground, mid-ground, and background. Be patient and wait until all the elements come together, and think of how your photographs can lead viewers into your photograph, and then out of them.

## **2. Fill the frame**

"It's not just that that and that exists. It's that that, that, that, and that all exist in the same frame. I'm always looking for something more. You take in too much; perhaps it becomes total chaos. I'm always playing along that line: adding something more, yet keeping it sort of chaos." - Alex Webb

If I could categorize some of Alex Webb's work it would be "orderly chaos".

He often fills the frame with so many subjects that it almost feels too busy. However many of the subjects in his photographs don't overlap and there are many "mini-interactions" in his photographs. This is what makes his images interesting- as I think his photographs tell lots of small stories inside the frame.

### **Suggestion:**

When shooting on the streets, try to constantly add things to your frame - yet know when "too much" is "too much". Try not to overlap the subjects in your frame, and try to have a nice balance between dark shadows and the light (shoot when the light is good- sunrise and sunset).

## **3. Walk... a lot**

"I only know how to approach a place by walking. For what does a street photographer do but walk and watch and wait and talk, and then watch and wait some more, trying to remain confident that the unexpected, the unknown, or the secret heart of the known awaits just around the corner." - Alex Webb



The only way you are going to capture great street photographs is to walk on the streets... a lot. When you are out walking on the streets, you will open yourself up to many more opportunities to shoot on the streets, and also experience the feel of a place.

Back home in Los Angeles, nobody walks. In-fact I am guilty of it myself. When I go to the supermarket (which is about a five minute walk) I like to drive my car (which only takes one minute). However on the way I am missing potentially great photo opportunities.

### **Suggestion:**

Try to walk as much as you can. Even if getting to a place (grocery store, bookstore, shopping center) will take 30 minutes (instead of five minutes) try to walk. Bring your camera along, and you will open yourself up to many more photo opportunities.

## **4. Look for the light**

“Colors are the deeds and suffering of light.” - Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

"The Suffering of Light" is the title of Webb's most recent book- a phenomenally beautiful book with smooth and thick white paper, velvety pages, vividly brilliant colors, and a great selection of Webb's best work from the last 30 years.

From a recent interview he talks about the quote:

"My understanding – of course, I’m not a philosopher or a scientist – of an aspect of Goethe’s theory of color is that he felt that color came out of tension between light and dark. I think that is very appropriate when you think about the kind of color that I shoot." - Alex Webb

He often describes when he is shooting in places- he looks for the tension between borders. For example, he found Istanbul a fascinating place because geographically- it is located as a hub for many different cultures. It is a melting pot in terms of socio-economic, political, and ethnic terms. He says about Istanbul, "I returned frequently between 2001 and 2005 to complete a book on this vibrant and melancholy city that sits between the divide between the East and

west: Istanbul: City of a Hundred Names".

He also refers to shooting at the U.S.-Mexico border and says:

"...There is something about the transience, the impermanence of the border that has always fascinated me. It's a place where two cultures meet and intermingle and create almost a third country."

From another interview when asked about himself shooting:

"When I am working, then I really have to work. I really have to work. I really have to stay attuned. I have to get up early in the morning, get out and I wonder and maybe the light is getting less interesting, then I eat my breakfast... I work in color, where light is really important in a very special way, so I work certain hours much more than others. I am always out at the latter half of the afternoon and in the evening."

### **Suggestion:**

When shooting in color, don't shoot color for the sake of shooting color.

Think about what sort of message or meaning that shooting in color has. Also make sure when shooting with color - shoot when the light is good (morning and late evening).

## **5. Realize 99.9% of street photography is failure**

"Luck – or perhaps serendipity – plays a big role... But you never know what is going to happen. And what is most exciting is when the utterly unexpected happens, and you manage to be there at the right place at the right time – and push the shutter at the right moment. Most of the time it doesn't work out that way. This kind of photography is 99.9% about failure." - Alex Webb

It is rare that you make a great photograph. There are some many things beyond your control. How your subject looks, the intensity of the light, the background, the moment, and so forth.

Therefore realize that when you are shooting street photography, 99.9% of your images are going to be bad photographs.

### **Suggestion:**

Go out and shoot as much as you can. Although 99.9% of street photography is about failure, the more you go out and shoot- the more chances you will have to take great images.

If you go out and shoot for an entire day and shoot 100 photographs, you might get 1 decent photograph. If you shoot 200 photographs, you might get 2 decent photographs. If you shoot 300 photographs, you might get 3 decent photographs.

Of course if you machine gun when you are out shooting- it won't make you a better street photographer. Shoot with intent, and after that - a lot of getting a great image is a numbers game. Remember you can make your own luck.

## **6. Work on projects**

"Most of my projects seem to start as exploratory journeys with no visible end in sight." - Alex Webb

As written previously, I believe that working on projects is a great way to approach street photography. The reason is

that working on projects will give you direction, purpose, and will allow you to create a narrative or story.

However working on projects is often difficult. We don't know how long they will take, or what to shoot. When talking about his own projects, Webb states: "Different projects seem to have different arcs of completion".

### **Suggestion:**

Think about how you see the world, and how your photographs reflect that. First start off by shooting your own life. What makes your city unique from others? If you want to go travel, go to a place with an open-mind and see what themes emerge. Then start focusing on those themes- and narrowing down.

Also check out my past article on "How to Start Your Own Street Photography Project" for more ideas.

## **7. If you are stuck, try something new**

There are times we may hit brick walls with our street photography, and don't know what direction to head to-

ward. Webb shares one of his experiences:

"In 1975, I reached a kind of dead end in my photography. I had been photographing in black and white, then my chosen medium, taking pictures of the American social landscape in New England and around New York - desolate parking lots inhabited by elusive human figures, lost-looking children strapped in car seats, ad dogs slouching by the street. The photographs were a little alienated, sometimes ironic, occasionally amusing, perhaps a bit surreal, and emotionally detached. Somehow I sensed that the work wasn't taking me anywhere new. I seemed to be exploring territory that other photographers- such as Lee Friedlander and Charles Harbutt - had already discovered." - Alex Webb

After this realization, Webb headed to Haiti, which transformed him- and also influenced him to change his work into color.

I experienced something similar myself. When I first started shooting street photography, I shot like Henri Cartier-

Bresson - looking for the decisive moment, being patient, and juxtaposing interesting subjects and backgrounds. However after a while, I found myself hitting a dead wall- and being uninterested in that way of working.

I then found a video on YouTube about Gilden shooting street photography- and was fascinated. I experimented shooting with a flash - and found that getting close was more interesting to me, and a better way of working for myself. After all, I find myself to be much more of an outgoing and up-front person, rather than someone who is a more passive and "invisible".

### **Suggestion:**

Experiment if you feel frustrated with your own work. If the way you are shooting street photography isn't making you happy- try something else. Always shoot in b/w? Try color. Shoot digital? Try film. Always upload your photographs everyday? Try once a month.

Experimentation is very important- but try not to experiment too much. Ex-



periment enough until you find yourself reasonably content, and stick with it!

## 8. Follow your obsession

"I mean its an obsession, you follow the obsession but at the same time you have so many doubts, you know. Why am I wasting so much money going back to this place, taking more pictures? What's the point of it? No one cares about it. I think I care about it but maybe I am deceiving myself." - Alex Webb

If you want to become a great street photographer, I think obsession is important. Not all of us want to become great street photographers (we may just do it for fun or as a hobby) but if you take your street photography seriously - work hard and overcome your doubts.

There are times you might doubt yourself why you are out shooting. I experience it all the time myself. But working on projects can help you stay more focused with your photography, while also meeting other photographers, reading photo books, and constantly shooting.

### Suggestion:

To stay obsessive with street photography, constantly read books on street photography, meet other street photographers, and shoot. In sociology there is a saying that "you are the average of the five people closest to you". Therefore if you hang around with a lot of passionate street photographers- by proxy- you will become a passionate and (healthily obsessive) street photographer yourself.

## 9. Capture the emotion of a place

"Color is very much about atmosphere and emotion and the feel of a place." - Alex Webb

Shooting in color is a great way to capture the mood and the atmosphere of a place. But once again mentioned before in this article- don't shoot color simply for the sake of shooting color. Think about how shooting color can add context and meaning to your photographs.

Alex Webb shares about the experience that transformed him to shooting color:

"Three years after my first trip to Haiti, I realized there was another emotional note that had to be reckoned with: the intense, vibrant color of these worlds. Searing light and intense color seemed somehow embedded in the cultures that I had begun working in, so utterly different from the gray-brown reticence of my New England background. Since then, I have worked predominantly in color." - Alex Webb

Therefore you can see one of the main reasons he switched to color was to capture the mood and intensity of the locations he was visiting.

### **Suggestion:**

Think about what kind of mood or emotion your project/photos are trying to tell- and choose the right medium. If you are interested in capturing the darkness and gloom of a place- b/w will probably work better. If you want to capture the energy, light, and excitement of a place- color might work better. Remember the saying, "The medium is the message."

## 10. Travel

Before I started traveling and teaching street photography workshops full-time, I had never traveled much. The negative thing about not traveling is that you can become close-minded. You only think about the values of the society you live in- and you forget about the outside world.

Traveling has helped open up my eyes to the rest of the world- and has transformed me as a person as well. I see the world from a much more global perspective- and have relished meeting new people while experiencing new cultures.

Travel can also help you get out of a rut in your photography (although not necessary). Webb shares one of his experiences:

"I happened to pick up a Graham Greene's novel, *The Comedians*, a work set in the turbulent world of Papa Doc's Haiti, and read about a world that fascinated and scared me. Within Months I was on a plane to Port-au-Prince.

The first three-week trip to Haiti transformed me- both as a photographer and a human being. I photographed a kind of world I had never experienced before, a world of emotional vibrancy and intensity: raw, disjointed, and often tragic. I began to explore to other places- in the Caribbean, along the U.S.-Mexico border- places like Haiti, where life seemed to be lived on the stoop and in the street." - Alex Webb

### **Suggestion:**

Travel as much as you can. I know in the states, people don't travel as much as they should. Part of it is the work-a-holic society we live in (and crappy 2-week breaks we get), but even a brief trip to another place in the world can be life changing. Traveling has taught me to be less materialistic, and also more appreciate of other cultures and ways of life- and thinking. It has also helped me explore new photo projects in different parts of the world (in Asia specifically with my "First World Asia" project which is currently underway).

Not everyone can travel- but if you can- travel and open your eyes to the rest of the world as much as you can.



4

## ANDERS PETERSEN

Anders Petersen, b. 1944, is a Swedish photographer, who is best known for his intimate and documentary-based photography projects. He is best known for his project, "Café Lehmitz" in which he photographed prostitutes, transvestites, lovers, drunkards, and drug addicts from 1967-1970. The photographs are very close and personal, and incredibly humanistic and soulful.

I was honored to meet Anders when I taught my street photography workshop at Fotografiska (he taught a workshop at the same time). People I knew who met him described him as very intense and hardcore- and I was a bit nervous meeting



him. However upon meeting him, he was an incredibly loving, caring, and down-to-earth-guy. He looked at my work and gave me great words of advice and inspiration.

Although Anders describes himself as a "private documentary photographer" - I love his thoughts, feelings, and philosophy that I feel many of us street photographers can learn from. If you are curious about learning more, read on:

## 1. Shoot with your heart, not your brain

One of the things I love most about Petersen is his obvious love of photography and the love of the people he is photographing. He also describes how he shoots:

"I am more using my heart and stomach and I go for that, it keeps me going. I don't use the upper-half so much when I am shooting - it is more after when I am shooting when I am looking at my contact sheets, and then I try to analyze and put things together."

Therefore I think as street photographers we should use more of our hearts when we are out shooting on the streets, rather than trying to use our brains.

For example, we should be looking for emotions such as love (couples hugging), hatred (people arguing), fear (someone reacting to your camera), strength (someone buff perhaps flexing for the camera), or loneliness (someone sitting in an alley alone).

Of course we still want to use our brains when shooting on the streets (having good composition, framing, and proper focus) - but it should come secondary. After all, a photograph that is technically perfect that has no soul isn't memorable.

Furthermore, Petersen stresses the importance of using our brains when looking at our contact sheets (or the photographs that we shot during the day). We should objectively see if our photographs are good (both emotionally and the form) and then edit and sequence our photographs accordingly.

Another excerpt he says from another interview that stresses the same point (slightly reworded):

My photography is not 'brain photography'. I put my brain under the pillow when I shoot. I shoot with my heart and with my stomach. And then this is very important for me, that my photographs are intuitive. It goes here and not from here (points to stomach then head). When I am planning a project, then I'm thinking—and when I am developing the film and looking at the contact sheets, then I'm thinking and editing and choosing – very very carefully, and that's when the responsibility is coming in.

## 2. Create photographs with more questions than answers

During one of his portfolio reviews during his workshop, Petersen gave feedback to the student how he preferred the students photos that asked more questions than having answers.

Therefore to apply this concept to street photography, you don't always

have to tell the whole story with your photograph. Don't include faces, shoot with backgrounds with no context, or strange happenings. This will make the viewer more curious about your images (rather than quickly look through them). After all, humans like to always tell stories and make sense of images- and when they have to spend more time to pause, look at your photograph, and try to figure out what it is - it will make the photograph stick more with them.

Petersen also applies this concept to why he shoots with black and white instead of color. He states:

"The reason why I go on with black and white photography is I'm used to it. In black and white there are more colors than color photography, because you are not blocked by any colors- so you can use your experiences, your knowledge, and your fantasy, to put colors into black and white. And this is what you do, put in your own colors."

I found this concept absolutely fascinating - that the viewers of your photographs have to inject their own personal

history and experiences to understand your photographs. This makes the viewer more of an active participant of looking at the photograph, rather than just looking at it passively.

Regardless if you decide to shoot street photography in black and white or in color, try to add mystery and suspense to your images. Speak less with your photographs, and let the viewers work to understand them.

### 3. Use a simple camera

One of the things that I had great difficulty with when starting photography was all the technical challenges of understanding cameras. For example, what F-stop should I use? What shutter speed should I use? What ISO should I use?

I would be so concerned with all of the technical settings that it would overwhelm me. When I was shooting on the streets, I would think more about what f-stop I should be shooting at instead of focusing on taking photographs of special moments and connecting with people.

I then realized that I should quit making things so complicated for myself, and just started shooting street photography with "P mode on my Canon 5D (my earlier camera), with my 35mm lens, and at ISO 1600 with autofocus in the center. I wouldn't worry about the settings and just shoot.

Nowadays I shoot with my Leica and always shoot using zone focusing at f/8. I don't worry about the settings, and I just click when I see "decisive moments" on the streets.

Petersen talks about why he prefers to use a simple camera (and settings) as well. He shoots mostly with a Contax T3, a simple point&shoot analog camera with a 35mm lens.

I prefer to shoot with an analog camera because I'm kinda stupid and naïve and lazy—so I keep to what I know something about. And I want to have a camera, which is—you know, very simple. An amateur camera. The only thing that means anything for me is the contact with people. Being true to people, and be-

ing true to myself. The camera is not so important at all, it is just a tool.

It doesn't matter what camera you shoot with in street photography (whether it be a DSLR, Micro 4/3rds, Rangefinder, Point&Shoot, iPhone, etc) as long as you are comfortable with your camera settings and don't have to think when shooting on the streets.

And as Petersen says, keep your camera simple and focus on the people.

Another interesting excerpt in which he discusses the importance of photographing (over cameras and equipment):

The more you talk about photography, the less it is about photography. It's more about the conditions of life, people and it is more interesting than talking about technicals, lenses and cameras. You are not supposed to be a slave of mechanical tools, they are supposed to help you and be as small and as unimportant as possible not to disturb the communication. That is what I feel when I shoot my pictures.

Also if you are curious more about his simple equipment he talks about his Contax T3 (and the Ricoh Gr1s he often shoots with too):

Moderator: You must be a man that always carries a camera with you...

Petersen: Yes (showing me his camera). Contax T3, 35 mm lens, very good lens, sharp in the corners. I made 2 meters prints and they were sharp in the corners. (The camera is loaded with Kodak TX 400). Always 400 ISO. All my work in the past 12 years has been done with this camera. I have used another one, too. It is Ricoh GR1s, with 28 mm lens, it's more wide [lens], but I prefer 35 mm lens.

## 4. Style isn't something aesthetic

One of the things that one of my friends (and fabulous documentary photographer) Bill Reeves taught me is how "Style isn't something aesthetic" - rather how you approach photography and the messages & subject matter in your pho-



tography. I have written about this in length in a previous article here.

Of course most photographers are recognized with having a certain aesthetic "look" - but Petersen agrees that the common perception of "style" as something aesthetic (isn't so important):

I try not to define my style. I don't think I have a special style, but I have a special approach. I like people. You can see the red line from my first pictures in Café Lehmitzv to the last one I am doing now in Soho in London.

I would say that Petersen's "style" is how he approaches his subjects and interacts with them. You can see through his photographs that the people he photographs trust him, interact with him, and cooperate with him.

If you see this video of him shooting in Turkey, he gets quite close to his subjects, talks with them, and interacts with them quite closely. From my computer screen I can feel the warm and the love he shows his subjects when photographing.

Petersen recently worked on a project in Soho (and published a book) in which he immersed himself in the lives of other people by visiting them in pubs, cafes, and even their homes. The photographs (like his others) are incredibly raw, gritty, and incredibly personal.

I would always be curious how he could approach strangers and get the certain access that he did. Something interesting I wanted to share that I heard from someone when I taught a workshop at Fotografiska in Stockholm a few months ago. Not sure if it is true, but the person told me one of the techniques that Petersen would use when approaching strangers in pubs to photograph:

Petersen would first go into the bar and start hanging out and chatting with people without even showing his camera. He would get to know certain people really well, and would then have an interest to photograph them (but would restrain himself). Then, he would ask them to excuse him, and then he would go off and photograph someone else and then come back. The person who he would previously be talking with would

see this and then get jealous, and then ask why Petersen didn't take a photograph of them. Then Petersen would be able to start photographing them.

So to sum up, don't worry too much about the aesthetics of your street photographs - rather focus on your approach and the subjects that you photograph.

Are you trying to document the beauty of life? Then perhaps you should shoot subjects that are happy and "pretty" - like jolly couples, smiling children, and people having a good time. After choosing your subject matter, shooting in color might work better (because the medium of color might better suit "happy photos"). Similarly, if you want to create raw and gritty photographs, you should focus on subject matter such as people in pain, outsiders of society, and rough textures. Then following suit, black and white may be a better medium to display what you are trying to say through the photographs.

More detail about his thoughts on his photography and style:

"That is a red line from my first work until what I am doing today, you are right. But I don't know really what to say about it. It's not really a style, for me it is an approach. It is more distinct for me, it doesn't work that much with anecdotes and atmospheres. It works more with light and shadows. I'm interested in a distinct, sharp attack. That is not explaining anything, that has no answers, but has many questions. And the more questions and longings I can find in one cut, the better. If you are curious and patient enough, it brings a lot. You can open the door and the camera is like a key. I am not so much for brain photography, idea-based photography, even though we always need some idea, some fundament to stand on it. I am more of that style of photographer, who is more intuitive, using my stomach and heart. I want my cut to be organic, I want an organic result. This is important for me."

## 5. Be a maniac

Street photography is hard. Damn hard. You can shoot street photography for an entire year and only get one memo-

rable image. After all, it is one of the most difficult forms of photography (in my opinion). When you are out shooting on the streets, there are so many variables and factors you need to put in. You have to consider the composition, the subject, how to approach them, the light, the settings on your camera, the position of your body, and so forth. And to have a perfect marriage of form and content? It rarely happens.

Therefore to make great street photographs, you need to be obsessive - perhaps a bit of a maniac too. You need to constantly be on the streets--shooting whenever you can. It is a bit of a numbers game in the sense that the more time you spend on the streets, the more likely you will get that one shot.

At age 68, Petersen is prolific and constantly creating new work. He talks a bit in this interview about the importance of being maniacal:

"I am a maniac. I really continue asking questions mostly about myself. Sounds egotistic and probably it is. I am asking myself – who am I and why. And

then I am looking for people and other beings to whom I identify myself – women, men, dogs, cats... I think it's all about identification with people that I belong to."

It is common for artists and photographers to constantly ask themselves why they are doing what they do - and to re-evaluate themselves. I think it is important to do because it helps give you focus on why you photograph.

At times we also can lose passion and focus - and ask ourselves why we photograph? But at times like this, Petersen says he continues to push on:

"On the other hand, I am not sure at all, so I keep going. In a way it's ok not to be sure and it's ok not being so brave. I'm quite afraid of everything. I think I'm a type of photographer with longing for companionship, friends, communications, trying to understand myself and other people."

So try to figure out why you photograph (if you aren't sure why, give a second to think about it). And don't worry if you don't have an exact answer, it is a

question all of us have (but try to challenge yourself).

We all hit brick walls to in terms of trying to innovate and create new images and projects. When in doubt, just hit the streets. It might take you a bit of time to start warming up to shooting, but then once you get into the flow, you will ask yourself why you thought it was so hard.

## 6. Get close to people

As humans we are social beings. We understand ourselves through interacting and getting to know other people. We identify ourselves compared to others as well. Therefore when we are photographing our subjects, the photographs we create aren't objective images of the world. Rather, they are subjective interpretations of how we see others.

Petersen talks about the importance of getting close to people, and relating with them:

"I think I understand myself through other people, more and more. And I understand another thing... I know it's a ba-

sic fact, that we are all humans after all. It's a big family. But on the other hand, it is true... If you go back to basics, you are relative to all other people in the world and it doesn't matter whether you are in Japan, Paris or Riga.

I am trying to look for what is making you feel closer to other people. I am not looking for what is drawing us apart – I want to be close. I don't look for differences despite I know we have different cultures, religion, but anyway we are all the same. And that is the basic, kind of a primitive platform, my way of photographing people.

I also feel that with physical proximity comes emotional proximity. That is why when I switched from using a telephoto stalker-like lens when shooting street photography (to using a wide-angle prime lens), I was forced to get physically closer to my subjects (which made me feel emotionally closer to them). I would get close so I could feel their presence, I could hear their conversations, and at times even get close enough to see the color of their eyes. I enjoy getting close to people and taking



their photographs, and often having conversations with them afterwards and building personal connections.

Of course one of the difficulties of street photography is being able to build some sort of personal connection with your subjects. After all, we generally just see a person, snap the photo, maybe smile or wave, and then move on.

Perhaps next time when shooting on the streets, try to take some time to know more personally about the people you photograph. People have incredible stories to tell, and in my experience-- sometimes the scariest people can be the nicest people.

## 7. Photography is a self-portrait of yourself

Consider every photograph you take to be a self-portrait of yourself. After all, as a photographer you are simply a subject-selector. As street photographers we happen to select our type of photography to be of candid images of people in public. This is what makes us different from let's say-- landscape photogra-

phers who like to shoot trees in the wilderness. The photographs we decide to say tell a lot about ourselves (are we more positive and drawn to the good parts of life? Or are we more negative and drawn to the darker sides of life?) And what types of people are we drawn to?

Petersen talks about in his "private documentary" work his images are a self-portrait of who he is. He starts off by talking about his recent project in Soho:

I am trying to document my emotions through this lovely city, and especially Soho. It has a lot of energy. Good vitamins. And of course there is a lot of nightlife going on here, so of course you see many drunk people-- but that's very okay with me. And when I go in the streets here in Soho, I try to find a combination with myself and what I see in the streets. So I'm approaching a kind of self-portrait, when I am selecting and choosing people, of course but the structures of Soho.

He expands more on this idea how subjectivity reigns over objectivity in his

work and better defines "private documentary":

I think documentary photography is so very important. But, I can say I have my roots in documentary photography. I like Ed Van der Elsken like Christer Stromholm and so on. But now it is more about private documentary. A sort of essay. Of course it is more about me. I want to point out that I am private- that it doesn't exist – any objective truth. Everything is subjective, and I want to point it out by saying so, by using the word 'private documentary'.

Petersen also talks about what he wants to accomplish through his photography in a real and raw way, rather than in a conceptual and formal way:

Photography is not really about photography- it is about longings, dreams, nightmares, and wants, and memories- and I try to catch that. But I'm looking for a primitive way. I want it to be a very back-to-basic, and not "art photography"- not at all. I want it to be amateuristic- I want it to be as true as I can do it, you

know? Organic almost. Can you use the word "animalistic"?

When you shoot on the streets, don't worry too much about the philosophy of why you shoot or any other conceptual ideas. Leave the "brain work" when you are in front of a computer typing out your bio. When you are on the streets, let your instincts lead you. But be aware of what draws you to street photography. Is it faces of people on the street? The light hitting off buildings? The still life type of image of forgotten things on the street?

What kind of subjects do you select when shooting street photography?

## 8. Focus on content, not form

One of the famous quotes by Garry Winogrand is "Every photograph is a battle of form versus content. The good ones are on the border of failure." As I wrote in my previous article on Winogrand, an effective street photograph is a combination of strong form and con-

tent. But what is more important? Petersen shares some of his ideas:

"My way of approaching photography is more - I don't care so much about the form. Perhaps I did it in the beginning, a long time ago. But now, I just want it to be as straight and simple and as true as possible."

I have similar feelings in street photography - that the content is more important than form (although both are very important). I feel that street photography is less about aesthetics, and more about capturing the rhythm, jazz, and emotion of people on the streets. Of course you want good compositions, but what good is having a perfect composition if your photograph doesn't say anything that people can relate or connect with?

Shoot with your heart, not your brain.

## 9. Photography is about solutions, not problems

One of the challenges I faced in the past (and still face today) is feeling confi-

dent when shooting on the streets. I used to want to keep my camera as hidden as possible, because I saw it as a "dead giveaway" that I was taking photographs of people. I wanted to be invisible and un-seen by anybody else. I hated my camera and the sound of the shutter, because it would cause people to know I took their photograph, and draw unwanted attention to me.

Nowadays I have a different philosophy and approach. Of course at times I want to be more discrete, but generally because I shoot quite close (around 1.2 meters mostly) it is pretty obvious that I take photographs of people, and I generally look at people and wave at them afterwards. I want the people to know that I took their photograph, because I saw something so interesting and unique about them.

I was also introduced to the idea of the camera offering more solutions than problems via David Hurn, who said that having a camera gave you an excuse to take photographs of people- and was almost like an entrance ticket to having a

reason to photograph. Petersen echoes the same thoughts:

"Photography offers a lot of opportunities. For me, the camera is like an entrance to the private lives of other people. And if you are curious like me, it is a fantastic tool."

Therefore don't hate the fact that your camera is visible and easily seen. Champion it, and use it as a tool and show it proudly that you are a photographer, and your job is to get to know more about society and other people through your lens. The camera is your excuse and your ticket into the lives of others, whether in the streets or off the streets.

So the next time people ask you why you took their photograph, it is more than enough to respond by saying, "I took your photograph because I am a photographer".

## 10. Maintain an "innocent eye"

One of the most difficult things is to appreciate the place where you live and

shoot street photography. I have lived in Los Angeles for around 6 years now, and there are times that I can be bored of the place. I have been to many places that all start looking the same - and it is difficult for me to see the world in a different way.

However I remember when I first started photographing, everything was so new, so novel, and so exciting. How can we keep our enthusiasm from when we first started and apply it to our photography now? Anders has a suggestion on how to take an amateur-approach and maintain your "innocent eye" in an interview:

Moderator: Isn't it true that with the age and experience you become also more conscious and aware of what you are doing and it makes it harder to photograph, to maintain that innocent eye?

Petersen: You are so right, so right... My dream is that if you go out in the streets where you were born you see the streets like for the first time in your life even though you have been living there for 60 years. That is my dream, but of



course it's not like that. So, what you have to do is to be aware mentally of all those experiences, and knowledge is a rather heavy rucksack and it's not good for being creative. So, what you can do is in a mental way you have to go down to zero, to clean yourself as much as possible, I know it's impossible.

Anders suggests the idea of preventing your experiences from weighing you down, and trying to rinse your mind and go back to "zero". He also admits that it isn't something that is easy, but possible.

Petersen continues by sharing his experiences when he was photographing in a prison for 3 years, and how one of his encounters with a criminal helped give him some insight on how to continue his passion:

When I was working in prison for 3 years, there was a very famous criminal Jaki. After a while I got into his cell and asked him, why are you so famous, how it comes you are so good. Because everybody was talking about him. And he said, it is simple, you have to imagine a

life like a pyramid and you have to reach the top of it. And it's not just about being criminal, it's also much about photography.

At the bottom of the pyramid there's safety, you have your family, friends, women, people you love, but you can't do any masterpieces there, you have to be clear. In order to go to the top of the pyramid, you have to get rid of them. And it is very much a mental process, as Jaki said it was like peeling yourself from it. And when you come to the top, it's like a fever. Once you are there, the only thing that matters is what you have to do, and nothing else matters. Then you are dangerous and then you attack.

When I heard it from this criminal, I thought this is also true about photography. How to catch momentum... you have to be very fast, ruthless when you crop the situation you are in. You are not supposed to be into the situation with both your feet, but one foot outside, in order to attain the best result of the situation.

In this excerpt Petersen describes that the battle that us photographers face is not with other people, but the mental battle we have to have with ourselves. We need to peel away our levels of safety and push forward, in order for us to achieve greatness and be content with our own work.

So with your street photography, some of the mental battles we need to face is spending enough time to go out and shoot, being able to re-visualize our homes as somewhere interesting to photograph, and to be consistent and push forward. Once again, it is a never-ending battle that all photographers face, but that is why I feel it is important to have a community (like this one) where we can continue to support one another to improve in achieving our personal vision in photography.

## Conclusion

Anders Petersen isn't a street photographer, but I think that us as street photographers can learn much from his approach and philosophy in photography. His photography is straight from the

heart and the soul, and less from the brain (which he reserves afterwards when he is editing and sequencing his projects).

Remember to be cognizant of why we are out shooting street photography. Are we out there just trying to create images in which we juggle with visual gymnastics or create images with soul and purpose?

## Quotes by Anders Petersen

- "Be wary of nicely formulated principles and truths. Useless feelings of guilt and sins of the past. Or while we're at it, a photograph resembling pretty adjectives. On the other hand, I like private diaries and family albums."
- "To me, it's encounters that matter, pictures are much less important."
- "I can't describe reality; at the most, I can try to capture things that seem to be valid, the way I see them."
- "You have to focus on what you are doing, not just as a photographer, but as a human being."

- "Cutting is a good way to describe [my way of shooting]. I cut... that's what it feels like, because it's so fast. Then I peel away layers."

- "I don't believe in reality really, it's a bluff. But I believe in a kind of reality that exists because of all the longing, dreams, secrets, nightmares, mostly longings. I think no picture is without longing. This allows you to use what you are afraid of, as a trampoline; to channel your energy into your creativity; go inside and open up like a sharp knife, like a doctor operating."

- Nan Goldin
- Boris Mikhailov
- Daido Moriyama
- Antoine D'Agata
- Michael Ackerman
- Jacob Aue Sobol

## Recommended photographers by Anders Petersen

When Anders was teaching his workshop right next door at Fotografiska, I took a snapshot of some of the photographers he recommended and was inspired by:

- Christer Stromholm
- Ed Van Der Elsken
- Lisette Model
- Diane Arbus



5

## ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ

Andre Kertesz is one of the greatest photographers who ever lived. He photographed extensively for over 70 years, which also makes him one of the most prolific photographers. Not only did he help pioneer the genre of street photography, he also had a strong impact on an entire generation of photographers - even including the great Henri Cartier-Bresson.

When asked about Kertesz, Henri Cartier-Bresson showed his reverence by saying: "We all owe something to Kertesz." and even "Whatever we have done, Kertesz did first."



Another famous photographer, Brassai, beautifully captured what made Kertész so great as a photographer:

"André Kertész has two qualities that are essential for a great photographer: an insatiable curiosity about the world, about people, and about life, and a precise sense of form." - Brassai

Every street photographer with a desire to learn more about the masters needs to know about Kertész. I have personally gained a great deal of inspiration from him and will share some insights I have gained from him:

## 1. Always have a camera with you

The most important thing for a street photographer to remember is to always have a camera with you. There are so many scenes we can miss when we don't have a camera by our sides.

Kertész made it a point to always carry his camera with him - even when photographing the First World War (in harm's way):

Interviewer: Did you take a camera with you everywhere?

Kertész: "Yes. So there I was, in the front line, lugging the plate negatives around in a metal case. The other lads said I was crazy. "Why?" I asked. "If I come out of this alive, then I'll develop them; if I don't, I won't." My kid brother had a great idea. Take 9 x 12 cm plates with you, he said, and cut them in four."

Understandably, lugging around massive 9x12cm plates was a huge pain in the ass. To make his camera more portable, he had the ingenious idea of cutting his glass plates into smaller pieces - to make his camera more portable:

Kertész: "Then at night-time, somewhere in the village, or wherever we were, I would search out a dark place. I had a glass cutter and quartered the plates. It was a stroke of genius, because that way in one box of 9 x 12's I had material not for 12 but for 48 photographs. Oh, how big was the camera? 4.5 x 6 cm."

Having a smaller camera made it much more portable for him to carry around in his everyday activities:

Kertesz: “That means it was nice and flat, so I could slip it into my pocket. Part of our regiment was taken prisoner by the Russians; they had to be replaced urgently and we made a forced march for 48 hours non-stop, with just a few minutes to snatch some sleep standing up, or to relieve ourselves, grab a few mouthfuls of food, then on and on. I stepped out of the ranks to snap the column, then carried on marching.”

Even with the portable size, Kertesz still found it difficult to find time to shoot. How did he overcome this? By snapping photos that happened around him when he could:

Kertesz: “I was just one of the many. That one says it all. I wasn't able to photograph very much while the war was on: just what was happening around me. And we were always in the front line, or immediately behind it. I always had a miniature camera with me at the front, where I would snatch informal snap-

shots, unlike the professional photographers in the War Correspondents Section, who always went around with gigantic cameras and tripods once a battle was over, in order to take on-the-spot photographs showing the destruction.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Life often gets in the way of our photography. We have to deal with our day jobs, our families, and everyday errands. It is hard to find time to photograph.

However, similarly to Kertesz, we should simply photograph things around us - and make it a point to always have a camera with us (regardless of how big it may be).

We complain about carrying around our massive DSLRs on a daily basis. However, before we complain, we should consider that Kertesz (and many of his contemporaries) lugged around massive glass plate cameras, which weren't very portable.

Of course, he was pragmatic and had the ingenious idea of cutting his plates into smaller sizes to make his camera smaller and more portable.

So, on a practical note, if you find it painful to carry around a large camera, I highly recommend investing in a smaller camera (or just carrying around your smartphone or compact camera). I have generally found that the smaller and more portable your camera, the better it is for street photography (as it seems less intimidating and is easier to carry around). The more often you carry your camera, the more often you will also end up taking photos.

## 2. Follow your dreams

Life is too short. We never know when we are going to die and oftentimes we delay our passions and dreams in lieu of a stable job, income, for a BMW, and a 3-bedroom house with a white picket fence.

Andre Kertesz grew up mostly in the countryside of Hungary, and although he enjoyed his peaceful life there, he knew that there was more to life.

One of his dreams was to travel to Paris and though he was first discouraged by his family, he decided to go anyway.

Interviewer: You were 30 years old when you left Hungary to spend years in Paris. What led you to choose that city in particular?

Kertesz: “I went to Paris because I just had to go, I didn't know why. I had a small amount of money to keep me going for a while, I had my creative power, and I had my dreams. There were three of us brothers; my father had died, and it had been Mother's wish that the family should stay together. In 1925, however, she told me that if I still wanted to go, then I should go; she didn't want to hold me back.”

“She could see that Hungary was not the place to do what I wanted to do. So, one day she said, "You're right, son, there's no place for you here. What you want to do, you can't. Go, laddie." So go I did. I set off for Paris on the 25th of August, or maybe it was September.”

Kertesz took a personal risk by going to Paris, and leaving his home. However with hard work, perseverance, and a bit of luck, his work began to flourish and spread around Paris:

Kertesz: “My work went the rounds, from hand to hand, in the cafés, and more and more people got to know it. I was then happy to give away to my acquaintances pictures that would nowadays fetch fifteen or twenty thousand dollars. As I never did have much of a head for business, I don't see a red cent from that nowadays.”

“After 14 months, a dealer put on an exhibition. Thank you. Gradually, I was getting invitations everywhere; things were going fine. I carried on with what I had imbibed in Budapest, and that spirit suited the French perfectly. They put what I was doing down to the Parisian spirit; they don't know it's half Paris, half Budapest.”

#### **Takeaway point:**

Not everyone has the luxury or the ability to travel, or pursue their own dreams (on their own terms).

However, I think regardless of your position in life, you always have the option of pursuing your dreams and passions.

As a street photographer (if you have a family and kids) it might be hard to move to Paris. But it won't stop you from meeting other local street photographers, organizing exhibitions, books, and shooting on the streets when you have free time (lunch breaks or weekends).

Follow your dreams, and they will take you where you want to be.

### **3. Take a higher perspective**

"I like high shots. If you are on the same level, you lose many things." - André Kertész

One of things that Kertesz is most famous for is taking images from a high vantage point.

What is great about these images is that they turn the streets into more of an abstraction and show the world from a unique perspective we don't normally see.

#### **Takeaway point:**

Follow in the footsteps of Kertesz and try taking photos from higher perspectives. The majority of our street pho-



tography is shot at ground level, which can make great photos (but can be visually boring).

Try to take the elevator up to the top floor of apartment or office buildings and photograph shooting down. You may find this to be a much more unique way of approaching street photography, as you can turn your subjects into abstractions of light, shadows and forms.

## 4. Focus on geometry and form

Kertesz was one of the earliest photographers to embrace photography as a true artistic medium. He infused his work with beautifully crafted compositions, based on geometry and form.

If you look at a lot of his work, he truly ‘painted with light’ considering the angle in which the light hit his subjects, the shadows they cast, as well as the contrast between the blacks and the whites.

When shooting in the streets, Kertesz integrated forms and shapes into the foreground and background to give more elegance, form, and poetry to his

subjects (think of the photo of the woman walking by the curved chairs in the photo below).

At first, people thought that what he was doing was crazy - shooting in the streets and photographing these ordinary things. However, when Kertesz showed the photos he took and what he saw, people soon understood what he was doing.

Kertesz didn't just focus on form and geometry in the streets. He also took many photos of still lives, which kept his eye sharp. He photographed forms as mundane as forks, glasses and flowers in his home. Nothing was too ordinary to be photographed. But when he photographed them, he photographed them in a way that highlighted the beauty in the mundane.

### **Takeaway point:**

Realize that you don't always have to be shooting street photography. To keep your eye for composition sharp, enjoy taking snapshots of ordinary things, but compose them well. Photograph

your family and children and focus on framing and composition.

Photograph the cup of coffee you are drinking and consider the light and the elements of shape and form. Study art books (and the work of Kertesz) and visit museums. See how other artists were able to beautifully compose and photograph what they saw. Then, over time, your eye for composition will become intuitive.

## 5. Experiment with different equipment

Throughout his life, Kertesz's experimented with many different mediums of photography. He shot with glass plates, 35mm on a Leica, with telephotos, and even a Polaroid SX-70 toward the end of his life.

In *Bystander: A History of Street Photography*, Colin Westerbeck shares how Kertesz experimented with different focal lengths to achieve his artistic vision:

"Some experiments Kertesz began to make with different lenses were also a

sign of his increasing concern with formal issues around the time. In 1927, for a view looking down a public stair in Montmartre, he removed the front element from the lens assembly on his Voigtländer camera. The result was a slight telephoto effect that flattened the scene and thereby made the picture function more as a two-dimensional surface. This pleased him, so he developed various ways to enhance it, eventually acquiring custom-made lenses ranging from 90mm to 260mm."

### Takeaway point:

I feel that it is important for us as photographers to constantly experiment and find out which approaches and techniques work for us.

Now let's not turn this into an excuse for us to just go out and buy every single camera in existence or fall victim to GAS (gear acquisition syndrome). However, if you feel that a certain focal length or piece of equipment can help you achieve your artistic vision, go for it.

For example, if you don't like the colors you are shooting on digital, experi-

ment with color film. Do you feel that your images aren't intimate enough? Try shooting with a wider lens. Do you want less distortion in your images? Perhaps get a longer lens.

Never let equipment be your barrier to creativity. But once again, remember to balance the fine line between photographic output and interests in equipment.

## 6. Feel what you photograph

"Seeing is not enough; you have to feel what you photograph" – Andre Kertesz

I feel that the most memorable images are the ones that touch you on an emotional basis. Photographs that hit you straight in the gut and imprint themselves onto your memory.

These can be photos that are sad and tragic, photos that are happy and full of life, or strange and whimsical.

Kertesz also shares his thoughts on technique and why he feels that emotions are more important:

"Technique isn't important. Technique is in the blood. Events and mood are more important than good light and the happening is what is important." - Andre Kertesz

Kertesz also shares that he doesn't feel that images have to be technically perfect. Technically perfect images without expressions don't mean much to him:

"If you want to write, you should learn the alphabet. You write and write and in the end you have a beautiful, perfect alphabet. But it isn't the alphabet that is important. The important thing is what you are writing, what you are expressing. The same thing goes for photography. Photographs can be technically perfect and even beautiful, but they have no expression." - Andre Kertesz.

### Takeaway point:

So when you are out shooting on the streets-- don't just be attracted by pretty forms, lights, and shadows. Rather, look for the emotions. Look for hand gestures that signal how a person

feels. Let your heart guide you when shooting in the streets.

You can also let your emotions guide your editing process. Rather than just judging your photos based on what is composed and framed nicely, judge your photos based on whether they have any emotional impact. If a photograph fails to elicit any sort of emotion from you, consider it dead.

## 7. Be patient for the right moment

"The moment always dictates in my work. What I feel, I do. This is the most important thing for me. Everybody can look, but they don't necessarily see. I never calculate or consider; I see a situation and I know that it's right, even if I have to go back to get the proper lighting." - Andre Kertesz

Kertesz embraced what we commonly know as "the decisive moment" in photography - the moment in which all of the elements of a frame come together perfectly. For Kertesz, photography was all about seeing the world in a unique

way. Not to just look at people, places, and things - but to truly see them on a deeper level.

Kertesz wouldn't always be certain when the "right moment" was, but he would photograph on instinct - from his gut.

In terms of composing his images, he would often be patient and only click when he felt that the composition was complete:

"I just walk around, observing the subject from various angles until the picture elements arrange themselves into a composition that pleases my eye." - Andre Kertesz

### Takeaway point:

Creating great composition in the street is insanely difficult. There is so much chaos in the street. How can we take all of this disorder and create elegant forms?

Kertesz suggests two things:

a) First of all, consider the light when you are photographing. If you see that the light isn't good, perhaps come



back to the scene at a better time when the light is better (golden hour - during sunrise or sunset).

b) Observe a scene from different angles. So, when you see something worth photographing, move your feet and look at the scene from different angles and see which is the most pleasing to your eye. And then click when you find the moment to be right.

## 8. Stay an amateur

When we think of the word: "amateur" we generally tend to think of it as a negative term. We call people who aren't skilled to be amateurs. In photography, "amateur photographers" are known to be the bumbling hobbyist photographers who take poor compositions, have way too much equipment, and wear nerdy photo-vests when out and about.

However the true word of the word "amateur" is someone who does something for the love of it, rather than being a "professional" (someone who does something for money/a living).

Kertesz embraces the fact that he is an amateur in photography and that it is the most beautiful way for an individual to express him/herself:

"I am an amateur and intend to remain one my whole life long. I attribute to photography the task of recording the real nature of things, their interior, their life. The photographer's art is a continuous discovery, which requires patience and time. A photograph draws its beauty from the truth with which it's marked."

"For this very reason I refuse all the tricks of the trade and professional virtuosity which could make me betray my career. As soon as I find a subject which interests me, I leave it to the lens to record it truthfully. Look at the reporters and at the amateur photographer! They both have only one goal; to record a memory or a document. And that is pure photography." -André Kertész

### Takeaway point:

Embrace the term "amateur" and know that you photograph for the love of it. Do not view your photography as less important just because you don't

make a living from it. Oftentimes, being a professional photographer can corrupt the first reason why you picked up a camera - for the pure love of it.

And as Kertész suggests to us: once you find a subject, a concept, or a theme that interests you, fully embrace it and use your photography as a medium to record what you find to be truthful. Make your street photography a way to record what you see in life and make it beautiful and immortal.

## 9. Be satisfied

One of the most tragic things I discovered about Kertész is the fact that for a long period of his life he was quite unhappy, feeling that he wasn't as recognized as he should be.

For example, he was rarely cited for his work and even excluded from lists of magazines published on the "most memorable photographs" and being on lists of "featured photographers."

For example, the magazine *Coronet* published his work in 1937, but in 1939 he was excluded from an issue showing

its "most memorable photographs". He also was excluded from the June 1941 issue of *Vogue*, which was dedicated to photography. Even though he contributed more than 30 commissioned photo essays and articles to *Vogue* and *House and Garden*, he was omitted from the list of featured photographers.

I feel that this excerpt on Wikipedia perfectly sums up the frustrations that Kertész faced in his life:

"Throughout most of his career Kertész was depicted as the "unknown soldier" who worked behind the scenes of photography, yet was rarely cited for his work, even into his death in the 1980s. Kertész thought himself unrecognized throughout his life, despite spending his life in the eternal search for acceptance and fame. Though Kertész received numerous awards for photography, he never felt both his style and work was accepted by critics and art audiences alike."  
- Wikipedia

### Takeaway point:

Even the greatest and most famous photographers in history feel the strain

that we face as ordinary photographers. Kertesz spent much of his life searching for fame and recognition for his work, but didn't receive it until very late into his life, and still wasn't as satisfied as he felt he should.

I personally feel that spending one's life in search of fame and recognition is a waste of time. Rather, I feel the most important thing is to create work that is relevant and meaningful to you. After all, fame and recognition is dependent on the opinion of others - something you can't control.

## 10. Stay hungry

To contradict the previous point, I feel that it is also important to stay motivated and hungry when it comes to your photography.

Even when Kertesz was 90 years old, he created a new portfolio and shared it with the photographer Susan May Tell. When Tell asked him what kept him going, Kertesz responded: "I am still hungry."

**Takeaway point:**

I feel that it is important to stay hungry in your photography, experimenting with new techniques, approaching different subjects, and pursuing new projects. However, I think that this should be interpreted as the hunger to please yourself, rather than the hunger to be accepted by others.

As Steve Jobs famously said (perfectly summing up his life): "Stay hungry, stay foolish." So go out. Keep shooting. And disregard what others think. Shoot for yourself, and never stop.

## Conclusion

I think that in order to gain more insights into street photography it is necessary to study the greats. Kertesz was certainly one of the most pivotal figures in street photography. If Henri Cartier-Bresson called him one of the most influential photographers, there must be strong truth to it.

If you want to learn more about Kertesz, I would recommend really delving into his photographs. Purchase books by Kertesz (or look at them online) and see how he embraced form,

composition, and light in his images as well as the emotion and sentimentality of his images.

I think, if we all aspire to take photos with beautiful form and strong emotions (as Kertesz did), we will be on our way to someday becoming great photographers as well.





6

## ANSEL ADAMS

Ansel Adams is one of the titans of photographic history. When I started as a photographer, I was primarily interested in landscape photography. I studied and consumed the work of Adams.

What drew me most to his work was the minimalism, zen, and the sense of calm from his photographs. I learned early on that Ansel Adams didn't just "take" photos—he "made" his photographs, through his extensive darkroom work.

Furthermore, I began to appreciate nature more from him. During his entire life, he canvassed to support the wilderness—politically, and through his photographs.

There are many extensive biographies of Ansel Adams online, so I won't cover too much of his history or past here. I wanted instead, to dedicate this post to practical tips and lessons I've learned from him, and how I've applied these theories to my own personal photography.

Even though you might not be a landscape photographer, Ansel Adams' personal philosophies can help you in all genres of photography, and in life.

## 1. “You don't take a photograph, you make it”

Ansel Adams is famous for his “zone system” — a complicated method of rendering the “perfect” monochromatic print.

He was famous for saying that you don't just “take” photos— you “make” photos.

He saw photography as a form of art. Clicking the shutter wasn't enough to make an image. You also had to spend time in the darkroom, to bring to life what you saw and felt in real life.

Therefore Ansel Adams spent countless hours in the darkroom, always trying to make the “perfect” print.

### **Takeaway point:**

I also believe the same is in our photography — clicking the shutter isn't enough. We need to use post-processing techniques to create a certain aesthetic, mood, and emotion in our photographs.

There is a fine line, however. Many modern photographers spend too much time in the “digital darkroom” and try to polish turds into pieces of art. No matter how good your post-processing techniques, if your photos aren't good to start with, they're not going to get any better.

Crap in, crap out.

However that isn't to say you shouldn't post-process your photos at all. The common misconception in pho-

tography (especially for beginners) is that somehow post-processing your photos are “cheating.”

I think all of us as photographers have a certain vision about the photos we would like to make. Try to pre-visualize the photos you want to make before you take them. Then afterwards, strive hard to “make” your photos.

## 2. Know where to stand

“A good photograph is knowing where to stand.” - Ansel Adams

In landscape photography, position is everything. Where you are situated in respect to your landscape, will determine your perspective, the mood of the photograph, as well as the composition.

I know some of the most epic landscape photographers will hike with 50 pounds of gear, just to get the best position. They will use wide-angle lenses, and venture into places nobody else dares to go.

The same applies to any form of photography.

**Takeaway point:**

In street photography, you can distill it down to two things (credit David Hurn from Magnum):

1. Where to stand
2. When to click the shutter

Don’t be lazy when you’re shooting. Know how to move your feet. And instead of using zoom lenses, I recommend using “foot zoom.”

By moving your feet and getting a better position, you will create more unique and creative images. Not only that, but practice crouching, moving to the left, to the right, and sometimes even your tippy-toes. Try to hike to get very high perspectives, and sometimes lie on your stomach or back to get very low perspectives.

## 3. Photograph how it feels (not how it looks)

As photographers, we forget that art is more about the emotion it evokes in the viewer, not how it looks.

In photography, it is easy to forget this point. Why? The camera is known

for being the most descriptive form of image-making.

However if we want to make more effective images, we should focus on photographing how a scene feels— not how it looks. Ansel Adams tells why he decided to photograph his famous image, “Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico” shot with an extremely dark sky:

“My Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico has the emotion and the feeling that the experience of seeing the actual moonrise created in me, but it is not at all realistic. Merely clicking the camera and making a simple print from the negative would have created a wholly different—and ordinary—photograph. People have asked me why the sky is so dark, thinking exactly in terms of the literal. But the dark sky is how it felt.” - Ansel Adams

### **Takeaway point:**

When it comes to your photography, what kind of emotions are you trying to evoke in your viewer? Are you trying to show them beauty, sadness, melancholy, excitement, or misery in your photos?

How do your photos make you feel?  
What kind of feeling do you want your viewer to walk away with?

We can create a certain emotion or feeling in our photos by different methods and techniques. If we are photographing landscapes, we should look for the light, mist, smoke, fog, or other natural splendors. And the way we post-process our photos afterwards will change the emotion dramatically.

If you’re shooting people or in the streets, look for body language, eye-contact, or hand-gestures.

Lastly, shoot with your heart. Don’t just think of composition and framing when you’re out on the streets. Photograph with your emotion, and your entire soul. This way, you will be able to better communicate your feelings through your photographs.

## **4. Pre-visualize your photos**

Going off the prior point, Ansel Adams always tries to pre-visualize his photos. Not only does he look at what his subject is in front of him, but he tries to



pre-visualize how the final photo will look like.

Ansel Adams also shares that if he pre-visualizes something exciting, it might make a good photograph:

“In my mind’s eye, I am visualizing how a particular revelation of sight and feeling will appear on a print. If I am looking at you, I can continue to see you as a person, but I am also in the habit of shifting from that consciously dimensional presence to a photograph, relating you in your surroundings to an image in my mind. If what I see in my mind excites me, there is a good chance it will make a good photograph. It is an intuitive sense and also an ability that comes from a lot of practice. Some people never can get it.” - Ansel Adams

### **Takeaway point:**

We have all faced this, especially when starting off in photography: we see a scene that excites us, and we click the shutter. We look at our LCD screen, and we are massively disappointed. What we saw in our LCD screen did not correspond with what we saw in real life.

To become a better photographer is to better-translate what you see in real life, and make it appear in a photograph.

This happens by improving your composition, understanding your technical settings, understanding your camera, and also knowing where to stand, when to click, and how to post-processing your photos.

Intuition in photography comes with a lot of practice. The more images you shoot, the more you scrutinize them after-the-fact, get feedback and critique from your peers, the more you will internalize pre-visualization, and figure out how you want your final images to look and feel.

## **5. Ignore critics**

Even someone as established as Ansel Adams had critics and “haters” in his lifetime. With more success, comes more envy, and more negative criticism from others.

How did Ansel Adams deal with his critics? He just ignored them:

“Critics are never comfortable with anything that catches on. Some people have said that I’m just a postcard photographer. I don’t even bother replying to them. Others have gone overboard the other way and have given all sorts of mystical interpretations to my work. There are very few critics who have understood my work or considered it fairly.”

Adams continues by sharing how superficial critics can be, and how ridiculous they are:

“As a rule, critics don’t get to the bottom of anything; they are superficial. It doesn’t really matter. Art critics are a sort of ridiculous bunch, for the most part. In general, I suppose I’m respected by critics and other photographers, but I also annoy a lot of young people. It’s perfectly natural that they oppose what they consider my conservative ideas about photography.”

### **Takeaway point:**

No matter what, you can never please 100% of your audience with your photography. In-fact, I think becoming a great artist is to not compromise your vi-

sion. The more innovative you are in your photography, the more people you are going to confuse, frustrate, and alienate.

It is all part of the photographic process, and finding your own voice in photography.

If you start getting negative criticism from others, treat it as a sign of success. After all, if you’re a nobody, nobody will ever criticize your work (not even your mom).

## **6. On technology and photography**

The thing that blew me away the most was how excited Ansel Adams was about the future of photography— especially the technology side of things.

Often myself (and my fellow hipsters) romanticize the past of photography. We obsess ourselves with older techniques, shooting film, and printing in the darkroom.

However even Ansel Adams (the master of the darkroom print) was excited for future digital technologies. He

shared how he believed that digital photography would enhance images, and also make even better results:

“Electronic photography will soon be superior to anything we have now. The first advance will be the exploration of existing negatives. I believe the electronic processes will enhance them. I could get superior prints from my negatives using electronics. Then the time will come when you will be able to make the entire photograph electronically. With the extremely high resolution and the enormous control you can get from electronics, the results will be fantastic. I wish I were young again!”

We are lucky to be alive currently with digital technology. I’m sure if Ansel Adams was still around today, he would be using the best technology he could afford.

Ansel Adams also (correctly) predicts the future of photography:

“For me the future of the image is going to be in electronic form. You will see perfectly beautiful images on an electronic screen. And I'd say that would be

very handsome. They would be almost as close as the best reproductions.”

### **Takeaway point:**

You are currently living in the best generation, ever, for photography. We have access to amazing digital technologies that can help us create what kind of image we want. We have powerful computers, smartphones, and cameras that empower us.

We can share our photos with millions (or even billions) around the world. Rather than wishing we were born in another century, let us be grateful for what we have, and make the best out of what we can.

## **7. On music and photography**

One of the things that interests me most about Ansel Adams is his affinity to music. Initially his goal in life was to become a classical pianist, but he decided to pick up photography instead. Ansel Adams explains how he first got interested in photography:

“In 1930 I was in Taos, and Paul Strand showed me his negatives. They were so gorgeous, they confirmed my urge, and I said, ‘That's it. I want to be a photographer.’ Some friends said, ‘Oh, don't give up music. A camera cannot express the human soul.’ The only argument I had for that was that maybe the camera couldn't, but I might try through the camera.”

Despite the negative feedback from his friends, he decided to pursue photography anyways. And furthermore, studying music gave him discipline in his photography:

“Anyway, it worked. I seemed to have an eye, and everything went very smoothly. I had no wracking problems. I progressed. Study in music gave me a fine basis for the discipline of photography. I'd have been a real Sloppy Joe if I hadn't had that. So before I knew it, I had done some jobs and begun to make a go of it. And here I am.”

Ansel Adams also shares more about how music instilled an incredible work ethic in him:

“Well, in music you have this absolutely necessary discipline from the very beginning. And you are constructing various shapes and controlling values. Your notes have to be accurate or else there's no use playing. There's no casual approximation.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Life often takes unexpected turns. We start college thinking we will be a doctor, and then end up studying sociology and becoming a photographer. Sometimes we pursue some sort of art, and we end up discovering another form of art.

Take your past experiences, passions, and hobbies— and combine them with your photography.

How can your hobby of fixing on cars change how you approach photography? How can your background in theater, dance, music, or sculpture influence your photography?

How can your personality, past university studies, or life experiences influence, motivate, or make your photography more creative?



They often call this “cross-pollination” — taking two different fields of art, combining them, and making something totally unique.

This is what Ansel Adams did, and this is what you can do too.

## 8. Make photos look like photos

Photographers tried to make their photos look like paintings. They would use soft-focus, diffused light, and textured papers. They called this “Pictorialism”.

Ansel Adams and the “group f/64” rebelled against this notion. Ansel Adams states below what the mission of “group f/64” was, and how revolutionary it was:

“It was devotion to the straight print, paper surfaces without textures that would conflict with the image texture. It was a belief in sharpness throughout the photograph. Good craft, in other words. F/64 is a small stop on the camera that gives great depth of field and sharpness. It was the concentration on

images that were not sentimental or allegorical.”

Adams continues by sharing how the working philosophy of “group f/64” was the “anti-pictorialism”:

“It was a reaction, a strong reaction against the pictorialists, who were working their heads off to make a photograph look like anything but a photograph. In an attempt to be creative, they were retouching and diffusing the images. Hideous stuff! They were the ones Weston called the fuzzy-wuzzies. They would go out into the street and find some old bum with a matted beard, and they’d get a tablet of Braille and make the old man put his fingers on the Braille. They would place him in an old chair, looking up through a cloud of cigarette smoke that was illuminated by a spotlight. The title would be Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory. That must have been done a thousand times. There were also slimy nudes. Those photographs were horribly contrived, shallow works, terrible moods—just terrible stuff that completely lacked creative intensity, the very thing we were so excited about.”

What Ansel Adams and the group tried to achieve was to create photos that looked like photos. Photos without any gimmicks. What they called “straight” images — photos that were straightforward.

They would use sharp lenses, instead of soft-focus lenses. They believed in dodging and burning their photos (increasing contrast or brightness in certain areas) but not so much that it made the photograph look too “dreamy.”

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the great legacies of the group f/64 and Ansel Adams is that they made photography acceptable.

During the time of Ansel Adams, photography wasn’t seen as a “real” form of art. That was only reserved for the painters.

Therefore when photographers started off, they wanted their photos to be taken as “art” — and therefore tried to make their photos look like paintings. Or tried to make their photos not look like photos.

Fortunately we live in a time where photography is (finally) accepted as a “real” art (at least by most art circles). We have museums, galleries, and schools dedicated to photography.

I think the takeaway point is that we should be grateful for photography — what it is, instead of wishing for what it wasn’t.

Don’t make analogies with photography with other arts, and say it is “superior” or “inferior” in certain ways. Photography is what it is. Treat it as its own form of art.

And let us be grateful to have the great honor of making photographs.

## **Conclusion**

Ansel Adams has re-solidified my belief in digital photography, and how new technologies has helped empower us in photography. Furthermore, he has taught me the importance of pre-visualizing before I make photos, not to just take random snapshots.

Ansel Adams has also taught me to shoot with my heart and emotions, and

not to just photograph how something looks like, but how it feels.

Ansel Adams is one of the most famous photographers in history, and will continue to be. He lived well into his 80's, and lived a creative life all-throughout. Although he achieved commercial success, it came much later in life.

His passion was to make photos that showed the beauty of nature, to educate others about the importance of preserving nature, and to devote his life to making the most beautiful prints.

His philosophies and images can inspire all of us, no matter what genre of photography we shoot.

Thank you for your beautiful images Ansel, and your legacy.



7

## ARAKI

Nobuyoshi Araki (more commonly known as Araki) is one of the most controversial figures in the photography world. While he is a rock star and a superhero in Japan, a lot of the outside world sees his work as sick, pornographic, and misogynist. This couldn't be further from the truth.

I first discovered Araki's work when I was in Japan, and I would often hear his name said alongside Daido Moriyama— one of the most famous Japanese street photographers in history.



When I first saw Araki's work, I was a bit shocked. Girls tied up in ropes, lots of nudity, close-up of genitals, and his sexual images were unlike anything I'd ever seen.

But upon closer look, I realized that his work was unique. It wasn't pornographic—a lot of his women showed fierceness, power, and a defiant look (even though they were tied up in ropes).

Araki is also one of the most prolific photographers in history. He was born in 1940 (currently he is 75 years old, in 2016) and he has published over 400+ photography books and magazines. He is constantly shooting everyday, uses many different camera formats, and is adored by all his subjects. And if you are curious, yes he does sleep with almost all of his female models (although Araki admits he is slowing down to his age).

My personal favorite work of Araki is "Sentimental Journey" where he documents his personal life with his wife (who eventually passes away). He documents their honeymoon, their marriage,

her sickness, her death, and then his sense of loneliness and wandering afterwards. It is an incredibly intimate book, and something that touches your soul.

I still only have a superficial understanding of Araki (there are many other scholars out there who study his work intensely), but I have still learned a lot of his life philosophies through his photography.

Although he is not a traditional "street photographer" (he is mostly known for his portrait and nude work), he also has done quite a bit of street photography in his day. He constantly is on the streets of Tokyo, camera-in-hand.

Let us use this time to see the lessons we can learn from Nobuyoshi Araki:

## 1. Photographs are diary entries

"Photographs are diary entries... That's all they can be. Photographs are just documentations of a day's event. At the same time, they drag the past into the present and also continue into the fu-

ture. A day's occurrence evokes both the past and the future. That's why I want to clearly date my pictures. It's actually frustrating, that's why I now photograph the future..." - Nobuyoshi Araki February 10, 2012

Araki says that photographs are diary entries. You can see that a lot of his work includes the date stamp in his photographs. His photography is a meditation about time, life, and death. Not only does photography document the events of a day, it predicts what is going to happen into the future.

What inspired Araki to see photography as a way to keep a personal diary? He mentions in an interview below about how the cultural trend was diary-keeping:

"During the 1980s, everyone was taking pictures like a diary. In that cultural climate, the first cameras with a date function were introduced to the public. Such a camera allowed you to date all your photographs. It could be manipulated so easily. I took photographs, one after another, with different dates since I

could switch the past with the future by manipulating the dates on an automatic camera."

Furthermore, Araki says that photography is "lying" — because you are creating your own version of reality. There is no true "objectivity" in photography, because we always re-interpret what we see:

"Photography is lying, and I am a liar by nature. Anything in front of you, except a real object, is fake. Photographers might consider how to express their love through photography, but those photographs are "fake love." That is how I make the future and past. That's why I entitled it "Pseudo-Diary." I can create 2020 in 2010."

### **Takeaway point:**

I love the idea that photography is keeping a personal journal or diary. In today's cultural climate, it is all about sharing everything. And I would say, we over-share. We use social media to over-document and over-share our lives. We never have time to reflect, meditate on

our own days, our own lives, for our own purposes.

I feel that photography should be a personal journey. Photography is often made less personal by oversharing. I still do believe in the value of sharing, but know that like a diary— you don't need to share every single entry with the rest of the world. And that is what makes a diary so valuable — you can share your deepest, darkest secrets with yourself, in order to analyze your life, your day, and your future.

## 2. Life is nostalgia

“Photography, well, not so much photography but life itself, is nostalgia I realized, having seen these moments: in this day and age of digital media, in the center of Tokyo you see these sticks, right, they take these sticks and chase around crayfish and carp. Boyhood memories and stuff, that sort of nostalgia is the most important thing in life, the old man has realized(laughs).” - March 2011, Nobuyoshi Araki

Photographs are naturally nostalgia; because the moment you click the shut-

ter, the moment has passed. Therefore when we look at our own childhood photographs, or photos shot a few decades earlier, we look at these moments with nostalgia.

I feel that nostalgia is important for a photographer, because it allows us to appreciate the past. It helps us remember the beauty of the past, the people of the past, and the past events.

However sometimes nostalgia can hold us back as photographers. We don't appreciate the present moment (and possible future), because we over-romanticize the past.

### Takeaway point:

Know the photos you shoot today are going to be tomorrow's past. Photography is documenting history. Know that 30 years from now, the photos you shoot today are going to make you feel nostalgic.

## 3. Use life's disadvantages to your benefit

In 2013, Araki lost the vision in his right eye due to a retinal artery obstruc-

tion. Instead of complaining about the injustice of life, he used it as an advantage to inspire his new exhibit of his work called “Love on the left eye.” The concept was that his photographs were split in half (there would be a photo on the left side, and the right side of the frame was all black).

#### **Takeaway point:**

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. The best artists in history are the ones who used misfortune, difficulties, and setbacks to inspire their creativity.

If you have some sort of illness, disability, or are crippled— use that to your benefit.

You also might not live in the most interesting place in the world, you might not have the best camera, and you might not have much free time— but these are all “creative constraints” which you can use to your benefit. It is all about your attitude, mindset, and the way you see life.

## 4. Find inspirations from paintings

When asked about Araki’s inspirations, he mentioned how wood block prints and calligraphy inspired his photography and art:

“I’m influenced by paintings, Ukiyo-e (wood block prints of everyday life in historical Japan) and calligraphy. Specifically, I discovered the beauty of monochrome through calligraphy.”

#### **Takeaway point:**

Many photographers and artists don’t find inspiration directly in their own field—but from outside fields.

See how you can find inspiration in outside arts. Cross-pollinate your photography with theater, dance, calligraphy, fonts, music, architecture, painting, drawing, or any other art form.

By combining different types of art, you can be truly creative.

## 5. Shoot without prejudice

“In general, the most challenging aspect of photography is taking pictures



without any prejudice. As I am taking pictures, I am so engrossed that I do not think of anything else – like how to take pictures, which technique I should use etc. The mere act of taking pictures, this is the most exciting thing to me.”

As photographers in the West, we are trained to shoot with prejudice. We are told to only photograph interesting things.

But in the East, they are a lot less discriminating. A lot of the Eastern philosophy sees everyday and ordinary life as interesting and meaningful.

### **Takeaway point:**

Try as an experiment to photograph everything you see (no matter how boring it is) without discrimination. My suggestion would be to look at ordinary objects in your house, and try to make it interesting. Photograph from your gut, and don't refrain from shooting a subject that you might think is “boring” or a “cliche.”

Of course you don't want to share all your photos, but try to be less self-critical and self-censoring when shooting

on the streets. Keep the passion and joy of making images alive in your heart.

## **6. On subjectivity in photography**

When Araki was asked about his photography, he shared how subjectivity was important in his photography. The photographers from his generation were all about objectivity— photographing what something was. Araki saw things differently; he wanted to photograph something the way he saw it. The more personal he made it, the more subjective he made it. Araki explains more:

“I needed to break down the me-and-you barrier. I can say that I have collapsed the previous tradition of photography that emphasized objectivity. In the past, photographers felt they had to eliminate their subjectivity as much as possible. I consider myself a “subjective” photographer. I try to get as close as possible to the subject by putting myself within the frame. In addition, this action avoids making my photographs mere works of art. Photographs taken by others are better photos than I took [

laughs]. Sometimes I give my camera to a subject and my subject takes a picture of me.”

**Takeaway point:**

Get close to your subject and the action. Put yourself in the frame (whether figuratively or literally). Put your emotion and soul into the images you make.

Remember that every single photograph you shoot is a self-portrait of yourself. Don't be afraid to show your personal and subjective view of the world. After all, that is what makes your photographs valuable.

## 8. On productivity

Araki is known to be one of the most prolific and productive photographers in history. How does he stay passionate after all these decades? He explains more below:

“It is a way of life. Taking photographs is like heartbeat and breathing. The sound of pressing the shutter is like a heartbeat. I don't think about productivity at all. I just shoot life itself. It is very natural for me.”

Araki doesn't force himself to shoot. It is simply his nature. He takes photographs like a dog scratches himself. He does what feels natural to himself.

Araki also loves the act of shooting the most. That is what excites him and keeps him going:

“For a photographer, the moment he shoots is most thrilling. Developing and printing comes later; it is secondary. That's why we are all poor. I enjoy taking pictures very much, but I am not thinking about the rest.”

But what drives him to click the shutter? Araki talks about the photographic “impulse” below:

“It must be kami (god). What makes a photographer take a picture? What makes an artist paint a picture? It can't really be explained. It's a kind of instinct or impulse.”

**Takeaway point:**

Do you love taking images? Do you love the art and the process of photography? Is photography something you do with your heart because you need to do

it? Or do you force yourself to do it against your own will?

Know that you don't need to always be shooting or always be producing. Follow your instinct. If you only prefer to shoot once every few days, weeks, or months— so be it. The important thing is to follow your nature (not the nature of anybody else).

## 9. On publishing photo books

What keeps Araki going in terms of publishing so many photography books? He's published over 400 books— what inspires him?

This is how Araki explains it:

“It's like diarrhea. When I take photographs, I publish them immediately so that I don't get constipated.”

He publishes so many photography books because if he doesn't publish, he feels like he is getting backed up and constipated. He needs a way to release his images from his subconscious, and that is how he does it.

Araki also talks more about how he edits his photography books, and his creative process and collaboration with others:

“In general, I think photographers should edit as well. Making photography demands a series of choices, like, who to photograph and which photographs to show. I have so many photo books. However, I think I have the responsibility of editing my photo books. For those works that have the word “sentimental” in their titles, I edit them by myself. All my photos are great, so even if someone else edits them, it still makes a great book.”

Araki continues by saying how important collaboration is to make an interesting photography book:

“In general, most of the time it is more interesting when editors are involved. Photography is collaboration, because taking a picture requires collaboration with models, and editors are necessary collaborators for me. Collaborations make things better. One gets more excited (sexually) when someone else is looking, right?”

### **Takeaway point:**

Photography is a social act. Both in making photos, and sharing photos.

I feel that every photographer should share his/her work. But however you decide to share your images—it is up to you. You decide how to share your work, when to share your work, and how often to share your work.

For Araki that meant to publish photography books. For you it might mean uploading your photos to social media, doing “zines” (magazines), self-publishing, doing exhibitions, or your own books.

Also when you’re putting together your work to publish, always try to get a second opinion. Try to collaborate with other photographers or editors (when it comes to selecting your best work, sequencing it, or designing your work). The more you collaborate, the more good ideas you can get from others, and the more flaws you can see in your work.

## 10. Capturing the soul of the subject

What is the most important thing to capture, according to Araki? the soul of your subject:

“I’m trying to catch the soul of the person I’m shooting. The soul is everything. That’s why all women are beautiful to me, no matter what they look like or how their bodies have aged.”

### **Takeaway point:**

How your subject look doesn’t matter. What is the most important is to capture their soul. To capture their emotion, their heart, their moods. And the more intimate your photos are, the more memorable and engaging they will be with your viewer.

## 11. Don’t be a professional

“Rather than shooting something that looks like a professional photograph, I want my work to feel intimate, like someone in the subject’s inner circle shot them.”

This is another concept I love from Araki—to make photographs that look personal, rather than “professional.”



Often we glamorize the idea of a professional photographer— with lots of fancy equipment, lights, assistants, and models.

But for me, I prefer the personal shots of others. I want to be transported into the shoes of the photographer. I want to feel intimacy with the subject in a frame. Because the more intimate the photograph feels, the more it pulls at my heart-strings and makes me see the world in a different way.

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't be a professional. Use cheaper equipment (smaller point and shoot cameras, or even your smartphone). Don't use fancy equipment, or don't feel the need to have a fancy background or scene.

Take photos of your everyday life, and personal friends and family in your own inner-circle.

Embrace the “snapshot aesthetic” — and show your closeness and intimacy with your subject with the world.

## 12. Shoot your own backyard

Many of us hate where we live. We wish we lived somewhere else— somewhere more foreign and exotic.

However Araki has made his work all in his own home-city. Sure we all think of Tokyo as exotic, but Araki declines (most of the time) to photograph in foreign places.

The reason Araki shoots in Tokyo isn't because it is exotic— but because it is familiar to him. He also gives the advice to other photographers to shoot what is around you and close to you:

“You have to shoot what's around you, what's familiar. I'm often invited to go overseas, but when I get there I always think, “Shit, I have to take more photographs of Japan.” So I focus on my neighborhood and things around me in daily life, like my girlfriend. I mean, we're Japanese, so you shouldn't even have to consciously tell yourself to shoot Japan. It should just come naturally to you. So in my case, I was like, “OK, I

should shoot a bunch of Japanese people,” which led to, “Well, why don’t I shoot the entire country,” and that eventually resulted in this “Faces of Japan” series.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I know it is tough— to appreciate where you live. To know that the grass is greener on your side (not on the other side).

My suggestion is to imagine yourself like an alien— coming to your own home city for the first time. What would you find interesting, unique, or weird? Document that.

Or you can think of doing a book or an exhibition on your own hometown. Take it seriously. Know the more “boring” and remote the place you live, the less likely it was documented by others. This is a huge opportunity.

Embrace life in the suburbs or anywhere that is boring. Remember to make the photographs personal and from your heart. Shoot what is familiar and close to you. Intimacy is what will make your photos sing to the viewer.

## **Conclusion**

Araki is still an enigma to me. I still don’t understand his entire psyche, why he photographs, and how he photographs. But what I do know is that he shoots in a way that is authentic to himself, and he shoots with his heart.

All of his subjects love him, and he has huge waiting lists of models who want them to photograph him. He doesn’t judge his subjects. He photographs the young as well as the old. He is active and engaged with his photography and subjects, and isn’t a distant bystander.

So friend, remember at the end of the day— photograph yourself. Photograph in a process that is authentic to you, and always disregard what others say about you and your art. That is what Araki does, and he has lived 70+ years faithfully to himself, and has created an incredible body of work.



8

## BLAKE ANDREWS

I want to write this article on a photographer, blogger, and overall cool guy — Blake Andrews.

I first saw Blake's work on the In-Public website, and was amazed by his surrealistic street photography— and his sharp eyes for shapes, forms, and visual elements.

If you have ever been on his blog: "B"— you can see he has one of the most unique voices in the photography community. He is outspoken, speaks his mind, and delivers quality photography commentary/interviews/book recommendations— with a fun style. He is one of the few (if only) bloggers I know who speaks without a

censor— and truly speaks his heart. There are few people out there with as much courage as he does.

Not only that, but he has been shooting for 20+ years, and is constantly pushing the boundaries of “street photography”. Based on a recent video interview and other interviews I have read about him online, here are some lessons I’ve learned from him:

## 1. Always be shooting

I don’t think there are any other street photographers (shooting film) whom are prolific as Blake. In the interview I did with him recently, he told me the longest period of time he has gone without shooting was probably 1-2 days (max). He always has a camera with him, and photographs constantly.

The only other photographer (who possibly might have shot more) was Garry Winogrand— who famously passed away with hundreds of undeveloped rolls of film.

I sometimes have an issue of staying inspired when it comes to my photogra-

phy. I have a hard time pushing myself to shoot everyday— so I asked Blake for some advice. The advice he gave me:

“If you walk for 2 hours somewhere, you will always at least take 1-2 interesting photographs.”

I think that is great advice. I sometimes bemoan the fact that nothing is interesting— and I have no motivation to shoot. But the reality is that if you spend enough time in public places and walking around— you will always find something interesting to photograph.

## 2. You can always make interesting photographs (regardless of where you live)

Not only that, but Blake has also inspired me by making me realize— you can make interesting photographs (regardless of where you live).

Blake currently lives in Eugene, Oregon— which isn’t exactly the most “popping” place for street photography. However he is able to find interesting scenes regardless. He photographs his children,



nature, macro things, and other things that interest him.

It is his constant curiosity of life that keeps him going.

### 3. Be part of a community

Another lesson I've learned from him is that he is very active in several photography groups based in Portland. He goes there at least 2-3 times a month, and it gives him the chance to print his work, share his work, and get feedback/critique from his work.

I think that being a part of a community is one of the best ways to stay inspired with your work. You have motivation to share and display your work, and also get honest feedback and critique which helps you grow and evolve.

### 4. Shoot first, ask questions later

Another lesson I learned from Blake is that when he's out shooting on the streets, he doesn't over-analyze his scenes. He just shoots instinctively, and then edits his shots afterwards.

This is a great lesson for me— because sometimes when I'm shooting on the streets, I over-analyze what I see in front of me, and just end up taking no shots at all.

Blake shared the importance of using your “right brain while shooting, left brain when looking over contact sheets.”

So when you're shooting on the streets, just focus on getting the shots. Shoot from the gut and from your instincts. Only when you go home and finally have time to sit down with your images— then you can start to more analytically analyze and edit your images.

### 5. Reality is stronger than imagination

Another point that Blake touched upon is the fact that “reality is stronger than imagination” — meaning, sometimes the things we see in the “real world” is more interesting and magical than what we can imagine.

I think as street photographers we can all relate to this. When I'm shooting on the streets, a lot of the things I see I

couldn't even make up. I don't really have a strong sense of imagination— but I think I have a good eye for spotting interesting things I see in the streets.

Another aspect of the “reality is stronger than imagination” part I like is that it proves how amazing and a wonderful place the world is. There are endless things to discover, explore, and see. As a street photographer, we have so much “content” in the real world to capture in our images.

So whenever we don't feel inspired— always remind yourself that there are so many interesting things to shoot. If you think your environment is “boring” — it is probably because you aren't looking hard enough.

## 6. Spend more time shooting (less time online)

I asked Blake what advice he would give to aspiring street photographers. He said that most street photographers would benefit from spending more time shooting, and spending less time online.

Of course this sounds like obvious advice, but it is a great reminder. I personally find myself getting into creative ruts when I spend too much time on the Internet— looking at photos on Flickr, websites, and social media. However the more time I spend exploring the streets— I never have a hard time finding something interesting.

So while it is good that you constantly educate and learn about photography— at the end of the day, your time is best spent shooting. If I could give a breakdown, I would say try to spend your time this way: 80% on the streets, and 20% educating yourself. There is no shortcut for time spent on the streets.

## 7. Get closer

Another solid piece of advice from Blake is beginner street photographers should get closer.

At the recent street photography workshop he taught alongside Matt Stuart from In-Public in Los Angeles, they gave the students an assignment of standing at a busy street corner for an

hour, and just photographing whatever entered their frame.

The common mistake? Most of the students didn't get close enough to their subjects.

A quote from Blake:

“Bystanders will quickly forget you, but a good photo lasts forever.”

So while it is true that you might get some people to get pissed off at you (for a little while) — the photo you capture will be forever.

So don't worry so much about upsetting people or getting yelled at. That is a small price to pay for creating a beautiful image.

## 8. Camera in hand always unless asleep in bed

This is another good “guiding principle” from Blake Andrews— “Camera in hand always unless asleep in bed.”

Blake always has a camera closely—and he is a compulsive shooter. I feel my problem is that I don't shoot enough,

and I certainly don't have my camera in my hand enough.

I personally do find the more I have my camera around my neck or in my hand, the more photographic opportunities I see. When my camera is hidden in my bag, I rarely see photographs.

Be curious and open to anything in the world. There are always great photos to be taken.

## 9. The grid project

An interesting project Blake Andrews has worked on is the “Portland Grid Project” in which he scoured almost every mile of Portland, photographing each section (a “grid”) and confining himself to those locations.

This assignment allowed him to get to know Portland really well— but also forced him to try to make interesting photographs in each part of the city.

I feel this is a great assignment to do in your own city. See how your city looks like on a map, and try to cut it up into little squares or grids. And everyday, try to shoot a different part of the grid—

and then at the end, you will have a beautiful mosaic of your entire city (in grid format).

I also believe that having a constraint in terms of space helps you be more creative. Not only that, but this assignment will help you seek out places in your own city that you normally don't go to.

## 10. Have fun

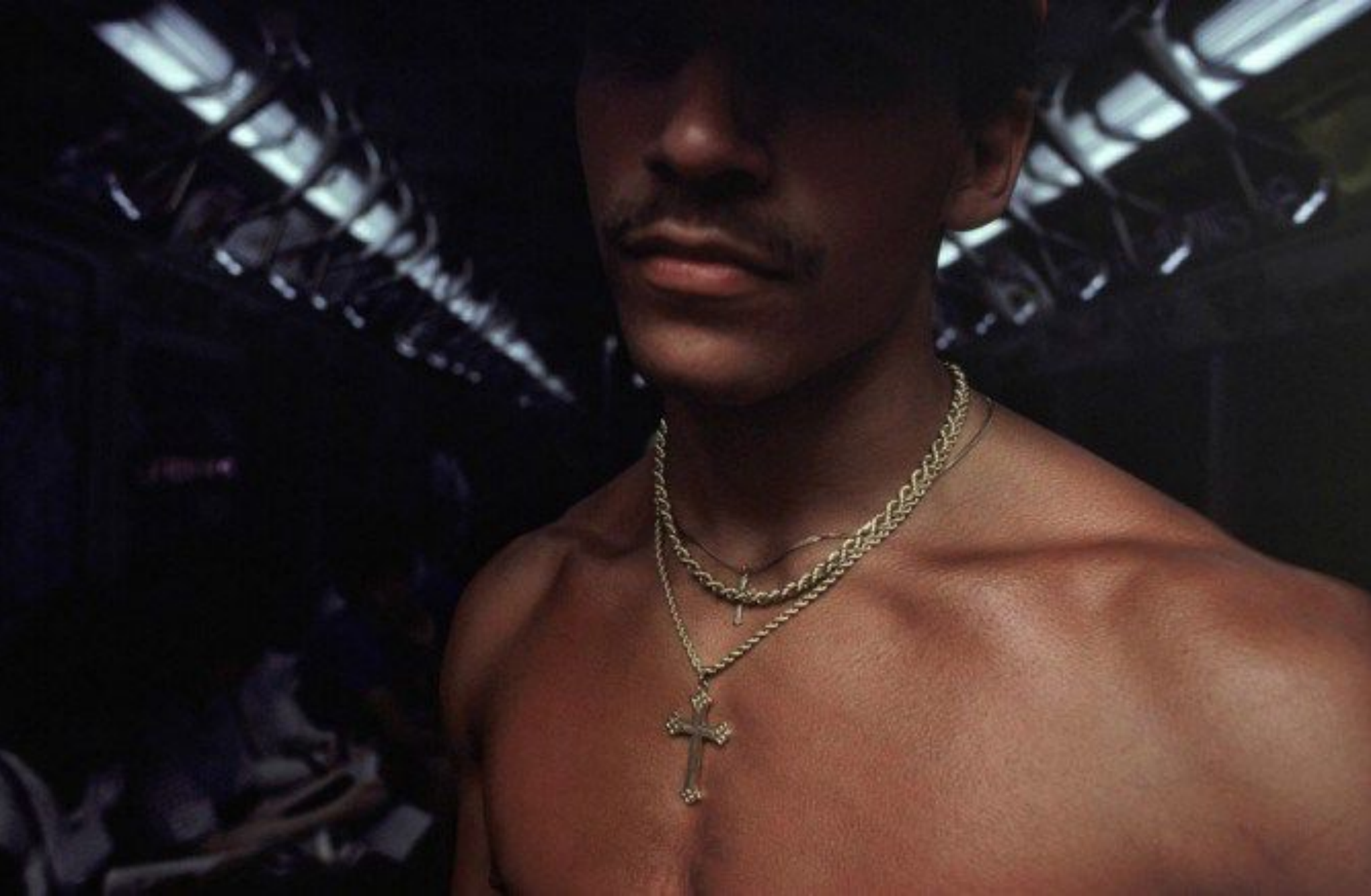
The biggest takeaway and sense I get from Blake is how he has a lot of fun with what he does. He doesn't take himself too seriously— and he shoots out of compulsion, curiosity, and fun— rather than trying to impress others.

He has amassed a huge archive and body of work in the last 20+ years, and he is constantly pushing the definition of “street photography”. If you look at his In-Public portfolio, his tastes are very eclectic. He doesn't want to just fit inside the box of traditional “street photography” — he is always curious of experimenting and pushing the box.

For example, he has recently been experimenting a lot with color photography— especially shooting on an Instax wide camera (also with a macro adapter). This has helped him see and discover the world in a different way.

With his blog “B” — he writes whatever interests him, and doesn't try to “pander” to his audience. He doesn't take himself too seriously— and shows great enthusiasm in his photography, writing, and his commentaries.





9

## BRUCE DAVIDSON

Bruce Davidson is a photographer that I deeply look up to and admire. He first started taking pictures when he was around 10 years old, and has now shot for a span of over 60 years. He has covered many important political issues, such as the freedom riders - as well as local issues such as the impoverished state of East 100th Street in New York City, and the dilapidated subway. He is truly a "photographer's photographer" - as he shoots, develops, and prints all of his photographs by himself and during his working career would "live like a monk".

Davidson refuses to define himself or his photography. He doesn't agree with the "documentary", "journalism", or "fine art" classification (even less with "street photographer"). However I feel that his photographs appeal to many street photographers- and there are many lessons of wisdom that he can teach all of us about street photography.

This article will cover a little bit of background history of Bruce Davidson as well as what us street photographers can learn from his photography and philosophy. Also note that this article is very in-depth and long. Brew yourself a strong cup of coffee and dive in!

## Bruce Davidson's Biography

Bruce Davidson was born in 1933 in Illinois, and has been a part of the prestigious Magnum Photos agency since 1958 after being invited to join by Henri Cartier-Bresson himself.

To track Davidson's start in photography, at the age of 10 his single-mother built him a darkroom in their basement and was taught the technical aspects of photography by a local photographer.

After graduating high school, he attended the Rochester Institute of Technology and Yale University, where he continued his learning in photography.

After his military service, in 1957 Davidson worked briefly as a freelance photographer, and joined Magnum the following year (having met Henri Cartier-Bresson while stationed in Paris as a soldier).

During these golden years he photographed extensively, taking photos of two of his famous projects, "Brooklyn Gang" - a project on troubled teenage youth in the area and "The Dwarf" - a circus-dwarf named Jimmy Armstrong that he befriended which showed the various levels of emotional complexity that Jimmy faced as a performer.

From 1961 to 1965, Davidson produced one of his most famous bodies of work, "Time of Change" in which he followed the Civil Rights Movement and Freedom Riders around the United States, in both the North and South. This project awarded him the first Na-

tional Endowment for the Arts grant ever given to a photographer.

Davidson's next project, "East 100th Street" is probably his most famous bodies of work, in which he photographed an infamously run-down block in East Harlem for two years. Using a 4x5 large-format view camera, he befriended many of the locals and constantly gave out prints from the project that he worked on. Through the project you get a very intimate look into the lives of people in East 100th Street - both the difficulties they faced as well as the joys.

To follow up East 100th street, he worked on "Subway" in the late 1970s, when the subway in New York City was a very sketchy and dangerous place. Instead of using black and white (his typical medium), he photographed the subway in color - which gave the photographs a sense of vibrancy and "sexiness" that he wanted to convey. A decade later he worked on a project on Central Park for 4 years, steering clear of the typical clichés and showing it as a unique and inseparable part of New York City.

Currently at the age of 79, Davidson isn't settling down. He is currently working on a project in Los Angeles - documenting the juxtaposition between nature and the city.

Once again to clarify, Davidson doesn't like to categorize his type of photography, and would certainly disagree with calling himself a "street photographer". However I feel out of all the photographers out there, he has had one of the strongest impacts on my photography in terms of his humanitarianism, interest in social issues, as well as his love and compassion for his subjects.

For this post I have done research from Bruce Davidson's "Subway", and his newest publication "Black+White" - a 5-volume set of his projects "Circus", "Brooklyn Gang", "Time of Change", "East 100th Street", and "Central Park", published by Steidl. I have also scoured the Internet for video and text-based interviews to base this article off. If there are any errors in this article, please mention it in the comments below.



# 1. Become part of the community

Bruce Davidson shares the story of how he became part of the community in East 100th Street:

"I came to 100th Street with a large format camera on a tripod. I wanted depth and detail and I wanted to meet the people eye to eye. I wanted the photograph to happen without intruding. The children called me the "picture man." They said take my picture. I took their picture. I took photographs of them, they took my photographs. Can I have another picture? I gave them another picture. Can you make a couple of more prints? I gave them a couple of more prints. They received their pictures and I received mine. I saw my pictures hanging all over the place. Sometimes when I photographed a family of a person again, I had to take down my own pictures." (East 100th Street)

As street photographers, the connections that we build with our subjects is often very shallow or non-existent. After all, that is the working style of street

photography. We see a subject or a scene we want to capture, we take the photograph, wave hello or thank them - and move on.

However the way that Davidson worked was totally different - he spent a lot of time in each area, getting to know the people and having them collaborate with him. When he first came to East 100th street, people were a bit suspicious of him. However over time they warmed up to him through him giving out prints, talking with the locals, and even having them take his photograph.

When I shot in Downtown LA, one of the places I shot a lot was the Fashion District. It first started off through a show I co-curated with The Think Tank Gallery in which we shot one-square block for a week straight. Each of the chosen photographers would then exhibit their 3 best shots in the show, in which the community were all invited to attend.

This gave me a wonderful opportunity to get to know the people of the community better. I would walk around



the entire Fashion District, saying hello to the store vendors and to the people who frequented the area often. At first shooting in the area I felt a bit out-of-place and awkward, but over time I started to feel very comfortable as many of the locals started to recognize me and say hello.

I feel just because we are street photographers doesn't mean that we should always be hidden and stealth. Sometimes interacting with the people you photograph both makes you and them feel much more natural.

Not only that, but collaborate with the neighborhoods you may shoot in. Sure shoot your candid street photography, but also take posed portraits of locals in the area- and hand them prints. It will make them much more appreciative of your company, and will also give you the opportunity to give them something.

## 2. How to approach your subjects

When Bruce Davidson was photographing the NYC subway, he admitted

to being quite timid at times approaching strangers to photograph. He describes in this excerpt from "Subway" the different ways he approached his subjects:

"I dealt with this in several ways. Often I would just approach the person: "Excuse me, I'm doing a book on the subway and would like to take a photograph of you. I'll send you a print." If they hesitated, I would pull out my portfolio and show them my subway work; if they said no, it was no forever. Sometimes, I'd take the picture, then apologize, explaining that the mood was so stunning I couldn't break it, and hoped they didn't mind. There were times I would take the pictures without saying anything at all. But even with this last approach, my flash made my presence known. When it went off, everyone in the car knew that an event was taking place-- the spotlight was on someone. It also announced to any potential thieves that there was a camera around. Well aware of that I often changed cars after taking pictures."

Davidson also shares a similar concept in another interview:

"I carried this little album of my work. I have three choices. If I see someone in this beautiful mood, I'll go up to them and ask them, I'd like to take a picture of that mood. If they say yes, I ask if they can get back into that mood. Not everyone can do that. Or, if they said no, then I took out the album and they saw the work. Or I took it, and ran like hell. I had those three choices in the subway."

I feel as street photographers we should also use our judgment to try different ways to approach strangers when shooting in the streets. Whenever I'm shooting in the streets, I try to judge a situation or a scene, which dictates how I will take a photograph of somebody.

Similar to Davidson, if I see an interesting gesture or a moment that I don't want to interrupt, I'll quickly approach and take the photograph without permission. This is how I would say I photograph 95% of the time. Then after this I generally will talk with the person and see how they are, explain why I took the photograph (if they had a beautiful look or gesture), and thank them for the photograph.

One point I thought was a great idea that Davidson did was carry around an album of photographs he took in the Subway. I feel that us as street photographers can do the same thing - carry around an album of photographs we have taken on the streets in case somebody gets upset or asks us what we are doing.

I generally carry around my iPad and show my photographs to anyone who questions why I take photographs or "what I'm going to do with the photographs".

Recently I was at the airport and I saw this woman dressed in lime-green, and I was overwhelmed with the desire to take a photograph of her. Being at the airport and not wanting to draw unwanted attention to myself, I asked for permission to take her photograph because I told her that I loved her outfit. She first looked at me skeptically, and asked "what for?" I told her I loved taking photographs of people in great outfits, and took out my iPad and showed her other photographs I took in the past. She liked them, and agreed that I could

take a photograph of her- and I proceeded to do so. I then gave her my contact information and email and told her to contact me if she wanted me to send a copy of her photograph to her. She smiled and thanked me and I went on to catch my flight (which I almost missed).

So try to judge a situation to see whether you want to take a photograph candidly or if you want to ask for permission. General guidelines that I follow is that if I am out in public and the person doesn't look angry or is walking at a really aggressive pace, I take a photograph candidly without thinking much about it. The times I generally ask for permission to take a photograph is that if they look overly aggressive or angry, or if I might be in a private place that could cause unwanted attention to myself.

Of course we never know how someone is going to react, so I recommend experimenting with both approaches - and soon you will develop your own set of guidelines to follow your gut.

### 3. See the world from your subject's perspective

When we shoot street photography, there are a lot of times that people object to us taking their photograph. There might be several reasons for this. It might include that they don't want their photo to show up on the Internet, that they don't like how they look that day, or just generally don't like being photographed.

This is where the question of ethics comes to play. Everyone has their own set of personal guidelines and ethics when it comes to street photography. Generally what I tend to avoid taking photographs of (without permission) is photographs of homeless people or people who may appear to be drug addicts or alcoholics. However this is not to say that I have never taken a photograph of a homeless person or someone I perceived to be a drug addict. There are also many photographs I have taken of "normal people" who didn't want me to take their photograph that I have taken anyways.

I would say when it comes to ethics & street photography, there is no ultimate "rule" of "what's okay to photograph" and "what's not okay to photograph". All I can suggest is to follow your own heart and what feels right to you.

In Davidson's experiences he also shares some stories of people he photographed who didn't like it, as well as people he didn't take photographs of (for different reasons).

People who don't want their photograph can be for reasons totally beyond what we can imagine. When shooting in Downtown LA, I also generally shy away from taking photos of people selling illegal merchandise (fake designer bags & animals) as they may be concerned that I will reveal them to the cops.

"Not everyone wants his picture taken. I began to photograph a man collecting junk in a yard. He saves the metal and sells it. He wouldn't let me photograph him. I found out why. He was receiving welfare and he thought that if I took a picture of him collecting junk to

sell, he might have his welfare taken from him." (East 100th Street)

Realize at times people don't want to get their photograph taken when they don't look their best. Much of it may also depend on their mood:

"An old man said to me one day, 'Oh, I don't want a picture like that. I want to get dressed up and I want to put a Bible in my hand. That's how I want my picture taken. I'll tell you when I want my picture taken, when I'm feeling good.'" (East 100th Street)

We may also betray people's trust without really knowing it.

"Then there's the man who runs the luncheonette. He let me take his picture once, but I made it too dark and he never let me take his picture again. I know you're prejudiced, he said, because you made it too dark. You make all the people here look too dark. When you make pictures look light, then I'll put your pictures on the walls. But I know he likes me. He lets me use the bathroom in his luncheonette. He doesn't let anyone do that. (East 100th Street)



Therefore when you are taking photographs of people in public and they get upset or refuse, try to understand why they may feel that way. See things through their perspective, which will give you a better understanding of why you are taking photographs (and the impact and influence you are having on the people of a certain area).

## 4. Don't hesitate when taking photographs

One of the most difficulties that street photographers face (myself included) is the sense of hesitation we have before taking a photograph. Like approaching someone of the opposite gender at a bar, the more we think about it - the less likely we are going to do it. We all have a degree of fear in ourselves when taking photos on the streets.

Davidson shares that the best way of breaking through this tension is acting on impulse:

"Despite my fantasies of being a hunter stalking a wild animal, I was still afraid. It was hard for me to approach

even a little old lady. There's a barrier between people riding the subway - eyes are averted, a wall is set up. To break through this painful tension I had to act quickly on impulse, for if I hesitated, my subject might get off at the next station and be lost forever.

Don't let yourself fall to "paralysis by analysis" when you are shooting street photography. As my friend Charlie Kirk says, "When in doubt, click".

Turn off that censor in your mind that prevents you from taking a photograph. The worst thing that generally happens is that people get upset and ask you to delete the photograph. But by not taking the photograph, even worse, you might miss that photo opportunity forever.

## 5. When to work in black & white and when to work in color

When we are working on a certain project it may be difficult to choose whether we want to shoot it in black and white or in color. Of course that nowa-

days shooting digitally with RAW, we have the option to change between both. However I believe that certain projects are much more powerful (if you choose the right medium).

Davidson shares his experiences first shooting the Subway in black and white (as he shot mostly black and white for his personal work). He soon realized after shooting in the Subways, that color would be a much better medium for the project:

"At first I photographed in black and white. After a while, however, I began to see a dimension of meaning that demanded a color consciousness. Color photography was not new for me --most of my commissioned work and all of my films had been done in color. But color in the subway was different. I found that the strobe light reflecting off the steel surfaces of the defaced subway cars created a new understanding of color. I had seen photographs of deep-sea fish thousands of fathoms below the ocean surface, glowing in total darkness once light had been applied. People in the subway, their flesh juxtaposed against the graffiti,

the penetrating effect of the strobe light itself and even the hollow darkness of the tunnels, inspired an aesthetic that goes unnoticed by passengers who are trapped underground, hiding behind masks, and closed off from each other.

What I used to do when shooting street photography is shooting everything in RAW, and then deciding afterwards whether I preferred black and white or color for a certain shot. However since I have been shooting film, I can no longer do that- when shooting a project I have to stick with either black & white or color.

I think that making a decision between shooting black & white versus color should be less about the aesthetics of "what looks better" - and more about which medium adds more meaning to the photographs.

In Davidson's example, he created a new meaning shooting in color - describing adding a "new dimension of meaning that demanded a color consciousness". He likened the mood & atmosphere he wanted to create was similar to that of

deep-sea fish, which are beautiful and glow vibrantly in color.

So when you are working on your own personal projects or shooting in the street, try to look beyond the obvious reasons of shooting in black and white or color. For example, shadows tend to look better in black and white, and if someone is wearing a bright colored shirt it looks better in color.

Rather, think about how black and white adds to the sense of drama and mood to the photograph (darkness, grimness, despair). And how color can add hope, vitality, and a sense of brightness and meaning to a photograph.

Of course these are just very basic examples, but consider all of this when you decide which medium to shoot in.

## 6. Don't be afraid to ask for permission

Street photographs are generally taken in public and without permission. If we call ourselves "street photographers" - we can often fall into the gap of not wanting to take any photos with per-

mission (as it may cause us no longer to be a 'street photographer').

My suggestion is to disregard that notion. Sure street photographs are taken without permission, but it shouldn't prevent us from asking for permission when taking photographs. As much as anybody out there, I don't like adding labels to myself in terms of what type of photography I shoot. I tend to call myself a "street photographer" as it is the easiest way to classify myself (I wouldn't call myself a landscape photographer for example).

If you come upon a great scene but you may be a little wary or concerned, don't be shy. Ask for permission. Davidson shares a memorable story from one of his most powerful images in "Subway":

"...I was looking at the map when the doors opened and in came a fierce youth with a deeply gouged scar running across his face. He sat down across the aisle from me, gave me a hard look, and said in a low, penetrating voice, "Take my picture, and I'm going to break your cam-

era." I quickly said, "I don't take pictures without people's permission, and I always send them prints." I reached into my jacket pocket for my portfolio, walked over to him, and slowly leafed through the sample photographs while sitting on the edge of my seat. After looking, he paused for a moment, then turned to me and said, "Okay, take my picture." I went back to my seat and began to photograph, taking a few frames."

If Davidson took a photograph of the youth with the deeply gouged scar running across his face with his flash without permission, who knows what he would have done to Davidson. However after Davidson chatted with him a bit and showed him some of his previous work, he was able to build some rapport with the youth - who then said it was okay to take his photograph.

Davidson shares another story of a photograph of a woman he took in Central Park with her two dogs. Rather than taking the photograph outright he eased his way into the situation and built her trust:

"There's a picture in my central park of a woman in a full-length mink coat with 2 little white dogs sitting on a park bench in the winter in Central Park. Now, the way i approached he was, 'Those are really sweet dogs, what kind of dogs are they?' she said, they are my boo-boos. I said oh I would love to take a photo of your dogs. Can I take a photo of your dogs? Sure. Can I take a picture of you with your dogs? Sure. If I went up to her straight away asking if i could take a photo of her with her dogs, she would be scared. There would be no intercourse." The best way is to approach people humanly. So they don't feel you're sneaking or anything. Or some sort of a bad person." (Central Park)

This is another good way to approach your subjects if you want to take a photograph of them. Mention something interesting or unique about them (either their hair, nails, outfit, pets, etc.). This helps them understand why you want to take their photograph and also what you find interesting and unique about them.



## 7. Don't always have a destination in mind

One of the things I love most about street photography is how we can wander the streets - like a flaneur- with no destination in mind. Although I do generally like to go out and work on projects, I still generally let my instincts lead me uncharted paths. I don't always have a destination in terms of where I want to go specifically when photographing.

Davidson shares from his "Subway" project in which he would wander around the subways without a particular destination in mind:

"I began to explore the different subway lines, taking them to the end then back again. Most of the time I didn't set a destination but chose to be carried wherever the subway would take me, occasionally referring to the map and making mental note of places I wanted to return to."

Let the streets take you down places you would generally not go down. Go down those odd roads, hidden alleys,

and into little stores that you might find curious and interesting. Of course use your common sense and don't do this during shady areas of your city late at night alone.

## 8. Don't let yourself become pigeonholed into definitions

One of the things that Davidson despises is when curators, the public, or historians try to classify him into a "type of photographer":

"Oh people you're a documentary photographer. I don't even know what that means. Oh people say you are a photojournalist. I'm rarely published in journals. Oh then yore a fine art photographer. Then I say I'm not. I aspire to be a fine photographer."

In another interview he tells a story of a student who also defined herself:

"Once I asked a student what kind of photography she did, and she said, 'I'm a fine art photographer', and I said 'That's really interesting, because I see myself as just a fine photographer!'"

I think that Davidson says a great point here (with great humor). Instead of trying to define ourselves into what type of photographers we are, let's all try to just be good photographers.

In addition, Davidson isn't interested in defining himself in terms of photography, and rather calls himself a humanist:

"I'm just a humanist. I just photograph the human condition as I find it. It can be serious. It can also be ironic or humorous. I'm political, but not in an overt way. Of course, everything we do in life is political. Almost everything."

Rather than defining what type of photography he does, he explains why he photos. He sees himself as a humanist by photographing "the human condition" as he finds it - rather than just to make interesting images.

When it comes to his way of working, Davidson shares that the relationship and contact that he has with his subjects are very important:

"If I am looking for a story at all, it is in my relationship to the subject - the

story that tells me, rather than that I tell."

"Contact sheets are interesting. I guess that's what my photographs are about. Contact."

Rather than aiming to just going out and taking interesting photographs, think about why you are trying to create those images and your relationship with your subjects.

Davidson also shares the deep sense of privilege he had getting to know more about the lives of others, and how it was more important than just photographs:

"I was permitted to go into a life that I didn't know, and experience it with my camera. If the photographs serve, I have come away with much more than photographs."

Think about what kind of impact you want to have to your viewers on a deeper, emotional, and even political level. Ask yourself these questions:

- Are you trying to create images that make people laugh, cry, feel sorry for others, or give people hope?

- What is your relationship with your subjects? Do you prefer to make close contact with them, or prefer to stay distant?

These are two questions that I don't have the answers to, but only you can answer.

## 9. Spend more time working on long-term projects

Almost all of Davidson's projects were over the period of several months or several years.

For example, he photographed for his "Circus" project for 4 months when traveling with them in 1958. For his "Brooklyn Gang" project, he photographed the group for an entire summer in 1959. After that, he photographed the Civil Rights Movement in the South for 4 years for his "Times of Change" book. For his "East 100th street" project, he photographed for 2 years. His "Subway" project took him an entire year riding the trains in NYC. His "Central Park" book took him four years.

In an interview he stresses the importance of spending more time working on projects:

"I find that young people tend to stop too soon. They mimic something they've seen, but they don't stay long enough. If you're going to photograph anything, you have to spend a long time with it so your subconscious has a chance to bubble to the surface."

But how do you figure out a project that is worth photographing or something you may be interested in? Davidson gives some advice in a Q&A session at the Strand bookstore:

"I think that students stop too soon. If I were a student right now and i had a teacher like me I'd say, 'You have to carry your camera everyday and take a picture everyday. And by the end of the week you should have 36 pictures exposed. And then suddenly you'll latch onto someone, maybe a street vendor- oh he or she is very interesting I might have to be with him or her. So things open up visually'."

Understandably, it is difficult to stay motivated while working on a long-term project. Once again, he also gives his advice at the Q&A session at the Strand bookstore by saying:

"What carries me on is the next thing. I'm working in Los Angeles and I'm very interested in plant and animal life overlooking the city. It is very difficult to photograph that, but I'm doing that. It's expensive, they don't have a subway yet in Los Angeles. So that challenge and that truth comes out of doing it everyday. Sometimes I don't even know what I'm doing - in Los Angeles I'm not sure what's it's all about- but it's very interesting to me."

Davidson, close to the age of 80, has an incredible body of work that he has already accomplished. However rather than being satisfied with what he has already accomplished, he is always looking for "the next thing" to keep him energized and inspired.

He also stresses the importance of the challenge of a project- a project that is too easy simply wouldn't interest him.

Davidson also shares his difficulties & struggles when working on a long-term project, especially in his "Subway" project:

"There were times when the subway was depressing beyond belief, times when someone in the car carried the odor of clothing saturated with dried urine and an incrustation of filth. Everyone looked around, unsure where the odor was coming from, until a shabby-looking man would get up and slowly leave the train."

Although Davidson faced these difficulties working on his "Subway" project, he still stuck with it. And the more he started shooting the project, he became totally immersed in it which continued to give him the passion to march forward:

"I became addicted to the subway. When I heard the rumble of the express train running several floors below our apartment, and felt the walls shake, my sense heightened, like a werewolf responding to the full moon. My life began to revolve around the subway. I volun-



teered to guide our younger child's class to museum by subway, but found such a complicated route that the teachers felt lost, and the children bewildered. Eventually the teachers made us all leave the subway and walk the remaining few blocks."

Another thing that Davidson did to better represent his "Subway" series was to photograph at different times during the day, to capture different scenes and characters:

"I began to go out late at night and in the early-morning hours. There are stations that are deeper underground and warmer in winter, where I have seen people asleep on benches, wrapped in blankets, in the hours past midnight. The subway becomes an empty no man's land for the homeless, a few late-night riders, and the roaming animals of prey who inhabit the subway until the first morning workers begin to fill the platforms and trains around 5:00am".

So when you are deciding what project you would like to work on, choose an idea that you are passionate about

and something that is challenging. For more ideas on how to work on a street photography project, check out this post on [How to Create Your Own Street Photography Project](#). I also have advice in terms of what I have learned through [Sociology on how to create your own street photography project](#) here.

## 10. Capture moods in your photographs

To create a memorable street photograph is a combination of content & form. We want strong content (capturing interesting people, scenes, situations) and strong form (composition, framing, backgrounds). Although both are important, Davidson says that his photographs revolve more around the content by capturing moods:

"From the start, my photographs were about capturing a mood. I didn't do picture stories; it was more about taking a picture that caught a mood, then building a series that sustained that mood."

He expands on this idea in another [interview](#):

"I don't think overtly I was political. I didn't think of my photography as propaganda. I thought of it as imagery, and capturing a mood. Or the atmosphere, or the climate around a given situation, which somehow I was drawn to...it was all about passion and how I was attracted to photography. I loved to take pictures."

In an interview at the strand bookstore, he is given a question about cameras (especially the proliferation of the iPhone as a camera). Davidson responds:

"I don't care about iPhones. I'm interested in quality, vision; I'm interested in challenges. I'm interested in humanity. The more iPhones, the better as I'm concerned."

It is very important to create images with good composition, framing, and technical settings. However don't let an obsession with sharpness, bokeh, or "color rendition" of your camera overshadow what is more important - capturing the mood, emotion, and soul of a person or a scene. Who cares if your photo-

graph is technically perfect but has no soul?

## 11. Be grateful for what you have

When photographing "East 100th Street", Davidson learned to appreciate what he had in his own life:

"I'm not trying to glorify the ghetto. In many ways, it's a horrible place, full of scars and pain. It taught me how much I'd taken for granted. I'm not wealthy by any means, but by contrast I am. I have hot water. I don't have ten children to support. My life, my work is full of possibilities. I can in some ways affect my destiny."

Davidson also shares a life-changing experience when working commercially and when he started to shoot the Civil Rights Movement:

"I supported myself with a little bit of commercial work. I started to do fashion, but didn't have any feeling with fashion - and the models were far too tall for me. After a while I gave that up, because I went down on a freedom ride. So I

went from fashion to photographing the civil rights freedom. I couldn't do fashion after that. I couldn't come to grips I was doing poverty in the south, and there was a model under a waterfall in a costume."

One of the plagues society (especially in photography) is that we aren't grateful for what we have. Rather than being grateful for our standard of life, we always aspire to get to the next level - to get a fancier house, car, or higher-paying job. We don't appreciate the material things we have, and always want more.

I remember when I first started photography I had a Canon Rebel XT (350d). It was a great camera, but I soon got suckered into thinking I "needed" a full-frame camera through online gear forums. Of course I splurged on a Canon 5D and thought I would be happy for the rest of my life. Then came along the need to buy Canon "L" zoom lenses. Then came along the need to get Canon "L" prime lenses. Then came along the need to get a Leica M9. Then came along the need to get more lenses. Then came along the need to get a Leica MP. Now

when I think the madness is over, I'm thinking more about medium-format film cameras. Trust me, the madness never ends.

We should all appreciate what we have, especially the loved ones we have in our lives and the nice shiny cameras and lenses that we already own. After all, many of the people in the streets we take photos of (with our expensive cameras) have far less than what we are blessed with.

## 12. On editing, printing, & putting together books

Although Davidson exhibits widely, he feels a need to put together his images in books. Here is some insight into his editing & book-making process.

"I felt that I had to put together a decisive collection of this journey because I started when I was 10 years old and photography — I mean classical photography, analog photography — is really within my DNA. It's in my bones.

I began by editing all my contact sheets and books. I edited for two or

three days and then printed for two or three days. I can't edit and print in the same day. That took a couple of years, because I made all the prints.

I methodically edited and printed, and that was an experience in itself. For instance, the circus dwarf photographs are somewhat well known. ["Circus," 2007.] But what isn't well known is that I also photographed the circus itself, which I never printed. So there are a lot of photographs in this collection that no one has seen before.

I have a book in color of the subway in 1979 and 1980. ["Subway," 1986 and 2003.] But I started in black and white, so there's a whole passage in this new book with subway photographs that are equally good."

He also talks about the importance of the collaboration he has with his wife in the editing process.

"The editing process is a very important process. I usually work with Emily, my dear wife of 30 years. I look at this photo to be a bit trite. Sometimes you

take out one picture that locks everything else."

Davidson also shares his general workflow when shooting and printing:

"What if trying to do, what I would like to do is to keep my life in balance. I walk the streets with my handheld camera, interact with people, discover, question, know, understand- and then I come back into my darkroom and make impressions of what i experienced during the day."

Davidson is also very disciplined when it comes to his printing:

"I have a ritual. I wake up at 4:30am, i have something sweet, cheesecake or something like that, then I go into the darkroom turn on the opera (Maria callas is my favorite because her voice is stronger than the water running). Then I make prints until 2 in the afternoon, and then I've had it. Then the prints are in the dryer."

To recap, Davidson tends to separate his shooting, editing, and printing rituals. We can apply the same to our own



photography, by giving time in-between each phase and keeping them separate.

For example rather than editing (choosing our best images) and post-processing them the same day (the digital equivalent of printing) we should perhaps spend an entire day choosing our best images, and another day post-processing them.

### 13. Don't be sneaky

At a Strand Q&A talk, one person in the audience asked Bruce Davidson his opinion on street photography and if he thought it was easier (or more difficult) to photograph nowadays. Davidson responds:

"I think people today are almost easier to approach, they know what a photograph is like. They want to be seen. That's another thing. I don't know, I have always felt that street photography was really - sneaking, stealing a soul."

Davidson makes the point that most street photography is "sneaky" and "stealing a soul". Rather, Davidson makes an-

other suggestion on how to be discrete yet not sneaky:

"I want to be discrete- so what I would do is go to a flower shop and take pictures of the owner of the flower shop - then I'd ask do you know anyone else in the street who would be interesting to photograph? Oh yeah we just delivered flowers to a 100-year old woman. So one thing leads to another - so you're kind of like a reporter. So its like an anchor."

Davidson also shares why he decided to use a very obvious 4x5 large-format view camera when shooting his "East 100th Street" project, in order to avoid being the "unobserved observer":

"Each day I would appear on the block with my 4x5 view camera and a bag containing film holders, accessories, and a powerful strobe. The presence of a large format camera on a tripod, with its bellows and back focusing cloth, gave sense of dignity to the act of taking pictures. I didn't want to be the unobserved observer. I wanted to be with my subjects face to face and for them to collaborate in making the picture. I wanted the

images to have a depth, tonality, and level of detail that could convey the mood of lives poised in a moment of time. During the two years I photographed East 100th Street, NASA was sending probes into outer space, to the moon and to Mars. Instead, I wanted to see into the inner space of the city and to focus sharply on people here on earth".

Of course as a photographer you can make a mistake when talking to your subjects on why you are taking photographs. An experience that Davidson had when shooting East 100th Street that stuck with him for a very long time:

"On one of the first days he worked on East 100th Street, Bruce got the inevitable photographer's question, 'What are you doing here?' from a woman on the block.

Bruce told the woman, "I am taking pictures of the ghetto..." (Followed by an awkward silence).

"Well, what you call a ghetto, I call my home." - via Bruce Davidson at MILK gallery talk (Adam Marelli Photo)

My personal opinion is that I don't like being sneaky when shooting street photography either. I make it very obvious when I am taking a photo of someone, as I use a 35mm lens and stand about 1-2 meters away from someone. I also generally smile and say "thank you" (although not always).

If you want to be more discrete (without being sneaky) Davidson suggests to take photos of a person that you might have some rapport with, and then use them as an anchor to ask for recommendations for other people to photograph. Although I have never tried this method, I think it is a great idea that I encourage everyone else to try as well.

## 14. When in a foreign place, get help from locals

When Davidson was working on his East 100th Street project, he had the assistance from many of the locals, especially one boy who acted as his assistant:

"There was a boy who helped me a lot. He carried my camera bag around. He knew who might want to attack me

and steal my camera. He knew many of the people who let me into their homes to photograph them. I relied on him. He made me feel safe."

Consider that when Davidson was working on his East 100th Street project, it was a very dangerous place to be (especially as an outsider by yourself). However by befriending the boy- he helped Davidson better navigate the area and bring him a lot of safety (and photo opportunities).

When you travel to foreign places (doesn't necessarily have to be out of your city), it is always good to figure out some of the important local customs and to even go out shooting with someone from the local area.

For example when I was shooting in Tokyo, I was very fortunate to go out to shoot with Charlie Kirk and Bellamy Hunt, two of my good friends. In certain areas like Kabuki Cho, they warned me of taking photos of the Yakuza without permission - as well as prostitutes in the area. Had I not known this, I might have faced trouble.

There was also incidents when I was in Tokyo, I upset and aggravated people for taking their photo. I was also lucky to have Charlie and Bellamy translate for me and speak in Japanese to calm them down. Another instance another local, Takeshi, helped me calm down someone I took a photograph of who didn't know how to speak English.

## 15. Give back to the community

One of the touching things that Davidson did was to give back to the community when he would photograph. He shares a story when he was working on his "East 100th Street" project:

"Quite a few kids on the block are interested in photography. I lent a boy who had been helping me a camera and my developing tank. I gave him some film and I'm teaching him things. The kids and the people who take photographs don't photograph the slums. They photograph their friends. You know, this boy kissing that girl.. All sorts of things all sorts of possibilities, without sentimental-

ity. They photograph the life they know, not its horrors."

Davidson also shares how he tries to give his subjects prints whenever possible in order to bond with them and get closer to them. He shares his experiences when shooting "The Brooklyn Gang":

"It's pretty much always my practice to offer pictures. Even in the Brooklyn gang I would give them pictures. It was a way of seeing them, and a way of them seeing me. So I was able to be invisible almost to them- because they were secure with them being around me. They were very depressed, angry, and poor- and nothing for them in that community. I wasn't there to judge them, it was about these kids - any kids- unattended to".

One of the most rewarding things I have done in my photography career so far was to teaching photography to Phoenix High, a continuation school for youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Many of these students were put into school for different reasons:

drug problems, gang problems, truancy problems, grades, etc.

These continuation students face a constant sense of stigma from the community as being "problem kids". When I was doing research at the school for an ethnography honors thesis at UCLA, I got to know the students and the teachers very well. They suggested the idea of me teaching a class there on photography, and after graduating UCLA and working full time - I would go there every Friday for 2 hours and teach them the fundamentals of photography and go out and shoot with them. With the help from many people (from this community) I was able to fundraise cameras to support the photography program.

Although I am no longer able to continue the program (as I am always traveling and teaching workshops), I still keep in contact with a handful of the students who have used photography as a medium to find inspiration in their lives to channel their passions. You can see portraits I have shot of them and their stories here.



Consider starting some sort of photography project in your area. Reach out to a local school or a community center and offer your photographic services..

## Conclusion

Bruce Davidson is a photographer who refuses to let himself be defined by others. Rather, he follows his passions and his gut to create meaningful bodies of work. When he chooses a project, he sticks with it and pursues it for several months, and often several years. He is a man that cares deeply for his subjects, and cares more about his relationships with them than the photos themselves.

Although Davidson wouldn't consider himself a street photographer, us as street photographers can learn very much from Davidson's experiences and wisdom from close to 70 years of photographing. Follow your heart, treat your subjects like humans, and try to capture emotion & humanity in your images. And don't forget to give back.

## Interesting stories from Bruce Davidson's "Subway" book

Below are some fascinating excerpts from Davidson's "Subway" book that I wanted to share:

### 1. On escaping a potential mugging

"I went on riding in empty cars at three in the morning. Once, the doors slammed open at a station and a middle-aged woman came in and began to undress. Out of a paper shopping bag she took some soiled articles of underclothing, a hotel towel, a pair of worn shoes, and a wine bottle, and carefully placed them all in the middle of the train floor. Onto them she poured cornflakes, then crushed ripe strawberries between her fingers and dripped that onto the breakfast cereal, making a sickening mess. I asked, "Are you making a subway collage?" She stared hard at me, lit up a cigarette, and sat down. I asked if I could take photographs for a book I was doing on the subway. She stood up, stamped

out her cigarette, and then lifted up her dress. My flash went off a few times. The doors between the cars opened, and three youths with their eyes on my camera charged into the car, but halted when they spotted the mess on the floor. "Hey man, look at the shit on the floor. Let's get outta here!" They turned and went out into another car. I realized the pile of disgusting refuse on the floor was a protective bonfire to keep the wild animals away. It had probably saved me from a mugging."

## **2. On getting mugged in the subway**

"I noticed two seventeen-year-old boys in the very last car smoking pot. I entered the car to see them more clearly, but decided not to make contact with them. They looked withdrawn and dejected, slumped in their seats. I stood for a few moments watching the view of the Manhattan skyline diminishing in the hazy distance, and then sat down a few seats across the aisle. The train slowed down and stopped at the Chauncey Street station, the doors opened at the youth quickly turned from the girl and

rushed at me with the blade of a knife protruding from between his thumb and forefinger. He stood astride me, the blade next to my jugular. I heard his deep, guttural voice "Gimmie that camera." His face was thin and dark, his eyes wide and desperate. I thought about the razor blade at my throat, and my words were, "Take the camera." His partner behind me released the door, and they were out of the car with the camera, running down the platform stairs. As the train pulled away from the station, I stood at the door in shock. Then it occurred to me that I might be cut and bleeding. I felt my body, but there was no blood. I realize that they hadn't gotten my camera bag, and that I had another camera and a couple of lenses left. I ran to the middle of the train to find the conductor who put out the alarm."

## **3. On working with an undercover cop and busting a thief**

"In the spring of 1985, New York magazine asked me to photograph a new police-decoy unit working in the subway. Using disguises, the decoy operates in small teams to foil muggers who prey on

passengers. We would set up together in the subway car with a decoy dressed as a businessman wearing gold chains and an expensive-looking watch. Two backup members of the team would sit a few seats away, and I would place myself in the corner with my camera around my neck, looking like a lost tourist. Hours went by riding the train from one end of the line to the other without incident. At 72nd street, I noticed a youth enter the train carrying a walking stick with a heavy brass head. He stood near the sleeping decoy, his eyes fixed on the gold chains. The next stop was 42nd street, 3 minutes away on the express. As the train pulled into the station the mugger struck ripping the chain from the decoy and running around me mumbling something about my camera. I looked up and my flash went off as I saw the muzzle of a .38 pointed at the head of the mugger by one of the decoy team members. The mugger was arrested and later it was reported he had a long history of assaults and robberies."

#### **4. On taking the cover image of Subway**

"That kid was probably 18-19 years old, came right off the beach and he had so much sun on his body that it almost radiated. So I just asked him "do you mind? You really have a good tan!". So I asked him, and I think I sent him a print, but of an image further back so he could see more of his figure.

Funny thing that happened: I had a show at the Museum of the City of New York, there were C-prints, and a guy came up to me and said, "I'm the cover!". And this guy was huge, and when I asked what he did he told me he was a bodybuilder. And he said "if you want, come by the gym and I'll work with you!".

#### **5. On why he decided to pursue "Subway" as his project**

"The subway interior was defaced with a secret handwriting that covered the walls, windows, and maps. I began to imagine that these signatures surrounding the passengers were ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Every now and then when I was looking at one of these cryptic messages, someone would come

and sit in front of it, and I would feel as if the message had been decoded. I started to draw a connection between the Broadway Island, the neighborhood cafeteria and the pious scribe on the Lower East Side. The connection was the subway."

### **6. How Davidson prepared himself for the "Subway" project:**

"To prepare for myself for the subway, I started a crash diet, a military fitness exercise program, an early every morning I jogged in the park. I knew I would need to train like an athlete to be physically able to carry my heavy camera equipment around in the subway for hours every day. Also, I thought that if anything was going to happen to me down there I wanted to be in good shape, or at least to believe that I was."

Each morning I carefully packed my cameras, lenses, strobe light, filters, and accessories in a small, canvas camera bag. In my green safari jacket with its large pockets, I placed my police and subway passes, and a few rolls of film, a subway map, a notebook, and a small,

white, gold-trimmed wedding album containing pictures of people I'd already photographed in the subway. In my pants pocket I carried quarters for the people in the subway asking for money, change for the phone and several tokens.

I also carried a key case with additional identification and a few dollars tucked inside, a whistle, and a small Swiss Army knife that gave me a little added confidence. I had a clean handkerchief and a few Band-Aids in case I found myself bleeding. I tightened my belt with the heavy strobe power pack on it, slipped on my jacket, put on my cap slung my camera over my shoulder, made one last trip to the bathroom, and was ready for a day in the subway."





10

## BRUCE GILDEN

Bruce Gilden is one of the best street photographers currently alive. He is a photographer who has had a deep influence on me and my approach in street photography-- especially when I first saw the video of him shooting in the streets of New York City.

Bruce Gilden is also one of the most controversial street photographers-- and I also feel one of the most misunderstood.

In this article I will write what I personally learned from his street photography and how I see him as more of a humanistic street photographer (rather than just be-

ing an asshole as others might misinterpret him to be).

## 1. Shoot who you are

What I love most about Gilden is that he is faithful to who he is as a human being in terms of his photography. He doesn't bullshit around and pretend to be someone he isn't. Rather, he photographs like he says in his own words... "who he is."

I think a lot of street photographers starting off often try to imitate the work of other more famous street photographers, without truly understanding their personalities.

For example, everyone tries to imitate the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson (even if their personalities might be totally different). HCB was a shy, introverted man who didn't like to have his own face photographed. The way in which he shot was reflective of his personality.

Gilden is quite possibly the polar opposite of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Gilden is an extremely personable and social per-

son. He shoots a lot of his work candid, but he also spends a lot of effort interacting and communicating with his subjects (unlike being sneaky just like Henri Cartier-Bresson).

For example, in his most famous video on YouTube he shoots mostly candid photos without the permission of others. However in one shot he took of an old man (who noticed him) he told the man that it was okay and for him to keep walking.

In another video of him shooting in the UK, there is a woman who gets visibly upset for him photographing her. He then explains why he photographed her and why he found her beautiful in her unique way-- and then turned the streets into her own personal walkway. It was quite possibly one of the most charming things I've ever seen a photographer do.

It is true that Gilden can be quite abrasive. In a workshop that Bellamy Hunt attended with Gilden in Tokyo, Bellamy shared how harsh and direct Gilden could be. At first glance, one could have taken it the wrong way that Gilden just

was mean-hearted. However over time, Bellamy began to understand the language of Gilden and how he communicated. If a photo wasn't any good, Gilden wouldn't piddy-paddle and sugar-coat his words. Rather, he would call it "shit" if it wasn't any good.

On the flip side, if Gilden said a shot wasn't shit it actually meant that it was a half-decent shot.

In terms of Gilden's street photography shooting style, he shoots who he is. He has a strong and aggressive personality, and shoots at an extremely close range with a 28mm and a flash. He doesn't do it simply to scare people, but he uses it in an artistic way, angling his flash to highlight the human drama and theater. He does this to highlight the anxiety of his subjects in the city in which he is photographing in.

### **Takeaway point:**

Gilden's advice for street photographers is "shoot who we are." Gilden shoots who he is in a direct, honest, and aggressive type of manner.

If you find yourself to be quite similar in personality to Gilden-- you might also find yourself shooting with a wide-angle lens and getting close to your subjects.

Personally I feel that I relate more with William Klein than Gilden in terms of photographic approach (interacting a lot with my subjects as well as candid shots). I also shoot with a flash not to scare people in the streets, but to simply illuminate them during the day (especially when they are in the shade).

If you find yourself to be a shy and introverted street photographer and you feel uncomfortable interacting with strangers, it is probably not a good idea to start shooting less than a meter away from people and flashing them in the face.

Shoot who you are. Understand your personality-- and shoot accordingly. If you don't like to interact much with subjects and prefer to be candid-- shoot more in the style of Henri Cartier-Bresson. If you like to interact with your subjects and stage them on the streets,

shoot like William Klein. If you want to work more candidly while also working at a close proximity, you might shoot similar to Gilden or Garry Winogrand.

## 2. Document humanity

One statement that is quite controversial that I will share is that I feel that Bruce Gilden is more of a humanistic street photographer than someone who just snaps photos on the street.

What do I mean by that? Well, I feel that Gilden's best book (which isn't as well known) is "Haiti." I remember when I first saw the book, I was quite shocked to see the depth, emotion, as well as the socio-political themes that went throughout the book.

Most people who don't know much about Gilden is that they think he is just a madman who likes to provoke and scare random strangers in New York City.

In his Haiti work, he visited over and over again over the course of around 19 trips between 1984 and 1995- getting

to know the people locally and built trust over time.

The images in the book are quite dark and chaotic, and showcase the anxiety of Haiti. Images that come to mind is a woman being pulled in several different directions in a large crowd, a man whose face is obscured and grimacing, as well as a corner where a large group of people almost seem that they are going to collide.

There are also quieter moments in the book, which showcase a man getting his hair cut and even a stray dog that looks over his shoulder with a look of concern and fear.

Overall the book left me with a very strong impression-- that which showed more emotion and humanity from the people of Haiti shot from a close proximity. You can see to get the shots that Gilden got, he truly embedded himself into their society. He didn't just come as a foreign photojournalist, snap photos of the destruction, and just leave. He spent time getting to know the Haiti people and documenting their everyday life- and



the viewer feels like a part of the society there.

To compare Gilden's Haiti book with let's say the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson Gilden's work is much warmer and intimate. Although HCB's photos are compositionally phenomenal and perfect in some regards-- they leave you feeling cold and empty.

#### **Takeaway point:**

I think that street photography's ultimate goal should be provoking an emotional response from the viewer. Gilden certainly does that with his work-- it is something that packs a punch and hits you straight in the gut.

His "Haiti" book especially shows the hard work he took to get to know the Haitian society - over the course of nearly 11 years. His photos provoke emotion, thought, and humanity-- what I feel we should all strive to do as street photographers.

### **3. Create unconventional compositions**

I feel that whenever one sees the work of Gilden-- what they immediately feel is the energy, rush, and adrenaline of his photos. I feel that part of this has to do with his use of the 28mm lens, flash, and close proximity-- but also due to the fact of his unconventional compositions.

For example, many of his photos are taken from extremely low angles, making his subjects look larger than they really are. He often cuts off subjects in odd places in the frame (only showing one half of someone's face), while still filling the frame.

I learned from Charlie Kirk especially how Gilden pushes the envelope when it comes to compositions. Gilden has been shooting on the streets for over 40 years, and yet still strives to innovate through his work and not just putting his photos directly in the middle of the frame.

#### **Takeaway point:**

Don't try to make all of your compositions the same and boring. Don't just put your subject smack dab in the middle of the frame, or just use the rule of

thirds. Experiment. Try different angles. Try shots from extremely low angles, or extremely high angles. Throw your camera vertical. Use an off-camera flash to cast unconventional or unusual shadows. Use a 28mm lens (or wider) and get close to your action to fill the frame--while intentionally chopping off people's faces or placing their heads on the extreme left or bottom of the frame.

Don't be stuck by the conventional rules of composition - try to break free and innovate.

## 4. Create mystery

I think the best street photographs are the ones that ask more questions than offer answers. I feel that Gilden's work does this extremely well.

For example, I think Gilden's most memorable photos are the ones that have that air of mystery in them. One of my favorite shots of Gilden is of two Yakuza gangsters smoking in Tokyo. One of the gangsters is lighting the cigarette for another who is looking straight into the eye of Gilden (as if he was caught at a wrong moment).

Another photo also from Tokyo (from Gilden's "Go" book) is of a man in a fedora looking over at Gilden, reaching into his coat pocket as if he was going to pull out a gun.

An equally puzzling image is of a man lying on the ground, looking as if he has jet-black blood pouring from his head. But in reality, he was just getting his hair dyed.

### Takeaway point:

Don't just create photos that tell the whole story. Show less, than showing more. Create an air of mystery in your photographs, and let the viewer crave to create a fun little story in their head of what is going on in the scene.

## 5. Keep going over the same streets and keep breaking new ground

Gilden has been shooting in the same streets of New York City for many decades now-- and keeps shooting there. However he hasn't given up shooting there. I still hear stories of other street

photographers who see him shooting on 5th avenue, with his Leica in his right hand and his old-school off-camera Vivitar flash in his left hand.

I think one of the most difficult things in photography is to continue to photograph in the same streets-- especially when they are familiar. Not only that, but how can you keep visiting the same places over and over again and break new ground and innovate?

### **Takeaway point:**

Regardless of where you live, you can make interesting street photographers. Even if you live in a suburb, you can take interesting street photos without people (think of William Eggleston and Lee Friedlander).

I know a lot of street photographers who dream to shoot in big cities like NYC, Paris, or Tokyo.

However the street photographers I know who live in these places also get bored of them as well.

When you are bored of shooting in the same place, try to be like a child and

see the streets with new eyes. Imagine you visited your city for the first time as an outsider or tourist. What would you find unique and interesting about the city?

And when you are bored of shooting your own city-- don't just give up. Keep going, over and over again. Be persistent, and you will find the subtle differences and nuances of your city that make it unique. And with enough time dedicated to your street photography in the streets where you live-- you will break new ground and innovate and shoot what nobody has shot before in a way nobody has ever shot before.

The best place to shoot street photography is in your own backyard.

## **Conclusion**

I have learned many lessons from Bruce Gilden when it comes to street photography-- but I would say that these 5 lessons are what I have distilled from him the last 4 years or so I have been inspired by his photography.

Regardless if you may agree with his approach in street photography or not, he has created incredible bodies of work in New York City, Tokyo, and Haiti-- and is someone who hasn't let up in his photography (he is over 60 and still working non-stop).

I think we can all gain inspiration from him-- as someone who has broke ground in street photography and never stops his hustle.





11

## CONSTANTINE MANOS

Recently I had the great pleasure of being accepted as a scholarship student (under 30) for the Magnum workshop in Provincetown, Massachusetts with David Alan Harvey. Unfortunately David got stuck in Paris en route, so the first two days I spent with Costa Manos. And I'm glad I did, I learned so much from his decades of experience (he has been in Magnum for over 50 years). Here is the wisdom I learned:

### 1. Learn how to make a good photo

One of the things that surprised me the most during the workshop was how he didn't recommend most students to work on a project during the week. His reason-

ing was this: "What's the point of working on a project when you don't even know how to make a [good] photo?"

So during the first day, he showed us his best images-- analyzed the composition, the form, the backgrounds, and essentially how to make a "good" photograph. Some tips:

**a) Avoid tunnel vision**

As street photographers, we tend to just focus on what is in the center of the frame (and disregard the background). Costa suggested us to not fall victim to tunnel vision, and to focus on the background while we were shooting. The background is just as important as the foreground.

I also see that a lot of beginner street photographers make the mistake of just looking for an interesting subject, putting them smack dab in the middle of the frame, and have a messy background (ugly trees, white cars, poles sticking out of the subjects' heads).

So don't fall victim to tunnel vision-- be diligent to have clean backgrounds

that add to the "sense of place" of a photograph.

**b) Every square inch counts**

Similar to the previous point, Costa emphasized that every square inch of the frame was of upmost important. So he stressed to us: fill the frame with information (subject, foreground, background, "decisive moment", interesting gestures) which make a strong image.

**c) See all the way to the edges and corners**

Furthermore, when you're shooting-- Costa suggested for us to focus on the edges and corners of the frame.

During his critique session, he would criticize students who had chopped off limbs, fingers, hands, and legs at the edges of the frame. He is a big proponent of not cropping (more on that later)-- so he is very diligent about his edges when shooting.

**d) Seek complexity and information**

Costa told us that he dreams of images. He sees images in his mind when

he's lying in bed-- and when he's out on the streets, he's looking for these situations.

He wants subjects in the foreground, the mid ground, the background-- interesting interactions, a sense of place, bright colors, lovely light-- and a sense of energy and life.

Some of Costa's best images are the ones where he fills the frame full of information, yet it is simple and doesn't have overlapping figures.

#### **e) Don't overlap your figures**

I think this needs its own point. During critique sessions, he stressed to us to not have overlapping figures. To have a little bit of separation (or white space) helped bring out the figures more from the background.

So in practicality, when you are photographing a group of people-- make sure no heads, limbs, or body parts overlap with one another.

#### **f) Don't crop**

Costa Manos (at the time of this writing) is 79 years old, and has been

part of Magnum for over 50 years. He is from the Henri Cartier-Bresson school of "not cropping". Even when Costa would print his photos, he would put a black border around his image showing that each print was the "full frame".

His reasoning for not cropping was this: cropping makes you a lazy photographer, and doesn't encourage you to move your feet while shooting.

Personally I can attest to this as well-- I used to be a "crop-a-holic" and crop every single photo I took. This made me lazy when I shot in the streets, because I would just tell myself: "Oh, I can just crop that later". I haven't dropped any of my photos the last 3 years, and I can say it has made me a much better framer when shooting on the streets.

Constantine says a little bit of cropping is okay (around 1-3% around the edges) as a lot of rangefinders aren't accurate. However he encourages his students to try to keep the full frame whenever possible.



## 2. Shoot the hell out of “interesting situations”

Costa mentions a “situation” as a scene in which you might possibly get an interesting photo. I have also heard this as called “the pregnant moment” by other photographers.

Constantine Manos isn't the type of photographer who shoots a photograph of everything. Rather, he just looks for a few “interesting situations” and then takes a lot of photos of that. For Costa, he says he might see (and photograph) around 6 situations a day when out on the streets.

I quite liked this philosophy-- because as you become more experienced in street photography, not that many “situations” will interest you. But once you find those interesting situations (that might yield a good photograph)-- work the hell out of them. Don't just take 1-2 photos; take 10, 20, 30, 40, or even 50 photos of that scene if possible.

So to sum up: photograph fewer situations, but when you find interesting situations -- shoot the hell out of them.

## 3. Photography books are a “book of poems”

Costa mentioned that each photograph has a life of its own-- and each photograph is like a poem. And a photography book is a “book of poems”. He told us that “...each poem is a separate thing, but together-- they all hold together.”

Furthermore, through his photography-- he is trying to create a “perfect poem”. He also thinks that cropping an image (excessively) is like removing a comma from a poem-- which will destroy it.

He also said in a poem, it is the small details that make it beautiful. The same in photos -- he is looking for small details which make a photo beautiful (like even a small foot in a corner of an edge in a photo).

I see there are a lot of photographers who are inspired through literature (and poetry) in their photography.



Even David Alan Harvey says that whenever he is about to go photograph a place (let's say Mexico), he reads fiction literature about the place to gain inspiration.

So see your photos as poems. Make them beautiful. And when working on a photo-book, see how you can make a “book of poems”.

4. Ask questions (and don't provide answers) in your photos

Constantine Manos was quite adamant that people shouldn't put fancy captions in their photos. He recommended to just include the location and date in a photograph. Any more information is superfluous and not necessary. Manos believes that a photo should be able to stand on its own (without a detailed caption).

Furthermore, he feels that he doesn't like captions in a photograph because he likes his photos to ask more questions (rather than providing answers).

For example, there is one photo he took with a boy lying down next to a bunch of crosses. He purposefully

doesn't tell the story behind the photo-- because he doesn't want to ruin the surprise for the viewer.

So as a takeaway point, keep your photos open-ended. Don't spoil the story for your viewer. Add some intrigue and mystery to your photos. Don't make them too obvious to decode or understand. This will make them much more engaging, interesting and memorable.

## 5. Street photography is (and should) be difficult

Constantine Manos doesn't like to use the phrase, “street photography”-- rather he uses the phrase, “photography in the public domain”.

Costa isn't interested in photos that don't have people in them. He doesn't find landscapes, flowers, or photos of animals interesting. He is looking for human beings, and for life.

One of his biggest lessons was that street photography was hard-- and should be hard. He said the following in class:

“Shooting people is more beautiful, because it is more difficult.”

This also goes in line with the philosophy that the best street photographs are often the ones that are the most difficult to photograph. The more difficult it is to photograph a scene, the less likely someone can replicate the same photograph.

Photos that are easy to take: - Photos of homeless people (just on the ground) - Photos of the back of people's heads - Photos of people on their phones - Photos of people (shot on a telephoto) - Photos shot from the hip

It is not necessarily true that the best street photographs have to be difficult to take. However you want your photos to not be easily replicable-- and unique.

## 6. Seek complexity

As mentioned earlier, Costa is looking for photos that are complex. He categorizes two types of complexity:

### 1. Physical complexity

In the frame, physical complexity is a lot of things happening. For example, having a lot of bodies, people, dogs, cats, etc. Physical complexity in a photograph fills the frame, doesn't have overlaps, has an interesting foreground, middle ground, and background.

### 2. Psychological complexity

Psychological complexity in a photograph is having intrigue or a strange thing happening in a frame. Psychologically complex images could have simple compositions as well.

When you have psychologically complex images, you often have people interacting with one another or the environment. You can ask yourself, “What is happening between the people in the frame? What is the situation? How is the relationship between the people-- what does their facial features and bodily gestures show?”

For psychologically complex images: focus on the eyes and the hands (they show a lot of nonverbal communication).

## 7. How to get close to people (and interact with them)

Costa is a pretty shy guy who likes to stay in the shadows when photographing (similar to Henri Cartier-Bresson). These are some tips he gave when it came to getting close to subjects (without having them notice you):

- Don't move abruptly, a hunter doesn't jerk around and is smooth when hunting.
- Don't make eye contact with your subjects (and they won't notice you).
- Pretend like you're photographing something behind somebody.

Furthermore, there are cases when people will catch you taking their photo. In those circumstances, people might ask you, "What are you doing?" To respond to that, Costa says: "I'm just a photographer having a nice time."

There are other circumstances where Costa will approach a stranger and ask them, "May I take your picture?" And if people say yes, he says, "Pretend like I'm not here."

Sometimes when he takes photos of people (or kids)-- he will point at the eye of the kid, and tell them to look elsewhere.

## 8. Don't have people looking into the lens

In the workshop, Costa says he prefers to be "...the observer, not the observed."

He told us in class, "Never take a picture of anyone looking at the camera, or else the photo is destroyed."

If you look at Costa's photos, because nobody is looking into the lens -- you feel like an observer looking into the photo. The photos also feel more "candid".

However I don't completely agree with this point by Costa. Some of the best photos in history were taken with the subjects looking straight into the lens. I feel that "eyes are the windows to the soul"-- and eye connection can create a more emotional connection and bond with your subject.

But once again, this is how Costa shoots-- and it works well with him.

## 9. Print your photos

Costa believes that, "...a photograph doesn't exist, until it is printed."

I think in today's digital age, we rarely print photos. I remember as a kid and my family and I would go on holiday-- we would bring along a disposable camera and take a bunch of photos, then get them processed and printed as small 4x6 images. I remember the excitement and joy of holding the physical object, the photograph, and thinking: "This is real, this exists."

Nowadays with Facebook, we rarely get the physicality of a photograph. We see them through our blue screens, but never hold photographs anymore. We don't feel the tactility of photographs, we don't feel the texture of the paper, we don't have a personal relationship with a photograph.

Even though Constantine Manos now shoots digital (he shoots with a new Leica M and Sony a7), he still prints

his photos. He still believes in the power of the print. This is what he said about the importance of the print (in the Magnum print exhibition show in Provincetown):

### The Print

"There are still photographers who believe that a photograph does not exist until it is a print. There remains in their memory the experience of working in a darkroom and recalling the magic of seeing an image gradually appear on a piece of paper in a tray of liquid; all this lit by a warm golden light.

If processed and stored properly this print can last for generations. It becomes archival; it becomes vintage. It becomes a treasure to be put in a fine box between soft acid-free tissues. It can be framed and hung in a favorite spot, to become an object of daily pleasure and comfort. It is a real object we can hold in our hands, not a negative or an image floating around in space and stored in cold machines.

Whether captured on film or captured digitally, this print, this object, re-



flects the craft and skill and pride of its maker. Its quality is a reflection of the skill and art of its making.

Let us sign it with our name as an expression of pride and accomplishment-- whether we have made it ourselves or have entrusted it's making to a skilled artisan. Let us be collectors and guardians of these beautiful artifacts. Let us celebrate the print."

- Constantine Manos, September 2014

Prints don't need to be fancy or expensive. Personally, I get a lot of my prints done at Costco in the states. It doesn't cost you an arm and a leg (I think a 12x18 is less than \$5) and the prints look pretty good (Fujifilm paper). Sure they aren't as good as professional lab prints, but I still think that it is better to make a print than not make one at all.

Prints make beautiful presents too. There is nothing more exciting than giving a print to a friend, a fellow photographer, or family-- and having them be amazed and grateful. They get excited in

thinking where they are going to frame it or put it in their home (or office).

Also I know a lot of photographers who edit and sequence their photography projects and books with small 4x6 prints. You can just put them all down on the ground, and rearrange, edit, and sequence them accordingly. There is something about playing around with physical objects which help you be more creative.

Another option is to put your small 4x6 prints on a metal board (with magnets) or on a cork board with tape or tacks. And keep them hanging them for a long time. The photos that you begin to hate looking at over and over again, you take them off. Then the photos that you really like tend to grow on you over time. They are like oil rising to the top of water.

Also for great prints over the Internet, I have used mpix.com with great results.

If possible, I also recommend everyone trying to print in the darkroom once. Take a local community college course

on how to make black and white dark-room prints. It is something truly extraordinary and magical.

## 10. How and when he shoots on the streets

At the end of the day-- you want to photograph what you like. Constantine Manos said this in class:

“I like to go to places and situations where there is a lot of people, activity-- on their feet and moving around. I like going to faires, the Daytona beach bike festival, Coney Island, and Venice beach.

Costa is also selective when he decides to go out and shoot. He doesn't shoot all day-- he only shoots when the light is good.

For example, from 8-11am there is nothing generally happening. People aren't generally out and about in the morning.

However he likes to start shooting at around 3-6pm, when there are a lot of people and the light starts to get good. He will shoot for around 2-3 hours, when a lot of people are moving around

(and there are other Poole with cameras too).

Costa also likes to go back to places that he likes. For example, if he finds a wall he likes, he will go back to it over and over again. He describes himself like a dog going to the same post and peeing.

Costa will also go back to those places, look for even better situations, and see if he could improve on photos he has already taken.

He shared in class: “Work hard, remember places, and go back until you get a good photo.”

## 11. Keep it simple with equipment

Costa is a big fan of the “one lens, one camera” philosophy. He believes that a 35mm lens is the ideal focal length for street photography (as it is close to what our human eye sees) and has shot with a Leica his entire career. He said, “One camera, one lens, hung from the wrist.” He thinks that 28mm tends to be too wide, and 50mm to be too zoomed in.

## 12. On pacing yourself

Costa gave some good advice during the workshop: pace yourself. He said, “...Don't drive yourself [too hard]. If you're tired, sit down. If you're not enjoying it [photographing], you're doing something wrong. Photography should always be a pleasurable search for something wonderful.”

## 13. Don't be “suckered by the exotic”

Often when we are traveling, we get “suckered by the exotic”. What that means is that the first time we go to India, everything looks so colorful and interesting. We try to replicate photos that look like Steve McCurry and National Geographic.

However in those circumstances, Costa says we are getting suckered by thinking just because things look unique and different-- we automatically think they are interesting. For example, I don't think I have ever seen a photo of a street performer or old Chinese person in Chi-

natown that made a truly interesting or unique photograph.

Costa explains in detail:

“It is not enough to just photograph what something looks like. We need to make it into something that is unique, a surprise. Photography has been used forever to show what things look like, like when photographers photographed objects and landscapes.”

I'm starting to paraphrase now:

“But landscapes are boring. People only photograph what landscapes look like, they are generic. I call this the “big and boring manifesto”-- people are fascinated by detail and sizes of photos. This is a fad. Those photos become big bucks-- commodities for galleries. People make editions for \$10,000 a piece. They are boring cityscapes-- big and sharp. Pictures should be interesting, new, and not the same old boring landscape and flowers.”

So as a takeaway point-- don't think that just by traveling to India or somewhere exotic, you will make good photos. I think the best photos are the ones

in your own backyard-- in which you take “boring” situations and make them interesting.

## 14. Photos are ideas

Costa shared the importance of ideas in photography (I'm going to paraphrase below):

“Ideas are very important and underrated in photography. A photograph, like a written text or a short story, is an idea. A photograph is an idea. A visual idea. It doesn't need any words. But it is an idea-- a visual idea. If you see something, a good photograph is the expression of an idea. This doesn't require captions and explanations. A photo should make a statement.”

Costa is also very much against “conceptual photography”-- in which the idea is more important than the photograph. He doesn't like too much verbiage about visual things. He said something like, “Too much thinking in a photo isn't good. You want visual thinking in photos, not 'word thinking'”.

## 15. On taste and photography

During a critique session, Costa shares his views on taste and photography (and is very candid about it, pun intended):

“There is so much bad everything. Bad art, bad photography. I don't want to sound like a snob, but 95% of the public doesn't have any taste. That is a reality. Taste is having a discerning appreciation of anything. Food, wine, photography, art. Different people have more discerning taste in food than art. But it is a very small percent. So there is a lot of garbage floating around, people patting each other on the back. A lot of boring stuff.”

So how does a photographer build better “taste” in their artistic sensibilities? Easy, look at great art (and avoid bad art).

If you want to be a beer connoisseur, you don't drink bud light and coors light. You drink specialty micro-brews. If you want to be a coffee connoisseur, you don't drink Starbucks, you have good es-



pressos in hipster cafes. If you want to be a foodie, you don't eat McDonalds and Burger King. You eat at highly-reviewed restaurants (my tip, anything with over 200 reviews on yelp with a 4.5 rating or above is generally good).

So with photography, I say avoid 99% of Flickr, Instagram, Flickr, and Facebook like the plague. 99% of the work on the Internet (probably more like 99.99%) is bad photography. There is a lot of noise out there, and not that much signal.

For me personally, I rarely look at photos on the web anymore. I only trust my photography books, or contemporary photographers who are creating truly exceptional work.

If you look at the work of the masters (and spend a lot of time on the Magnum website)-- you will learn what makes a great photograph by osmosis. You will simply absorb great photography. You need to consume great images to aspire to make great photos. And once you build up your taste and palette, you can no longer look at bad photos (kind

of like how I can't drink bad coffee anymore in gas stations).

## 16. Avoid bad situations

In street photography, we want to try to put ourselves in good situations-- where we have the ability to make a good photograph. But sometimes in the streets, there are situations where no matter what you do-- you just can't make a good photograph. This is what Costa said during a critique of a student photos (when the light was very harsh, and the background was very busy):

“You put yourself into a difficult situation. So you already have a few strikes against yourself. Don't put yourself in a position that will be difficult. Don't even bother taking photos when Mother Nature isn't on your side. You can't fight Mother Nature, so don't even bother. Don't start the game with too many strikes against you.”

Costa elaborates:

“You don't want to photograph black and white people in the sun, and people

in a white sky. No matter what you do, you can't fix it.”

So when it comes to street photography, know that there are some times of the day that you won't get good light: which is generally mid-day sun. The light tends to be harsh.

Instead if you want good light, put yourself in the right situation. The only time to get really good light is during sunrise and sunset. As a side note, using a flash helps open up opportunities for shooting at different times during the day. And even Costa Manos was a big fan of digital cameras that could shoot late at night (with ISO 3200+, as in the old days, they were only limited to ISO 200 color film).

## 17. Make your photos sharp

Costa is a big fan of shooting with a deep-depth-of-field (f8-f16) and with a fast shutter speed (1/250th of a second or faster). He prefers “absolutely sharp” photos (and dislikes bokeh).

During a critique with one student, he called the photo as “damaged informa-

tion”-- that because she shot wide-open at f2 (into a bright sun), technically the photo was poor. He suggested exposing for the highlights, so you won't have blown highlights.

## 18. Be specific

In another critique, Costa recommended the student to “...avoid capturing two photos in one. Just focus on one scene”.

So if you see two scenes happening in a photo-- just focus on one.

## 19. Don't spread yourself too thin

One big takeaway I got from Costa was the importance of not spreading yourself too thin in your photography-- to stick with one style, and not have too much inspiration from others.

For example, he is a big proponent of one camera and one lens. This helps simplify our equipment, and gives us a consistent style and look. For his “American color” series-- he only shot on Kodachrome 64 color slide film as well.

He also recommends students to gain a lot of inspiration from other photographers-- but mentions how it is a fine balance. If you spend too much time looking at too many other photographers, you spread yourself and your inspiration too thin. It is better to be inspired by a few photographers, know their work really well, and own all their books-- rather than trying to get to know every single photographer.

## 20. Make photos that will last

My last takeaway from Costa was to make “photos with an infinite life”. He told us, “...the better the photo, the longer it will last. We will see it over and over again, and it will enter our memory bank.”

He also challenged us to ask ourselves, “how rare is the moment? Will the photos exist 50 years from now?”

And ultimately-- the process and search of photos is as fun as the final product. So remember, have fun and enjoy the journey.

## Costa quotes

Here is a list of interesting quotes Costa shared during the workshop:

- “Photos should be perfect.”
- “Follow your instincts.”
- “Be careful of putting things in the center, unless there is a reason.”
- “I'm hungry for more information around the edges of the frame.”
- “The camera doesn't have the versatility of the human eye.”
- “You can crop people at the waist, thighs, can't cut at the shins. Can't cut off feet. Can cut off head in certain situations.”
- “You can't find something unless you know what you're looking for.”
- “Photos should make a statement.”
- “Negative space can be used positively.”
- “The best way to edit (select) digital photos is to throw away most of it.”

- “If your not enjoying photography, you're doing something wrong.”
- “Watch out for fluorescent lights, they are nightmares.”
- “Dead space eats away from th photo. It's like cancer.”
- “I don't really like verticals, I would only shoot a vertical if someone was on a ladder.”
- “The subject of the picture should be the picture. Not the subject matter.”
- “The best way to take a bad picture is to take it. Ask yourself: 'Why am I pushing the button?' You want to get rid of the clutter before putting it into the machine.”





12

## DAIDO MORIYAMA

I remember the first time I stumbled upon Daido Moriyama's work via word-of-mouth by a friend. I remembered how my friend told me how he was a genius, and how incredible his black and white work was.

When I first looked at Daido's work, I simply didn't "get it." His shots looked like a bunch of random and unintentional snapshots. The majority of Daido's photos weren't very interesting to me and seemed to be quite boring.

However over time, Daido's work has grown on me. I still don't think he is the best street photographer in the world, but I love his unique vision in photography

(similarly to William Klein, he went against the grain of tradition in photography). Not only that, but Daido inspires me for his curiosity in life and only sees photography as a way to document how amazing the world truly is.

I know you guys must be sick of my list posts by now, but I prefer to write in that manner as it is easier to organize my thoughts. So with no further adieu, here are some lessons that Daido Moriyama has taught me about street photography.

## 1. Make the camera your slave

Many street photographers are obsessed with cameras and gear. We often talk about the difference between shooting with a DSLRs vs rangefinders, the difference of using zoom lenses vs prime lenses, and even the technical settings attached to it.

However at the end of the day, photography should be about taking photos-- not just obsessing over cameras. Araki, one of Daido's colleagues (and

also one of Japan's most infamous photographers) talks about how Daido made the camera his slave in the documentary: "Near Equal" (2001):

"The photographer had been a slave of the camera for a long time. Good camera, good lens, Leica, etc. These were the masters of a photographer. But in a way, Daido Moriyama is a photographer who started to make the camera his own slave. Photography is not about the camera.

Of course we need the camera. If you want to write a romantic love letter, we need some tool to write it with. But anything-- a pencil or a ball pen is fine. It is like this in photography, and he is a pioneer for that. (Araki 2001)

So if you don't already know, Daido is quite famous for using most Ricoh film compact cameras for his 50+ years of shooting on the streets of Shinjuku in Tokyo. He shoot mostly black and white film, but has actually moved onto digital recently.

Daido expands on why he prefers to use compact cameras compared to big

and bulky SLR's in his documentary, "Near Equal":

"If you use a SLR, you see things like this [holds camera to eye]. And when you do this, you want to have perfect focus.

The moment which you want to capture does not fit your feeling, if you do this. If you are using a compact camera, it is simple.

[While holding SLR to eye] Also furthermore, if you [use a SLR in front of your eyes] many people in Shinjuku, people turn their faces, or flee."

Certainly the benefit of shooting with a compact camera in the streets is the fact you don't have to always worry about the camera settings. You can simply point, click, and let the camera do the rest (autofocus, exposure, etc). According to Daido, it allows you to focus more on the photography and the feeling of the moment-- rather than fumbling around with settings on the camera.

Not only that, but another huge benefit of shooting with a compact camera is the fact that it tends to be a lot

less threatening than a big SLR. It is small, inconspicuous, has a quiet shutter sound, and looks more like a toy than a "serious camera."

So how did Daido even discover the Ricoh compact film camera? I think this snippet from the "Near Equal" documentary shows how little he cares about the camera, and more about the photography:

[Interviewee on Daido]: "I think he basically never bought his own camera. He basically borrowed a camera from someone. And it somehow becomes his own camera, or he got one from someone."

Daido: [On the Ricoh] I got it as a gift, but when I used it, it was unexpectedly good. Any camera is fine. It is only the means of taking a photo.

Daido certainly isn't the type of photographer who tested out dozens of cameras, lenses, and configurations. He just took the first camera he was given, and went out and photographed what he found interesting.

**Takeaway point:**

Don't worry about your camera so much. Just go out and shoot.

## 2. Wander the streets like a stray dog

One of the photos that Daido is most famous for is a stark photograph of a stray dog, looking right at him with insidious eyes. This is what Daido had to say about the photograph in an interview with Tate: "Daido Moriyama: In Pictures" (2012):

"I took this photograph when I went to Misawa in Aomori to work for a camera magazine. I stepped out of the hotel in the morning to go out for a photo shoot, the dog was just there. So I immediately took several pictures.

I realized later in the darkroom when I printed the image how amazing the dog's expression is. Snapshots are all about an instant moment and this dog instantly became a part of me. I am actually honored to be compared with that dog."

If you watch the documentaries of Daido Moriyama shooting the streets of

Shinjuku, that is exactly what he looks like: a stray dog. He wanders the streets for hours on end, with no real destination in mind. He goes into the back alleys that most people are afraid to go, and photographs whatever he finds interesting. In his interview with Tate he talks about how he wanders the streets:

"I basically walk quite fast. I like taking snapshots in the movement of both myself and the outside world. When I walk around I probably look like a street dog because after walking around the main roads, I keep wandering around the back streets."

If you use the "stray dog" analogy-- you can see how his senses are even animalistic. He talks about the power of smell in a recent short documentary on him in Hong Kong: "Daido Moriyama - The Mighty Power" (2012):

"There is a mighty power in photography. And especially overwhelming in its expressiveness. I love to observe the people in cities, in which an uncanny scent floats. I love to burrow in mysteri-



ous lanes. To detect the unusual scent guided by my own sense of smell.

### **Takeaway point:**

When it comes to street photography, serendipity is key. Don't feel that you always have to have a destination in mind when you are out in the streets.

I think this especially applies when it comes to traveling and shooting street photography. If we ever visit a foreign country, we feel obligated to shoot in certain landmarks of the city (Eiffel tower anyone?) However in my experience it is the touristy parts of a city which are the worst to photograph-- and it is the places off-the-beaten-path which make the most interesting photographs.

So apply this "stray dog" mentality to yourself. Be unburdened by a goal or a destination. Just go where your curiosity leads you, and don't forget to take photos along the way.

## **3. Look for possibilities**

One of the things that really touched me about Daido and his work is that even at his age (he is 73) but still

photographs fervently. In his interview with Tate he shares his desire to continue photographing:

"My friends or critics are often surprised and ask me why I never got bored walking around for over 50 years. But I never get bored. I often hear it is said that people, even photographers, do their best work when they are in their 20's and 30's. I'm 73 now. But I could never see the city with an old man's eyes, or as if I understood everything.

Everyone has desires. The quality and the volume of those desires change with age. But that desire is always serious and real. Photography is an expression of those desires. So that way of thinking or speaking is nonsense to me. Completely meaningless. That's how it is.

What amazes Daido most about the world? The fact that it is limitless and how he can discover his own desires through the city:

"I have always felt that the world is an erotic place. As I walk through it my senses are reaching out. And I am drawn

to all sorts of things. For me cities are enormous bodies of people's desires. And as I search for my own desires within them, I slice into time, seeing the moment. That's the kind of camera work I like."

So why does Daido prefer to shoot in cities? He explains his allure of Shinjuku in Tokyo, his favorite place to shoot in the world:

I see Shinjuku as a stadium of people's desires. I like the intensity of the city's character when its overcrowded and jumbled thoughts and desires are whirling. I can't photograph anything without a city. I am definitely addicted to cities."

In "The Mighty Power" Daido shares more of his fascination and passion about photographing in sprawling urban cities. He cites one of the best parts of shooting in a city is the fact how the possibilities of photographing are limitless:

"Every city, no matter how it looks is a work of art. Fifty years have lapsed and with the thousands of photographs I have taken, I still find photography amaz-

ing. There are still millions of things and people that are worthy to be shot.

### **Takeaway point:**

There are very few street photographers who have been shooting as long as Daido (50+ years). Even Henri Cartier-Bresson gave up photography after ~40 years of photographing (from 1930-early 1970's).

Many street photographers I know tend to get bored of photographing where they live (myself included). We like to always think that the "grass is greener on the other side" and that where we live is boring and cliché.

How does Daido manage to photograph the streets of Tokyo (and more specifically Shinjuku) for over 50 years? The secret is that he doesn't focus on the shortcomings of the place, but rather the possibilities.

One of the beauties of street photography is that regardless of where you photograph (whether it be a suburb, a mall, a city-center, or even a beach) the moments which you photograph will never be the same. You will never get the

same exact person (wearing the same outfit) in the same exact spot, with the same exact light, and the same exact expression or look in their face.

Always look for the silver lining in street photography. Another secret to not getting bored with shooting street photography in your neighborhood can be from this quote by Steve Jobs: "Stay hungry, stay foolish".

Don't settle with your photography and feel that you have already done everything in your power. Strive to take better photographs, to explore more, and to find the nuances in the city or place in which you live.

## 4. Shoot black & white for the meaning, not the aesthetic

When you look at street photography, the majority of it is in black and white. Why is that? Well I would surmise that contemporary street photographers love the sense of nostalgia associated with black and white. After all, all

of the masters shot in black and white. But then again, that is all they had.

Now we have the option of shooting in black and white or color. Yet, most street photographers I have seen gravitate still more towards black and white.

Daido has shot the vast majority of his street photography in black and white. Why? It wasn't merely just for the aesthetic. Rather, he tried to find something deeper in meaning through his monochromatic images:

"The reason why I think black and white photography is erotic is completely due to my body's instinctive response. Monochrome has stronger elements of abstraction or symbolism. This is perhaps an element of taking you to another place. Black and white has that physical effect on me. That's just the way I respond to things."

We see the world in color, so black & white is a departure from that. It tends to be more abstract, symbolic, and helps us see the world in a unique and novel way.

In an interview with Aperture: "Daido Moriyama: The Shock From Outside" (2012) he talks about another reason he enjoys shooting in black and white, which is to capture the erotic nature of the world:

"One distinction I can make—I've written about this in my essays: black-and-white photography has an erotic edge for me, in a broad sense. Color doesn't have that same erotic charge. It doesn't have so much to do with what is being photographed; in any black-and-white image there is some variety of eroticism. If I am out wandering and I see photographs hung on the walls of a restaurant, say, if they are black and white, I get a rush! It's really a visceral response. I haven't yet seen a color photograph that has given me shivers. That is the difference between the two.

However this is not to say that shooting in color doesn't interest Daido. On the contrary, now that he is shooting digitally, he finds the idea to be quite exciting and challenging:

"My interest in color is increasing. Sometimes when I see one of my black-and-white photographs, I think to myself: "That's a Daido Moriyama image." Whereas color work seems wholly different to me—still, there is something good about it. So what interests me is seeing my own work differently: the new, vague feeling of accepting the color work as my own. That is where I am now. At that vague, flickering stage."

#### **Takeaway point:**

I think when you make the conscious decision to either shoot in black and white or color, you should do it purposefully.

Based on my personal experiences, I have found that when I am shooting in black and white or color I see the world in a different way.

For example, when I shot exclusively in black & white, I would look for shapes, forms, shadows, light, expression, and moods. However now that I am working exclusively in color, I look for bright hues, contrasts of different col-



ors, vivid advertisements, and signs of consumerism.

Don't simply shoot in black & white or color for the aesthetic-- but do it for the emotion and meaning.

## 5. The photos you take are a self-portrait of yourself, not others

The term "snapshot" is often looked down by photographers. It is thought of being unintentional, amateurish, and uninteresting.

However Daido loves the concept of the snapshot, and enjoys the casual approach to photography:

"Nowadays, people take photos casually. Especially of their daily lives. The casual attitude toward photography is the same as mine. There is nothing right or wrong."

"...The only difference is that I use my own way to record my life, while they use theirs."

Not only that, but Daido is fascinated with the idea of having his viewers

be active participants in looking at his photographs. He wants his photographs to resonate with his viewers (and with himself):

"I think that the most important thing that photography can do is to relate both the photographer and the viewer's memories. At first sight a photograph looks straightforward as it slices off a scene or a moment in time. But the images that photography captures are actually ambiguous. And it's because of this ambiguity that I like photography."

"At the very beginning a photo is produced from a photographer's specific perspective. However, when it is presented in front of different viewers various perspectives will be developed by viewers, which will enrich the content of the photo."

Daido is also very aware of the fleeting nature of moments, and values the ability for the camera to record the present. Not only that, but he also wants to preserve his feelings through his photographs as well:

"Photography is the capture of the very present moment. It is meaningless to regret in the future what you've missed. Therefore taking a photo of the present is to preserve it. That is the essence of photography. Your feeling is always a reflection of the photo you produce.

The past cannot be captured by the present. And the future also cannot be captured by the present. The present can only be captured in the moment."

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't feel so obliged to take street photography so seriously all the time. At the end of the day, it is less about the people you capture on the streets-- and more of a self-reflection of who you are as a person and how you see the world.

Take a casual approach to street photography by always carrying your camera with you everywhere you go, and take snapshots of whatever you find interesting.

If anyone ever calls your photos "snapshots" don't get offended. Rather, revel in it as I feel that the beauty of a

snapshot is how open and democratic it is. Often times photographers can be quite pretentious about their work. The snapshot is the celebration of living and experiencing life without prejudice and showing a part of who we are.

Also know that photography is all about discovering who you are as a person. I often look at the work of photographers and can see straight through them. To generalize, I look at a lot of street photographers whose work is quite dark, grim, and depressing. I am sure this is how they see the world, and have a much more cynical view of society.

Other street photographers can take colorful and vivid photographs that celebrate the joy and beauty of life. This can also be a reflection of themselves as a person.

If I explore my own photographs, I would say they say a lot of who I am as well. I studied sociology as an undergraduate student, and it is how I tend to see and view the world. I also look at my photographs, and although I do have some humor and fun in my shots- the ma-

jority of my shots tend to be quite sad, depressing, and cynical of the world.

When I studied sociology, I tended to see more of the negatives of individuals in society. Things I hated about the world: consumerism, the deception of mass media, and this never-ending thirst of power and money. These are also the themes that I see developing through my work, especially in my "Dark Skies over Tokyo" project, my "Korea: the Presentation of Self" project, as well as my new "Suits" project.

So at the end of the day, photograph who you are and also try to get your viewers to engage in your photographs. Invite them in, introduce them to how you see the world, and hopefully something will also resonate with them as well.

## Conclusion

Daido may not be the best street photographer in the world, but his experience and wisdom is definitely worth exploring. He is very non-pretentious when it comes to his photography (which I love). He takes on a casual ap-

proach with his simple compact camera, and roams the street like a stray dog sniffing out moments that he finds interesting.

What I find the most inspirational is at the end of the day, he is not so interested in taking photographs as wandering and experiencing life.





13

DAN WINTERS



My good friend Bill Reeves recently bought me a copy of "Road to Seeing" by Dan Winters. I've always known Dan Winters as being a quite edgy portrait photographer-- and had no idea that he was actually quite interested in street photography, and had quite deep philosophical views on photography.

When I first got the book, I was pretty astounded. It is a thick book (about four-fingers thick) and has amazing typography, binding, and the photos in the book look like small prints.

The other day, I devoured the book-- it took me about 5 hours and I also jotted down some of my favorite quotes and ideas from Dan. Through this post- I want to share some of the lessons I've learned from Dan, while also giving an overview of the book.

## Road to Seeing

For those of you who don't know Dan Winters, he is an accomplished portrait photographer who is famous for taking iconic photos of celebrities and often making these ridiculous situations (and props) in his shoots.

In the book, "Road to Seeing" -- Dan combines many different elements. It is part auto-biographical (he shares how he got started in photography, his philosophies, and trials and tribulations), part historical (he shares the history of photography and even street photography), and part educational (he shares the lessons he's learned along the way).

All-in-all, it is a gorgeous book that I highly recommend everybody to invest in. As I often say, "Buy books, not gear." I think books like this are good kicks-in-the-ass. After finishing the book, I was inspired to shoot-- and went down Telegraph avenue in Berkeley and ended up shooting 2 rolls of Kodak Portra 400 on my Hasselblad (I'm starting to shoot more medium-format in Berkeley).

I'm not going to share too much personal background on Dan Winters (I'm sure there are much better biographies written on Wikipedia or elsewhere). But I will share my personal feelings of Dan Winters (at least based on what I read through the book).

In "Road to Seeing" -- Dan is like your personal guide. He talks in a very down-to-earth way, and isn't pretentious at all. For a guy with his fame and success, he just seems like your photography teacher who wants to tell you how it is. He is very open, transparent, and loving with his words and thoughts-- and is trying his best to be as helpful to the reader as possible.

I loved his friendly and conversational tone throughout the book-- he is certainly a guy I would like to have a nice cup of coffee with.

As I am a huge fan of education and learning-- I want to distill some of the biggest lessons I personally gained from Dan Winters.

## 1. Thoughts on street photography

I didn't know, but Dan Winters is hugely inspired by street photography. Not only did he start off doing a lot of street photography when he was younger-- he still pursues it today as one of his favorite creative outlets.

When Dan was young and studying in Munich, he would shoot street photography nearly everyday. He shares in a below excerpt:

"I found myself exploring the city and making photographs nearly every day. Though not previously a practitioner of the form, I was a great admirer of street photography. Alfred Stieglitz's work was my first conscious exposure to the genre. Henri Cartier-Bresson followed, and soon the floodgates opened. Robert Frank's seminal 'The Americans' quickly became my bible. William Klein, Lee Friedlander, Tod Papageorge, William Eggleston, Harry Callahan, Ray Metzker, and many others. The list is a long one."

Not only that, but his early beginning in street photography gave him the confidence in his work:

"The handful of pictures I made while in Munich that I felt were successful are important to me. It was during that period that a profound shift took place in my photography: I started to call myself a photographer. "I am" is incredi-

bly empowering. My passion and my self were beginning to align."

In 1988, Dan moved to NYC and while working full-time as an assistant, he spent much of his free time shooting street photography:

"It was difficult for me to work full-time as an assistant after having spent several years as a working photographer. My free time was consumed by photographing the streets of New York. Street shooting was a passion I first experienced in Munich, and to this day it remains one of my favorite creative outlets. In the '80s, I spent untold hours with my friend Kevin, a gifted street photographer in his own right, wandering the concrete and steel canyons of Manhattan, camera in hand. From Coney Island to Prospect Park, from the Staten Island Ferry to the streets of Harlem (and all points in between), I amassed a substantial body of work during this period of my life."

Dan even shares a funny story of bumping into Lee Friedlander, and learns

the lesson: always have your camera with you.

"A highlight from these years was the time I ran into Lee Friedlander in SoHo. I have long admired Lee's street work, and I marvel at his ability to capture his surroundings so succinctly. It was a chance encounter-- I was riding my bike to a nearby hardware store when I immediately recognized him from the self-portraits published in his seminal book *Lee Friedlander Photographs*. I said something ridiculous like, "Hi, I'm the New York chapter president of the Lee Friedlander fan club." My attempt at levity did not go unnoticed-- he let out a hearty laugh and asked me where my camera was. When I told him it was at my studio, he said that it wasn't doing me any good there. "You should always carry it," he said as he continued on his way. Solid advice."

Street photography trained him in many different ways: to learn how to see, to be patient, and to see photographic potential in everything:

"Cities are in constant motion. I learned to be still while shooting-- watching moments methodically with a precision I hadn't known before. I began returning with the same places and noticing their subtle differences. I looked for photographic potential in everything. Photographing frequently is essential for any photographer. And like any practice, it allows for the development of an inner dialogue. Robert Frank compared this to a boxer training for a fight. I find I'm sharpest when I'm shooting on a regular basis."

Dan also provides some advice when it comes to shooting street photography-- the main lesson is to walk a lot (and don't have too much of a pre-conceived plan):

"The somewhat nomadic practice of walking the streets and photographing the places we inhabit-- and responding to all that the universe has to offer-- has a particularly strong hold on me. Street photography affords us opportunities to capture stolen moments, but the street also provides a context. The shared space outside our sanctuaries becomes

just as much a character as those who populate it. As a practice, it's nearly impossible to have a specific plan. I find the best method is to simply start walking. I've spent hours on a city block that one could traverse in a matter of seconds, and I revel in the ability to render its frenzy into the stillness of a frozen pond.

Dan also shares why he loves street photography-- for how liberating it makes him feel. He also points out how the term "street photography" isn't as important as the act of making photos in public:

"[Street photography] is the most liberating form of image-making I know. I use the term 'street photography' because it's an established term within the photographic vernacular, though I suppose it could be called 'public photography' as well. One of the great practitioners of the field, Garry Winogrand, had disdain for the term, insisting that he was not a 'street' photographer, but rather a 'still' photographer. We can always rely on semantics to allow us to drift from the essence of a subject."



Dan also loves how open and democratic street photography is:

"One aspect of the genre that appeals to me is that it's non-exclusive. Because the subject matter does not require special access, it really is a democratic enterprise. It doesn't even require a street. Any place that is inhabited by man is usually accepted within the genre."

Dan also believes street photography and documentary photography to be the same:

"Another semantic distinction is the term 'documentary photography,' which is meant to imply that the images are being made for the purpose of creating a historical document. While intent may differ, I would consider these genres to be one and the same."

He also shares the importance of being attentive when in the streets:

"In his insightful 1964 short story 'Blow Up,' Julio Cortazar encapsulates what I believe is the essence of street photography: 'When one is walking

about with a camera, one has almost the duty to be attentive.'"

Dan loves the experience of feeling part of the streets, and the hunt to capture these fleeting moments-- and shares his love of the genre:

"It's a fascinating experience to become part of the street-- to come to it by watching it rather than engaging in a fleeting, parochial encounter. So much energy and talent has been expended in the pursuit of capturing these moments, and our collective experience and sense of place has been so enriched by street photographers, that to create a comprehensive account of the genre would fill several volumes. [...] Ultimately, the passion I feel for this type of photography [street photography] is so near to my heart, I would be remiss in not addressing it."

### **Takeaway points:**

I think here are some points we can learn from street photography (based on Dan Winters' experiences)

- a) Always have a camera with you (solid advice from Lee Friedlander)

- b) Don't have too much of a pre-conceived plan when out shooting
- c) Walk a lot
- d) Don't worry about the definition of "street photography"
- e) Shoot regularly (to stay sharp)
- f) See photo opportunities in everything (it doesn't matter where you are)

## 2. A photograph should stand on its own

One thing that bothers me a lot about modern photography is conceptual photography-- how it focuses more on the concept of a photograph (than the photograph itself).

I believe a photograph should stand on its own-- without a fancy backstory, caption, or theory. One of the first quotes from Dan Winters which really stuck out to me:

"A photograph does not require any information beyond the confines of the frame."

Dan also shares some of his thoughts on the art world-- and his personal frustrations with the system:

"I have not struggled with my works being acknowledged in the art world, so I insist this is not being aired as sour grapes. More than anything, I think it speaks to an emperor's-new-clothes syndrome, in which photographers' work has to be explained ad infinitum in order to safeguard its success within the so-called fine art world, and how that creates a closed cycle."

Dan shares how photos shouldn't need to be explained, and the backstory (or how difficult it was to create) shouldn't matter so much:

"Photographs should not need to be explained. I don't want to know how many steps were involved when I'm looking at a picture. I might find it interesting that the artist labored intensely to make an image, but process alone is weak footing on which to stand. The photographic image should stand on its own. Perhaps this is due to digital technology and the ubiquity of mobile de-

vices and apps-- the photographic process has been demystified to the layman, The public perception that anyone can take a picture has, for many, marginalized the medium."

### **Takeaway point:**

One lesson I've learned from Constantine Manos was that a photograph just needs two things in a caption: the location and year.

When I started photography, I would put all these esoteric and cheesy titles on my images -- to try to make them better. I used titles such as, "Darkness", "Loneliness", "Solitude", "Lost in thought" (thinking about it now makes me cringe).

However I think photography in itself is a visual art that communicates everything it needs to (within the frame). A single image should be able to stand on its own-- without the need to prop itself up with words or a backstory.

### **Counter-point:**

To counter this point, I think it is fine to mix words, video, and text with

photography. Some projects that aren't about single-images (but more of a series) need text to make it stronger. Not all photographers I know care totally on just photography. Some photographers I know are also writers and poets, and like to combine both text and photography-- and do it beautifully.

So ultimately just think to yourself: what do you want to achieve out of your photography? What kind of message do you want to communicate to your viewer?

Just try to be intentional with your photography-- and don't automatically assume that fancy text, captions, and elaborate back-stories will make images any better.

## **3. On what drives him**

Out of all the great photographers and artists I have studied-- they all have one common trait: obsession (which also manifests as passion).

Dan shares how being obsessive has helped his career:

"I worked hands-on with cars with as much fervor as my previous pursuits. This obsessive character trait has been helpful throughout my career. I have the ability to be hyper-focused on a single subject and absorb vast amounts of data pertaining to that subject."

What makes Dan Winters' work so great is that he combines so many different fields (film, illustration, photography) to make his own unique style and voice.

What ultimately drives Dan Winters isn't this need for external recognition-- but this opportunity to make images that please himself:

"Though professional work makes up the majority of my archive, I ultimately make images for myself, and any subsequent connection that is formed with the viewer from my efforts is a blessing to me. Regardless of whether my work is perceived as being bad or good, it is a product of my journey, and it's one I'm grateful to have the opportunity to share. When I see extensive writing that attempts to explain imagery al-

most to the point of defense, I'm often reminded of Martin Mull's insightful quote: "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture."

Another great tip from Dan Winters on taking your photography seriously:

"I make it a habit to approach every picture as though it were my last."

I think also what drives Dan Winters in his relentless pursuit of images is knowing that there are so many great photos that yet been photographed:

"Presented with this opportunity, whether real or manufactured, would I have the ability to see the potential of the situation and trip the shutter at the precise moment that would result in a masterpiece? I now find peace in the realization that countless potential masterpieces happen each moment the world over and go unphotographed."

Dan also shares his personal journey-- and how without creativity in his life, he felt like he was dying:

"The shift I was undergoing was also a spiritual one. I felt as though my life



up to this point was not being lived as consciously as I would have liked. I felt that the last few years had been experienced in a kind of fog, that I had succumbed to the delusion that the next concert, car part, or party was the answer. The spiritual aspect of my creativity had been lost, and the awareness of myself as a human being was not being acknowledged."

Early-on, a great way he was able to find passion in his photography was photographing his loved ones:

"I quickly moved away from the inanimate in favor of human subject matter. I photographed family and friends and began a love affair with the portrait. I began telling stories in photo essays."

Dan also shares his outside inspirations-- and how he decided to dedicate his life to photography:

"I began frequenting art house theaters and studying documentary films. I went to museums and galleries in Los Angeles and began buying books on photography, painting, and art history. I became a regular at the LA Philharmonic

concerts at the Hollywood Bowl. Life was filled with a new level of excitement. My passion had been reignited, and I began to see beauty everywhere. I felt as though I was awakening, and I made the conscious and calculated decision to make photography my life's work."

### **Takeaway points:**

In terms of what drives Dan Winters, I would say it is the following:

- a) Obsession (being hyper-focused on what he is doing)
- b) Knowing that many great photographs have yet been photographed (the world is full of opportunities)
- c) Beauty is everywhere
- d) Not photographing made him feel dead creatively
- e) Photographing like each photos was his last (pure gold)
- f) Making images to please yourself (rather than others)

## **4. On self-criticism**

Even though Dan is an absolutely incredible photographer, he has had some patches of self-doubt with his work.

For example, he was hugely inspired by W. Eugene Smith (one of the most perfectionist and obsessive photographers who have ever lived).

Dan starts off by introducing how he first discovered W. Eugene Smith's work:

"I was first exposed to the photo essay through W. Eugene Smith, who many consider to be the father of modern photojournalism and unrivaled master of the form. Smith produced a mammoth body of work in his 60 years, a significant portion of which appeared in Life over a span of three decades. In 1986 I attended an exhibition of Smith's photographs at MOCA in Los Angeles."

However upon seeing W. Eugene Smith's body of work-- Dan was left feeling anxious (that he could never come even close to creating as great work):

"The exhibition left me dumbfounded, and I remember being overcome with inspiration, as well as anxiety. As I discussed earlier, I was fearful that I

would never produce photographs as profound and beautiful as Smith had, and at this point in my life, I am unfettered at this."

On the other hand, W. Eugene Smith had to make huge sacrifices in his personal life (and physical/mental/spiritual health) to create the work that he did:

"Smith was, by all accounts, a gruff eccentric who was his worst enemy. He was constantly clashing with editors, and it was his seemingly inhuman devotion to his work, along with his habitual drug use, that would eventually claim his life. Smith was famous for being infamous. His photographs were sometimes hybrids of documents, in that he frequently manipulated events by posing his subjects and inventing entire scenarios in order to create the picture he wanted."

Dan ultimately realized that being another human being -- he would never create images like Gene Smith, and became okay with his position in life:

"There will never be another Gene Smith. I'll never make images as power-

ful as his. I can accept this, as his life choices led him toward his own unique path. My path has led me in a different direction, one for which I'm grateful beyond measure."

Dan also shares the importance of not comparing your work to others (even though it is human nature):

"It is important for us not to compare our work to the work of others, as challenging as that may be. It is simply human nature to look outside ourselves, rather than face that which exists internally. Comparison is ego-based and unproductive in the long run."

### **Takeaway point:**

Personally, I have lots of doubts about my photography. I constantly self-criticize my work, and think to myself: "It will never be good enough." I want my work to be as good as Magnum photographers, and I want my photographs to be respected and admired by others.

However in my personal journey, trying to find external validation has only been negatively crippling. I've discovered that no matter how good your work is--

you can never have 100% of your audience like your work. Even Bill Cosby said something like, "I don't know what the secret to success is, but I know it isn't pleasing everybody."

When I look at photography books, I often feel a similar response to Dan Winters: inspiration and anxiety. Inspiration because the work is so great and beautiful-- and I want to create work on a similar pedigree. Anxiety because I don't think my work can ever get there (which can be discouraging).

However ultimately-- we should always first take photos to please ourselves. At all costs, we should avoid comparing our work to the work of others.

We all have different personal backgrounds. Some of us work full-time jobs and have barely enough time to make images. Realistically, you can't just quit your job, travel the world, and abandon your family. Some of us may not be physically equipped to put on the difficult work of constantly traveling, walking, and shooting. Some of us don't view photography as the most important thing in

our lives (I don't) and value our personal relationships with our friends, family, and community -- which will prevent us from being the world's best photographer.

Seek to please yourself, and remember: validation is for parking (not human beings).

## 5. On collaboration with your subject

Dan Winters is a talented portrait photographer-- and sees portraiture as a collaboration between the photographer and subject. In the book, Dan outlines his working method with his subjects:

To start off, Dan is very transparent with his subjects. He communicates how he personally works, and shares his own expectations (in terms of the image he wants to make):

"When making a portrait, I've found it's important to communicate my working method to the subject before the session begins, especially when I'm working with individuals who have frequently been photographed. Varying approaches

can yield vastly different results, so this working agreement is vital. I will usually describe what my expectations are and the type of photograph I would like to make on that day, as well as the level of participation I expect from them. I also provide any specific details that give the sitter a well-rounded idea of my general process."

Semantics and word-choice is also important. Dan explains:

"I usually refer to the sitting as a 'portrait session' as opposed to a 'photo shoot.' I feel the terminology describes a more intimate experience and, in some way, changes the subject's perception of the event."

Dan shares how the portrait session is a two-way dialogue:

"A dialogue then begins between us. I welcome the subject to voice any concerns or ideas they might have, any particular angles they favor, and the type of direction that works best for them."

However at the same time, Dan often has a good idea of what he wants from the shoot-- and can direct his sub-



jects too. But the importance of this is having mutual respect:

"In most cases, I prefer to direct the sitter throughout the shoot. This not only allows me to guide the shoot in the direction I would like it to go, but also relieves the subject of the responsibility of having to generate material for me. Individuals in the creative world-- actors and other visual artists with whom I often work-- are aware of the camera, and of the artistic process in general. For these sessions, there is a mutual respect and a peer dynamic between us, as well as a reverence for the photographic process and its capabilities."

Sometimes the subjects have great ideas to contribute:

"Over the years there have been occasions when the subject has asked that I allow him or her to give expressions and postures to work with. Though not the norm, this working method can allow for a wonderful collaboration and has provided results that I very possibly would not have coaxed out of the sitter."

Dan also shares the importance of not being too rigid -- and going with the flow:

"Even when directing a session, I'm fluidly responding to moments that occur organically. When I give a certain type of direction-- 'Find quiet,' for example-- that request can elicit a different physical and emotional manifestation from person to person. Once again, that response may not necessarily be one I would have imagined on my own, but it is decidedly genuine."

Ultimately the image he wants to make in a portrait session involves both him and the subject:

"I'm enormously grateful that I've been afforded by the opportunity to work with so many exceptionally talented artists. When making portrait photographs, my aesthetic may vary but I always try to make a photograph I feel represents both a conscious effort and a mutual agreement between my subject and myself."

**a) Takeaway point: Making vs Taking portraits**

There are many different ways to shoot street photography. Personally I really like "street portraiture" -- in which I ask permission from my subjects (strangers on the streets) to make their photos.

Similar to what Dan said-- when you ask someone permission to take their photo, semantics (word choices) matter.

For example, I often ask people, "Do you mind if I make a portrait of you?" rather than, "Do you mind if I take your picture?"

The difference between both is subtle -- but makes a huge difference.

"Making" a photo sounds much more creative and artistic than "taking" a photo (which sounds forceful and like you're stealing their soul). Also by saying "portrait" and not "picture" -- you make it sound much more serious and artistic.

So as a quick tip: stop saying "take photos" and start saying "make photos." It will change your own perception to image-making and also to your subjects.

## **b) Takeaway point: Collaborating in street portraits**

Also realize when you're "making" portraits of people on the streets-- it is a two-way collaboration. Give people the opportunity to goof around, pose how they would like-- but also have an idea of how you would like your subjects to look.

For example, I will often ask people, "Look into the lens and don't smile" which often gives people a more nuanced and natural look. Sometimes I will ask people to look away into the distance, look downwards, or even cover their faces with their fingers in a certain way. I sometimes ask people to show off their jewelry, sunglasses, or outfits.

When people are stiff, I often ask them to jump up and down to get some blood flowing -- which helps them relax.

Other times, I will talk with people and joke around-- and while they are talking or laughing, I will make more photos.

## **6. On being flexible**

Even though Dan Winters has a strong creative vision-- he tries his best to be flexible in his work.

For example, he pre-visualizes what he wants out of his work-- but tries not to become too attached. Dan explains:

"I feel it's crucial to not become too attached to any one idea, as any number of circumstances and variables can present an image I would have never pre-visualized. My rule of thumb is to have a good Plan A, but always be receptive to and actively seek out a Plan B."

Furthermore, he doesn't always know how the context and location will be-- and stays receptive:

"I love the challenge of showing up to a location and allowing the space to inform the photograph, thus allowing Plan B to act as my plan A."

Dan also shares his more philosophical views on flexibility and life-- and the importance of living in the moment:

"My work often requires this level of flexibility, and it forces me to live in the moment, making the most of whatever

experience may present itself at any given time. Knowing when to say yes and when to say no is always a balancing act, one I continue to fine-tune for myself."

Dan tries to be open, grateful, and lives without regrets:

"Thus far I've had very few regrets about my choices in this arena. I feel that when things work out, they were meant to be, and I live in gratitude for each and every experience that saying yes has provided me. At the same time, I'm learning to appreciate whatever measure of peace saying no has to offer, as well."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think we need flexibility and looseness when it comes to street photography. I think it is good to work on projects and have some sort of a pre-visualized concept when you're out and shooting. However, still leave some room for flexibility. Every day is different.

So for example, when I'm working on my "Suits" project-- I'm actively seek-

ing people who are wearing suits. But there are days that there are no "suits" walking around. In that regard, I will change gears-- and try to stay open and receptive to any other potential street photo opportunities around me.

Furthermore as a philosophical point-- I think it is important to have flexibility in life. We won't always have the opportunity to go out and shoot-- and life often gets in the way.

For example, sometimes we might have a plan to shoot for an entire weekend (without any interruptions). But let's say your kid gets sick or something else needs to be attended to. Don't be frustrated that you will no longer be able to shoot this weekend. Rather, go with the flow. Figure out what else you can photograph (whether it is portraits of your sick kid, or whatever).

Life is unpredictable. We need to be like bamboo and bend when necessary. For further reading on living in a world with randomness (and how to be flexible), I recommend "Antifragile" by Nassim Taleb.

## 7. On the soul of an image

Photographers often get caught up in the technical parts of photography-- but forget what the most important thing is: the soul of an image.

Dan Winters is a pretty technical photographer (and is trained in many different formats)-- but ultimately all he cares about is the image:

"The soul of the image is ultimately the only relevant issue when viewing a photograph. Image-making is image-making. I'm often asked about my preference: film or digital. To me, the question is irrelevant. I have no need to choose one method of capture over the other. The photograph is all that matters to me."

Dan shares the personal differences he has between film and digital (and ultimately how each medium has its own merits):

"I enjoy shooting film because I enjoy working in the darkroom. I enjoy processing film and experiencing the magic of pulling a wet roll of negatives



off a development spool and holding it up to the light. I came out of this era, and for that I am grateful. I am not attached to any judgements one way or another. Each method has its own merits. I frequently shoot with digital equipment, and have come to appreciate the technology's capabilities. It's been fascinating to witness the technology evolve over the years. I can imagine the profundity of the moment in 1972 or 1973 when Dr. Michael Tompsett and his team at Bell Labs first viewed the ethereal portrait of Tompsett's wife Margaret captured on a CCD chip, using a camera of his own design.

A lot of photography snobs don't like digital-- because now anyone can make a technically good photograph. However digital is just another medium to make images:

"I've noticed a pervasive belief that digital equipment has made 'everyone a photographer.' While digital cameras do allow one to make pictures that are properly exposed and focused, they are merely an object solely dependent upon the operator. Image-making is image-

making. The contents and structure of the frame are what inform a photograph. Using a digital camera does not facilitate this. It acts the same way as any camera: It records the moment that the photographer wishes."

Furthermore, digital photography has expanded photographic possibilities:

"Having said this, digital technology has allowed people to make pictures that would otherwise be technically impossible. In my photographs of shuttle launches, for example, the cameras I used were able to record at a resolution and frame rate not possible with a comparable photo chemical based capture system. Likewise, digital photography has made it possible to quickly assess the manner in which exposures balance when using an electronic flash. And when I shoot using digital systems, I find I'm more apt to make subtle changes in lighting than I would, say, while I'm shooting a portrait on film that requires Polaroid tests as my primary reference."

To take a blast to the past-- there was a time when "serious film photogra-

phers" looked down on amateur photographers who used the simple Kodak Brownie camera:

"There have been casual photographers ever since George Eastman introduced the Brownie in February 1900. The camera sold for \$1, which amounts to roughly \$30 today. The simple device was advertised as foolproof, and Kodak assured that everyone who purchased a Brownie was a photographer. Serious photographers of the era looked down their noses at the 'Kodakers' who ran about, snapping away."

Dan think it is less about the medium which makes the photographer--but the singular voice:

"I often hear people say, 'Everyone thinks they're a photographer,' but aren't intent and conviction the benchmarks for mastery of any medium? Is there a distinction between 'I sometimes play violin' and 'I'm a violinist'? From a technical standpoint, it's never been easier to make a photographic image, but what is it that makes a singular voice distill time

or place in a way that people connect to it emotionally?

Dan (although shoots much of his professional work on large-format) even sees the smartphone as a great way to make images:

"The mobile device, when viewed in the context of Tompsett's efforts, is truly miraculous. "I shoot frequently with my phone. I make photographs with it that I would not normally make, many of which I love. The phone allows me to photograph more frequently than ever before, and allows me to stay connected to that part of my process."

In another section of the book, Dan reaffirms the importance of "pursuing the soul" through photography:

"Technique is a part of our craft, and it plays an integral role. However, it should not be at the core of our work. Ours should be a pursuit of the soul."

### **Takeaway point:**

As someone who shoots both film (35mm, medium-format) and digital (APS-C, smartphone) I know the bene-

fits of both. I love shooting film because it gives me a more zen-like experience, I love the aesthetic (film grain is sublime), and the slowness (waiting to get it developed). I love shooting digital for the convenience (instant gratification), the ability to share quickly and easily (on Instagram when shooting with a phone), and how democratic it is (everyone can shoot street photography with a phone or a cheap digital camera).

I hear the debate between film and digital a lot. Ultimately I prefer film-- but that is a personal choice. It is like the difference between liking vanilla or chocolate ice cream. It comes down to personal preference.

But I do agree with Dan-- it is ultimately the image that matters. It doesn't matter whether a photo was shot on film or digital-- what is the soul of the image, and how does it make you feel emotionally? How does the image challenge you to view the world in a different way?

Ultimately I don't even think it is the image that matters. It is the emo-

tional reaction of the image that matters the most.

So with your street photography-- seek to create images with soul. Fuck the medium. Whether it is shot on a medium-format or an iPhone, as long as the image makes you feel something in your heart-- you are doing your job as a photographer.

## 8. When not to take photos

As a photographer, I have an anxiety that I won't be able to capture all the moments of my life-- and one day I might be on my deathbed regretting not documenting more of my life.

However I came upon an interesting psychological study-- that apparently when you make photos of an event, you are less likely to remember it. The science is something like-- if you take a photo of something, you are subconsciously telling yourself, "Don't worry brain, you don't need to force this to memory-- because it will always be stored in a photograph later."

So now I have been making a conscious choice when not to make photos. So for example, I try not to take photos of my food anymore. Rather, I try to enjoy the taste and the experience. Similarly, when I'm seeing fireworks with Cindy-- I put away the camera and just enjoy the experience.

Dan Winters shares a personal story of when he prefers the experience (over the image):

"I didn't make many photographs while in Australia and, to be honest, there are few among those that I'm fond of. I will often miss the mark photographically when I'm traveling for pleasure, as I tend to be more immersed in seeking adventure, and I find I don't have the desire to document it. I've been a diver for many years and have never had any interest in doing underwater photography. I don't want the distraction of photographing to take me out of the precious few moments of each dive. The undersea world is profound, and often reminds me of just how much we don't know about our planet."

### Takeaway point:

Know when to put away the camera. You don't need to document every small part of your life.

Be more selective.

Photograph that which really really matters a lot to you-- and you want to create a physical document and record of it.

So for me, I take my street photography really seriously-- as well as documenting the life of me and Cindy. But for everything else, I try to just enjoy the experience.

## 9. On creating your unique voice

Dan Winters is a photographer who isn't easy to put inside a box. Although he is famous for his commercial portrait work, his interest includes illustration, multi-media, and much much more.

Dan shares the pursuit that he has of making great images -- but along the way, how he has discovered patterns in his work and his voice:



Dan starts off by the lessons he's learned from Scott Harrison, a photo editor when he was work at at the Chronicle:

"If I took anything away from Scott, it was that, regardless of the assignment, there's always a great picture to be made. Always look for that picture. I have practiced this philosophy my entire career. I always try to shoot portfolio-worthy images. As every photographer knows, the great images are elusive. They do, however, become apparent when one is actively looking."

Dan expands by sharing the importance of creating an internal dialogue (and being cognizant of what you're looking for):

"This process speaks to the development of an internal dialogue. It is basically noticing that which you are noticing. This is a lifelong practice. One must become conscious of the patterns in his or her work and of the sensibility that forms as a result. These are the building blocks, which allow us to consciously de-

velop a unique photographic voice. This practice transcends technique."

Dan explains how Lewis Hine (famous for documenting poverty and horrible child-labor practices in the early 1900's) found his voice, which was trying to create social reform:

"Lewis Wickes Hine was not seeking notoriety when, in 1908, he became the photographer for the National Child Labor Committee and began documenting child labor practices in the US. Hine's photographs are immensely beautiful, but the pursuit of technique, composition, or the recognition of peers was not his intention. It was his great compassion and love of humanity that initially led him to photography, and he used the medium to effect social change. He photographed children imprisoned in dark factories and coal mines, along with newsboys and bootblacks toiling on the streets of New York."

Even as a teacher, Lewis Hine tried to evoke social change (in the work of his students):

"As an educator he urged his students to utilize photography as a means to provoke social reform. His projects had largely been bankrolled by various government agencies; over time, he found it increasingly difficult to secure funding, and he died bankrupt and broken. After his death, his photographs and negatives were offered to the Museum of Modern Art. They declined. The museum may not have recognized their importance at the time. Thankfully, the collection now resides at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The staff there needed no explanation as to their value to humanity."

Dan Winters believes that technique is only a small part of finding our voice as photographers. Rather, one's personal voice in photography is more of the why of image-making. The reason we make photos-- the impetus that drives us.

Dan shares the importance of finding his own voice, which is taking a multi-disciplinary approach:

"While I view my work as one body, it is composed of multiple disciplines,

techniques, and subject matter. Art is language, and its fluency, though never fully achieved, is dependent upon diligent practice. The manner in which one creates stems from a singular place, but can manifest itself physically in many ways."

Dan expands on this importance of working in a diversified manner:

"I came to the realization early on that I would not be challenged creatively unless I was able to work in a diversified manner. I've always loved the films of Stanley Kubrick, not only because I find them to be enduring examples of cinema at its peak, but also because he explored such a wide range of genres and subjects. Looking at his filmography, Kubrick cannot be classified as anything other than an auteur. His career has long been a model to me and has inspired me to stay stimulated while creating vastly different kinds of images."

He also sees technique as a means to an end-- meaning that a photographer shouldn't find his/her style just in terms of the camera, lens, format, approach, or technique. It is merely a starting point:

"I spoke earlier about technique, acknowledging that while technique is intrinsic to all forms of communication, it should not serve as an end. The innumerable ways in which the same tools and materials can manifest themselves in a finished piece is staggering. Art is never the sum total of the materials that compose it. Art transcends materials. Materials are merely a starting point."

Dan further drills in the point that "style" isn't just the materials we use in our work. We use certain tools and techniques to express ourselves in terms of communicating a certain message:

"The word 'style' is often applied to photography. More often than not, this categorization is erroneously applied to the materials in the frame, and not to the inner sensibility of the photographer. As I discussed earlier, materials play an important role in our mission. We are bound to them, and we remain reliant on corporations to provide us with the tools we need to practice our craft. However, these tools merely facilitate our communication; they cannot speak for us, but rather we must speak through them."

Dan expands on this point-- and saying how as artists we should focus on the why of photography (rather than the how):

"I bring this up because visual art can never adequately be described. It must be seen. It must be felt. When I view a photograph, a painting, or another form of visual expression, I'm pleased when my reaction is not related to 'how' but to 'why.' 'How' will follow suit, as I'm curious about materials and the ways they can be utilized in image-making but I am pleased when I first search for the origin of the language, setting about dissecting the physical once I have allowed the metaphysical piece to find its way into my psyche."

Dan acknowledges finding one's voice isn't easy-- and takes a long time:

"One's visual language is not something that manifests overnight. It develops organically over a life-time. The shifts can be so subtle as to be virtually imperceptible and, at times, will come to fruition so rapidly, and with such force,

that the profundity is all-consuming. That is life's work."

### Takeaway point:

This was a big section, so let me break it down a bit:

- a) Building your style takes a long time (don't rush it).
- b) The technique of your photography doesn't dictate your style (rather, it is about what you are trying to communicate through your photography, and why you shoot).
- c) Try to create great work (always aim to make portfolio-worthy images).
- d) Find inspiration in many different diverse fields (and combine them to make your own vision).
- e) The medium you shoot with (35mm film, medium-format, digital, smartphone, etc) isn't as important as the image itself. Focus on the image.

## 10. Stay true to your vision

Nothing great in art has ever been created by committee. Every great artis-

tic advancement was from the strong, singular vision of an individual.

It is easy to pander to the masses--and to merely create art that reaches a broad audience (let's say, IKEA art).

As a photographer, stay true to your own vision. Dan shares this same mentality:

"One of the great mistakes a young photographer can make is to try and second-guess what others, specifically clients and peers, expect of their work. Staying true to one's own vision is critical. That's not to say the client should be disregarded: When I'm out on assignment, my client will expect that their needs are met, though I always attempt to make the image I generate for them my own."

As a photographer, a good way to stay true to your vision is also to constantly self-evaluate why you make images. For example, when Dan Winters refers to a book called "Negative/Positive." The author Bill Jay writes in the book:

"There comes a point (probably many) when it is necessary to step back



from the medium and rethink our relationship to it. Photographers should be constantly questioning their life-attitudes, and attempting to relate these values with their own images."

However when trying to pursue your own unique version of "the truth" in your photography, you will have critics and people who try to tear you down. Although Dan Winters' work is generally not controversial-- he has also encountered many critics.

Dan first starts off by sharing how anonymous internet trolls have changed the landscape of online criticism:

"Of all the projects I've worked on, I've never witnessed such a violent reaction. Normally there is little public reaction that I'm aware of. But in today's world of online criticism, anonymous commentators have never had such a steady perch. I found it interesting that much of the disdain stemmed from the belief that my sitters looked "ugly." There were many detractors. Even the editor of a trade tabloid chimed in her penny's worth."

One of the most controversial projects Dan worked on was a portfolio series on Hollywood portraits. Essentially, Dan photographed many famous people in a very simple, straight-forward, "normal-human-being" type of way. This is what Dan had to say about the portfolio series:

"I confess that some of the portraits did not work, and I lament the fact that I'll most likely never have the opportunity to make or refine those images again. However, I believe I accomplished the photographic exercise I set out to do. I've spoken with some of the actors I photographed for the piece, and reactions were mixed. From an artistic perspective, I've gotten approval by many in the industry whose criticism has consistently been honest and succinct."

Dan Winters talked to William Eggleston about it (who is not a stranger to criticism). Eggleston gives him good advice: only care about what your friends and supporters think (disregard what anonymous critics think):

"I spoke with William Eggleston about the portfolio, and about some of the more extreme reactions that were brought to my attention. I knew his work had been met with similar reactions in the past. One reviewer, commenting on his exhibition at MoMA in 1976, declared it 'the worst photography show ever hung.' I asked him how he felt about such a scathing critique. 'I didn't let it bother me,' he said. 'I had friends and supporters whose opinions I valued much more than those of the anonymous critic.'

Dan continues by sharing the importance of staying true to your own vision:

"As with any pursuit in life, one must commit fully and truthfully. When I made this portfolio, I did not deviate from the course. I'm proud of the pictures and believe they possess an inherent truth that the ubiquitous glossy magazine portraits often lack."

When Dan's series was published in "New York" magazine-- here were some online negative criticisms he received in response to "The New York Actor":

Commenter 1: 'Wow--this is a huge misstep for New York mag. Wrong photographer. These are awful.'

Commenter 2: 'This is pompous self-promoting garbage. Seriously, if I have to look at one more photo spread containing headshots of famous people I'm going to puke. No passion, no excitement, just some faces of some people...who just happen to be famous. If he did the same shots of random strangers would we even care Would anyone bother to publish these 'portraits' if an unknown photographer shot them? I don't think so. It sickens me to know that once someone gains some bit of fame or notoriety they can shoot total crap and pass it off as inspired work because they have name recognition. Just because people think you're great doesn't mean everything you shoot is great. Nothing but ego-driven dribble, both for the sitter and the shooter.'

Furthermore, one of Dan's favorite images (a portrait of Laura Dern) isn't well-received by others. Dan expands:

"Laura's performance in front of the lens was quiet and understated. The photograph I'm most fond of from the shoot is one I also count among my favorite portraits to date."

"This was not the photograph I'd envisioned making the day. The awkwardness of the image exists only on a single sheet of film. I don't recall making it; when I look through the progression of the shoot, it provides no acknowledgment of my conscious intentions. But sometimes the best photographs present themselves in the moments between the moments. While editing the photographs a few days after the session, the picture all but assaulted me, as though it was insisting that it not be overlooked. Many people have criticized the image as being unflattering and weird. While I do find the moment uncomfortable, I see a truth and beauty in it that affects me every time I view it."

**Takeaway point:**

Stay true to your personal vision-- and don't let others (especially anyony-

mous online critics) water down your vision.

I do believe it is important to get honest feedback and critique from close friends, family, and other photographers you respect-- but always take their feedback with a grain of salt. Ultimately it is your vision of a photographer which matters the most-- don't deviate too much from that.

You will be criticized, judged, and compared in your work.

My practical advice: remove negative people from your life. If you hang around other photographers who constantly gossip and talk negativity about others-- remove them from your life (they are probably also talking negative things about you behind your back).

There is a saying: you are the average of the 5 closest people to you. If you are around positive, encouraging, and loving people-- they will help uplift your vision and voice as a photographer. However if you surround yourself with negative people, they will simply try to drag

you down with them in their black hole of negativity.

I also believe to develop your vision as a photographer is to work on a project you are passionate about, in which you have a certain message you are trying to convey to your viewer. Have something to say, and don't deviate from your message.

## 11. On imitation

I don't believe there is such thing as true "originality" in the world. We always borrow our ideas from others. However, I do believe originality is taking all of your life's experiences -- and combining them in a way that hasn't been done before (and making it yours).

Dan shares his outside influences:

"It definitely plays against type, but I've often spoken with musicians who have surprised me with their musical tastes. This phenomenon is not unique to music. It speaks to the idea of searching outside one's working medium in order to fold in outside influences. This serves us well as artists, as our work is a

manifestation of all of our life's experience. I have a deep love of the paintings of Francis Bacon and have looked to his work for inspiration many times over the years. As I discussed earlier, Bacon's practice of using line work to delineate physical spaces in his paintings served as an inspiration when I designed and built the set for my portrait of Denzel Washington."

Dan also shares how he has imitated a lot of other artists in his work:

"If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I have, at one point or another-- especially early on my path-- flattered many. This practice is not based in an absence of inspiration or ideas; rather it's a method to gain inspiration. Our own unique voices will benefit by examining the paths of other artists, regardless of their chosen medium."

Below are some photographers that have had a deep influence on Dan:

"If I were to create a list of my photographic heroes, Harry Callahan, along with Alfred Stieglitz, Ray K. Metzker, and Frederick Sommer, who would top



the list. Callahan, for one, was able to produce a large body of work with a powerful, singular voice. He fluidly moved from subject to subject, tailoring his sensibility to each challenge; as a result, he left a legacy that is universal. Frederick Sommer, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston all used the same equipment, yet their work differs greatly. Once again, the piano is not the sonata."

Dan also refers to Zen when it comes to "originality" in life and art:

"Zen teaching talks about the 'root mind,' the original mind that existed before your mother and father conceived you. It is the way you experienced the world before thought was made. This is something within each and every one of us. We have the DNA to prove it. We are each 'original.' Even our experiences are our own, and no one else's. Also, since each moment has never existed, any given moment is 'original.' If, as photographers, we apply our unique selves, armed with our original mind to any situation and capture an instance in a photograph, then the photo is original."

### **Takeaway point:**

I know some photographers and artists who refuse to look at the work of others with the fear that it will "influence" them too much-- and cause them to lose their unique voice.

I think that is absolutely rubbish. I think we should try to absorb as much influence and inspiration from the world around us. Naturally, we are filters-- we will filter in what we like, and discard what we don't like.

I think if we constantly surround ourselves with great photography, great photography books, and great photographers-- we will elevate ourselves to also become great.

Ultimately everything we do will be "original" -- in the sense that there are no other human beings exactly like us. Therefore all of our life experiences are unique. No two street photographs are alike 100%-- in terms of subject matter, light, background, gestures, and the moment.

"Originality" is overrated. Just focus on creating images that affect your

viewer emotionally and challenges them to see the world in a different way. Focus on the soul of the image-- rather than if it has been "done before."

If a certain subject matter, project, or approach interests you-- go for it. Who cares if others have done it before. You haven't done it before.

## 12. On pushing yourself

Dan Winters works hard in his photography-- and is always trying to push himself to new levels creatively. Dan shares:

"When I look back at contact sheets that are 30 years old and notice images that are the seeds of what I'm doing now, it helps me to understand this progression. Discipline plays a large role, but discipline is more than just repeatedly practicing the same physical process. I believe discipline must be so deeply ingrained that, regardless of how or what we're producing, we're tapping into something on a spiritual level. Creativity must be a pervasive part of our lives and cannot be relegated to a single technique, process, or piece of equipment. I enjoy

pushing myself in new directions, as it provides another avenue of exploration and another way to further diversify my visual language."

Dan has also tried photographing lots of different subject matter, and different techniques and approaches:

"Over the years I have migrated from subject to subject, utilizing different techniques. And while the physical presence of the images may differ, I have found that a singular voice has continued to evolve."

Sometimes we feel we plateau as artists. But plateaus are simply another opportunity to grow:

"I've found the learning curve to appear to plateau just in time for another level to reveal itself. Our paths as artists should evolve and grow with a similar rhythm."

Dan also sees a danger to becoming formulaic with our work. He encourages us as artists to continue to grow and mature:

"History has shown that it is not uncommon for artists to have a significant period of productivity before retreating into familiar formulas. As artists, it is our hope that our productivity continues over a lifetime, growing and maturing throughout."

In another excerpt in "Road to Seeing," Dan further expands on the importance of change and evolution in his work:

"As photographers, we are dependent on a physical subject in order to practice our craft-- someone or something to train our camera on so we may, through our own perception, interpret our subject photographically. Over the years, the nature and content of my images has changed and evolved. As an artist, this is all I can ask for. I believe we die as artists if we allow ourselves to lapse into formula. The more I look, the better my understanding of that which I am looking at. When we shine our light on something, the universe reflects back and, in some sense, that reflection seems more prominent in our daily lives."

### **Takeaway point:**

As a photographer and artist, don't become stagnant. Keep pushing your boundaries, and moving forward.

I don't think it really matters how objectively "good" we become as photographers. I think the most important thing to stay alive as an artist is to see constant growth, evolution, and progress.

As Roman philosopher Publilius Syrus once said, "The rolling stone gathers no moss."

## **13. On love**

Towards the end of "Road to Seeing" -- Dan Winters expresses his final message to photographers: focus on love.

I think sometimes as street photographers, we are so immersed into capturing the lives of others, that we forget to look inwards-- to photograph those we love and care about the most.

For example, he brings the photos of Frederick Sommer into view:

"In these portraits, we can see that the photographic process acts as a medium through which we experience these loved ones-- as human beings first, as photographs second. The 'why' precedes the 'how.' This, I believe, should be the goal of all art."

Dan Winters has also photographed his family with as much love and attention as his other professional and personal work. If you look through "Road to Seeing" -- you can also see very intimate photos he took of his son.

Dan reflects more on making intimate portraits:

"Over time I've found myself returning to photographs in which the photographer shares the intimate and private moments of his or her own life. The clarity of truthful moments transcends technique and, in fact, utilizes the photographic process as a conduit for human connection. Harry Callahan's stunning photographs of his wife Eleanor; Jacques Henri Lartigue's seemingly innocent photographs of his friends and family; Emmet Gowin's intensely personal por-

traits of his wife Edith; Sally Mann's dreamlike chronicle of her children. These images are an affirmation of the beauty in life.

Sharing evidence of love is the most important gift a photographer can share with others:

"Evidence of a life replete with love is, in my mind, the greatest gift a photographer can give to the world. While I have been profoundly touched by these images of love, it was not until I became a father to my son Dylan that I began to understand the true source of their testimony."

And as a last point, Dan shares the following lesson-- focus on love over all other pursuits in life:

"Over the course of a lifetime, filling our lives with love must take precedence over all other pursuits. A life filled with love is all we can hope for. If we are able to form substantial, loving relationships with even a few people, we can count ourselves lucky."





14

## DAVID ALAN HARVEY

I just finished a week-long workshop with David Alan Harvey as a part of the Provincetown Magnum Days event. I have already written an article on the lessons I've learned from David Alan Harvey– but wanted to use this opportunity to further expand on what I've learned from him, and also add some new things I've learned:

### 1. Be sophisticated

I want to become the best photographer I possibly can. This means that I can no longer compare my work to photographers on Flickr, Facebook, and Instagram. I want to compare my work to the Magnum photographers– and get brutally honest

feedback and critique from them. There is a saying in Sociology: “You are the average of the 5 closest people to you.” If I surround myself with only great photographers– I will become great (or aspire to be great) via osmosis. It is like stepping into a perfume store– I will naturally gain the scent (by being around others).

But simply being around the masters isn’t enough. I need to consume, inhale, and digest the work of the greats. I highly admire David Alan Harvey’s color street photography– and I want to elevate my color work to the next level.

Harvey shared during the workshop, “Nowadays– photographers must be sophisticated.” He shared how so many photographers create great work now, and it is very easy to take a “technically proficient” image. In fact, it is easy to take a great image now. But that isn’t enough– a photographer needs to learn how to make a body of work that stands on its own– a series of strong images. Kind of like a necklace strung together with pearls (pearls being photographs).

Therefore when he started the workshop and gave us all critiques– he told us that he going to give us “tough love”. He told us that he “doesn’t bullshit people” – and wanted to critique our work compared to Magnum photographers, to give people a fair assessment of how their work stacks up in the whole field of photography.

It isn’t necessarily fair to compare someone who has only been shooting street photography for 6 months (against a Magnum photographer). I still do firmly believe that a photographer should compete against him/herself– to be the best photographer he/she can become.

But at the same time– you need to ask yourself: “How good do I really want to become?”

I want to become the best photographer I possibly can– and I feel that trying to become more “sophisticated” in my work is what is going to help me get there.

So during the workshop with Costa Manos and David Alan Harvey, I wasn’t

looking for pats on the back. Sure it is a huge ego boost to get a pat on the back, but it is brutally honest feedback and critique which I needed.

So when getting feedback and critique from David and the other Magnum photographers– I asked them to tear apart my work and be brutally honest with me. When they critiqued my work, I didn't defend myself or my work. I just kept my mouth shut, and nodded. I asked them to help me find holes in my work, and advice where I could take my work.

### **Takeaway point:**

Ask yourself: “How good do I want to be?” Think to yourself– do you really want to become a great photographer? Are you willing to put in the hard work, blood, sweat, and tears to elevate your photography to the next level – and possibly be on the same level as Magnum photographers?

I think external recognition is bullshit and a way to depression and anxiety. So become the best photographer you

possibly can, and try to make your work more sophisticated.

How do you create more sophisticated work? Here are some tips of things I recommend avoiding:

### **a) Avoid Cliches**

You can start off by avoiding cliches. Avoid simple black and white photos of people walking past billboards.

### **b) Avoid Single Images**

David Alan Harvey is only interested in series, projects, and photo-essays.

I see a lot of photographers online just trying to create strong single-images that will get them a lot of “Likes” and “Favorites” on social media.

While I do think there is a lot of merit behind strong single images, I still feel that the greatest photographers are the ones who put together a body of work.

A body of work is a series of images that has a statement about yourself, about society, or a message you are trying to get across to your viewer. Very rarely do photographers become great



just based off of a bundle of disjointed single-images. Of course there are exceptions (Elliott Erwitt and Steve McCurry), but I still feel the best examples are the ones with bodies of work (Josef Koudelka and “Gypsies”, Martin Parr and “The Last Resort”, David Alan Harvey and “Divided Soul”).

### **c) Avoid showing bad images**

I think to build sophistication in your work— you don’t want to show bad images. You need to edit ruthlessly (only share your best work) – and let your images sit and marinate a long time before sharing them.

For example, I have a simple rule of thumb: it takes me at least a year before I can emotionally disconnect myself from a photograph to realize whether it is good or not. This will also give you enough time to sit down with other photographers face-to-face to get an honest appraisal and critique of your work.

### **d) Know what makes a great photograph (and body of work)**

To become a more sophisticated photographer, you first need to know what makes a great photographer.

As a simple assignment, do the following (inspired by Charlie Kirk: Go to the [magnumphotos.com](http://magnumphotos.com) website and look at all the photographs in all the photographer’s portfolios. Look at each body of work and ask yourself: “What makes their work so great? What makes their work better than mine? How has their single images resonated with many others? What statements do their bodies of work say? Which of their photos do I not appreciate or understand, but why do others like them?”

I also highly encourage spending as much money as you possibly can on photographic education: on photography books, workshops, and travel. Of course don’t just go out and buy a 1000 books (and not read any of them) – but surround yourself with great photography and inspiration. Avoid gear-review sites, gear rumor sites– anything that will lead to G.A.S. (gear acquisition syndrome). Rather, whenever you get an urge to buy



a new camera remember: “Buy books, not gear.”

## 2. Absorb inspiration from outside arts

David Alan Harvey gains his biggest inspiration from things outside of photography. In fact, he says he isn't very inspired by photographers. He gained his largest inspiration from literature, paintings, and music.

He also loved French painters, because they could “make something from nothing.” Kind of like street photography— you don't need fancy models, double rainbows, sunsets to make interesting photos. You can just go out on the streets, and snap whatever interests you.

Using the literature analogy— he sees himself as an author, not a photographer. He sees himself as an image-maker, and puts images together to have a larger context as a theme. Kind of how a musician puts his/her music into an album— into a larger body of work, as a larger theme.

Even when it comes to composition, he sees it like “writing sentences.” However just because you write good sentences doesn't mean you can write a book.

He therefore sees putting together photos as the most important thing (rather than just making strong single-images). In a book, you need a narrative: you need a beginning, a middle, and end. That isn't possible with just one sentence.

Similarly in photography if you want to build a narrative— you need a series of images that stitch together a beginning, a middle, and an end. And the sequencing matters and is important.

### **Takeaway point:**

At the end of the day, photography is just another form of art and communication. And with photography— you want to communicate something to your viewer. Whether it is an idea, an emotion, or a concept.

I think the best photographers are the ones that gain their inspiration from outside and disparate fields (music, lit-

erature, painting, sculpture, philosophy, sociology, economics, psychology, etc).

They say that creativity is just putting together two different concepts and ideas– and synthesizing them into some new and novel way.

So for me, I actually gain my biggest influence from philosophy, psychology, and sociology. In my street photography– I am trying to understand humanity and social interactions. At the end of the day, I see myself less as a photographer– and more of a sociologist with a camera as my research tool.

So don't feel constrained that you just have to look at photography to gain inspiration.

My suggestion: follow your curiosity. If there is anything that interests you, follow it like a dog follows a scent. Be obsessive. Consume the arts like you would if you were hungry and suddenly discovered a buffet in the middle of a desert. If you somehow like interior decoration and design, look at that and study it. Perhaps that can shape how you create the inner-space in your photographs.

If you are into engineering or science, perhaps that can help improve your compositions in your photography. If you like poetry, perhaps that can help your editing and sequencing of images. If you like history, perhaps you can see your photographs as historical documents.

### 3. Limitations are freedom

Nowadays we hate limits. We want to be “limit-less”. We don't want any constraints in our life, our time, or relationships, or our photography.

However one thing that really inspired me was how David Alan Harvey said: “Limits are freedom.”

#### a) Limitations in equipment

For example, he only shoots with one lens (roughly a 35mm equivalent). This means that he has already made the decision what size his canvas is (if you use a painting analogy). Sometimes painters get stressed out because they don't know what size canvas to paint on. But if you already pre-select your canvas size, you paint around those constraints.

The same thing in photography: by choosing just one camera and one lens: you set a limitation on yourself– which ultimately gives you more freedom. You know what equipment you are bounded to (so there is no stress in terms of what camera or lens to use that day). And once you realize that limitation, you no longer have any excuses– you just go out and shoot.

He even said the following:

“Too much choices will screw up your life. Work on one thing, then expand on your canvas.”

Another nice example: Harvey told us that limiting his equipment is liberating, in the sense that he can dance while drinking a beer. He said if you have lots of cameras and a zoom lens, you can’t dance.

So our best asset as creatives and photographers is this: our limits.

## **b) Limitations in area**

David Alan Harvey also limits the areas in which he shoots. For example, when he was photographing the world

cup in Brazil, he did most of his shooting in the one mile or so around his hotel. He said this helped him in many ways: he conserved his energy (he isn’t as young as he used to be) and I believe it forced him to be more limited with the canvas or area he could photograph.

I can relate with this example. About 3 years ago, Jacob Patterson from the ThinkTank gallery in Downtown LA came up with a street photography competition/exhibition: You were only allowed to photograph on one square-block (both sides of the street) in the Fashion District in Downtown LA. And you had to present your best 3 images for the show.

At first, it was quite frustrating. I wanted to have more freedom to roam around the streets. But soon, I discovered the benefits: you became to know the area really damn well, built friendships with the locals, and also forced yourself to be creative in such a limited area, space, and canvas. Ultimately myself (and others) ended up creating strong work in about a month of just shooting that one square block.

Sometimes I want to be limitless in terms of the area that I shoot. I get bored quite easily with an area– I love novelty.

However I am starting to realize the benefits of limiting the location or area you shoot. It helps you to get to know an area much better, and to build a body of work with more consistency. The best projects I have seen are generally on one subject matter, or one location.

### **c) Limit your direction**

Also when David Alan Harvey sees a good scene he wants to photograph, he limits his direction.

For example, when he was working on a book on Hip Hop Culture – he was able to gain access to a strip club in the Bronx in NYC. He followed his guys into the club, and kept his camera facing the same direction the entire time. The guys soon started to ignore his presence, and all the while– David is working the scene. I think in the few hours he was there, he took over 600+ photographs.

I think that when you see a good scene in street photography (an interest-

ing situation, wall, or area) – keep your eyes fixated on that area, and see how you can milk a great photo of that area. You perhaps might want to build an interesting foreground, middle-ground, and background. You wait for the elements and subjects in the background to move around, until you get the perfect arrangement of elements in the frame.

## **3. Don't be easily satisfied**

I think if you want to truly become a great photographer– you can't be easily satisfied.

One of the things that David shared with us is the downside of shooting digital: in the sense that a lot of young photographers are self-satisfied too quickly by looking at the LCD.

David shared the biggest error many young photographers make: stopping too soon.

For example, when he sees a good photographic scene– he will take dozens (or even hundreds) of photographs of it (if necessary). He shoots digital now, and it has given him even more freedom



to take more photos of a scene– to truly get that perfect image.

The problem with looking at your LCD screen while shooting (“Chimping”) is that it kills your flow. By seeing your LCD screen too quickly, you are too easily satisfied with what you have (rather than thinking if you can get a better shot). This is actually one of the biggest benefits of shooting digital for me– to not become easily satisfied, to keep up the hustle because I am unsure whether I “got the shot.”

I think there is a big “myth of the decisive moment” in street photography– in the sense that we think that the great photos of history were just in 1 shot. In fact, if you look at Magnum Contact Sheets, you can see that the greatest photos in history often take many attempts of photographers “working the scene” to get the perfect image.

### **Takeaway point:**

Don’t be easily satisfied with your photography. As Steve Jobs said, “Stay hungry, stay foolish.” Keep up the hustle. Keep pushing your boundaries.

Don’t be satisfied with what you already have– aspire to become even greater– to become even a more amazing photographer.

The second you are satisfied with your photography is the second you become complacent. I think the biggest secret of success in photography (and life) is this: avoid complacency. Continue to create even better work, reinvent yourself, your process– whatever will take you to the next level.

And don’t chimp.

As David Alan Harvey said during the workshop, “Don’t fucking stop. Don’t stop short. Squeeze the last drop from the lemon.”

## **4. On taking your photos to the next level**

This point expands on the previous points a bit.

David Alan Harvey works hard. Really hard. When he is out shooting, he will put in 14–16 hour days. However what he is really looking for is only 3 good situations. And once he finds those

situations, he will “work the scene forever.” In-fact, he mentions that a lot of photographers he knows get frustrated with him– because he will take forever to just make one photograph (by shooting dozens if not hundreds).

He wants to take his photos one step further. He told us an analogy of doing a high jump: an 8 foot high-jump is a good jump. But “...if 20 people can jump that high, you want the edge. You want to jump even higher.”

Also on the previous point– he doesn’t waste his energy moving around too much around a city. He will find a few good areas and milk it all its worth. He shared the advice:

“Don’t walk and look for photos. Don’t waste energy. Stay somewhere until you absolutely nail it.”

He wants to avoid complacency. He said:

“Don’t go for ‘good enough’. If you are a race car driver, you want to drive it a 15th of a second faster. A little better is a whole lot better.”

David Alan Harvey mentions the importance of going for “top-level photos.” He told us (I am paraphrasing):

“Some people have a tiny edge. It shows, because they are the ones who will get their book published. So study the top people, don’t set your standards by a Flickr group. Study the masters, from the past to the present. Study the difference between the best photographers. Critique your work compared to the best. Don’t dumb it down. Don’t just go for ‘ok’. Be better than photos you’ve already seen. Go for better than your own best.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Imagine yourself as an athlete (not like a photographer). You want a small edge– but it is that small edge in a top-performance that will make all the difference.

If you are an olympic weight-lifter and you can deadlift 600 pounds, deadlifting 602 pounds can make all the difference.

If you are a sprinter and you can run 1/100th of a second faster– that makes all the difference.

If you are a writer and you can out-publish your peers by 1 book a year, you have the edge.

If you are a photographer and you make your work just a little bit better than all the other photos you have seen before– you have the edge.

Avoid “good enough” – aim for better.

## 5. Have something to say

As an author– you want to have something to say. Being a photographer is the same thing. You don’t want to just take photos of whatever on the streets– just because it is weird, funny, or amusing. You want to say something deeper.

The best authors pour their hearts and souls into their work. They show the world their unique perspective, their vision– and make themselves vulnerable.

As a photographer– you want to share with the world your unique vision. You don’t want to just imitate others,

and imitate the work you have seen the world.

How do you see the world differently? How is your vision unique? What do you want to say (that hasn’t been said before)?

Do you want to become a great photographer? Because it takes a lot of work. Do you want to take your photography to the upper-level, or do you just want to be a hobbyist? What do you have to say about the world?

David Alan Harvey said this perfectly: “You can’t be an author unless you have something to say.”

He also told us this advice (once again paraphrasing):

“End up looking like your pictures. Magnum photographers photograph who they are. Alex Webb has an intellectual approach. He and Henri Cartier-Bresson pull back from people, and don’t drink beers with people (while I do). You must show your personality in your photos. Cindy Sherman, Dwayne Michaels, and Sally Man do this well.”

### Takeaway point:

I don't think there is anything such as "objectivity" in photography. You decide what to include in the frame, and what to exclude. Therefore photography is your own unique vision and perspective of the world. You choose the focal length, where to stand, and when to click the shutter.

As a street photographer, you don't have the same ethical duties as a photo-journalist or documentary photographer. You want to give your unique viewpoint.

If you can see yourself through your images— you have accomplished your goal.

Henri Cartier-Bresson was first a painter, then a photographer. He called his photographs just as small sketches from everyday life. He was more interested in drawing/painting than photography. He also was immensely obsessed with composition, and it shows in his work.

Daido Moriyama's photos are dark, edgy— and have a sense of loneliness, despair, and confusion. This works well in

his gritty black and white work— in which he is wandering.

Jacob Aue Sobol craves intimacy. You see it in his images. He gets close to his subjects— he has them trust him. He is very direct and head-on.

Bruce Gilden is a rough and tough New Yorker. He is criticized the way he shoots, but that is who he is. He is a brash and upfront person.

Martin Parr is a social critic. You can see it through his images, that aren't positive portrayals of humanity and society.

So what about your vision is unique— and what are you trying to say?

## 6. Capture soul and emotion

David Alan Harvey was a fan of Diane Arbus— in the sense that she "...got the souls of people in photos."

He also told us the following (paraphrased):

"You need photos that 'screams something.' You need hate, sadness, fear,



and emotion. You need extreme blood or death, or go very very quiet and bland, or with mysterious photos. You need to go one way or the other. Photos can be esoteric or specific. Don't stop short."

Harvey also encouraged us the following:

"Work on something you're personally connected to. Composing light and shadows– fuck that. Have something to say."

Takeaway point:

I think a photo without emotion is dead. Sure you can make all these fancy layers, compositions, lights, colors, shadows, etc in photos– but if they don't have some deeper sense of what it means to be human, who cares?

I think the best photos are the ones that are emotional– that have soul. Photos that hit you in the heart, and burn themselves into your mind.

As human beings, we are an emotional and social being. If we can harness that visceral part of what it means to be a human being through our images– it

will create much more memorable and meaningful images.

## 7. Don't fuck up

One of the students in the workshop works as a wedding photographer. David Alan Harvey said that wedding photographers actually make strong photographers– because of the following rationale (paraphrased):

"Wedding photographers are good, they need to get the moment. They can't fuck up. Wedding photographers can't be lazy, they need to go in for the moment, and understand the light. There are now a lot of good photographers that come from wedding photography. The wedding photographers are the new photojournalists of the times. The old generation were all newspaper photographers (but they are dying off)."

David Alan Harvey also told us the importance of having pressure and discipline in photography (paraphrased):

"You can't get good photos without discipline, hard work, and pressure. You

need to be forced a little bit – you need a little pressure to make good pictures.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I have once heard the quote, “Pressure makes diamonds.”

I believe it firmly. If I didn’t have an audience for my photography – I wouldn’t work hard to make good images, and edit brutally. Similarly, one of the biggest reasons I work hard writing and blogging is because I know that I have you as a reader to please and help – and a community that depends on me to write consistently.

Wedding photographers often get a bad rep. I know a lot of people are snobs towards wedding photography. But honestly (if you shoot weddings and are looked down by other photographers) – fuck them. You work hard. You have the pressure to make strong images to please your clients. Avoid snobby photographers.

But anyways going back to the point – remember that life isn’t easy. I think it is Marcus Aurelius who once

said, “Life is more like wrestling than dancing.”

If you want to truly become a great photographer (not everyone does) – you need to push yourself, to have pressure, and to have constraints.

For example, I know a lot of academics who cannot get work done without a deadline. Similarly, if you set a limit on the time it will take you to work on a project (for example a week-long photography workshop), you will be forced and pressured to make good photos.

For example, when I did the workshop with David Alan Harvey, I technically only had 2 nights to work on my project. I was quite stressed and pressured – but it forced me to work hard and make good photos. I ended up going to this one bar in Provincetown called “The Old Colony” – had a few beers, took along my camera, and broke outside of my comfort zone to make portraits of people inside the bar. I talked to strangers I normally wouldn’t feel comfortable with – but ended up having a great time

with them, having introspective conversations, while also making good photos.

## 8. Keep it simple

One of the biggest takeaways I got from the workshop with David Alan Harvey (and pieces of advice about life) was to keep it simple.

He told us that almost all of the great photo projects in history have had a pretty simple concept– but were executed pretty well. Nowadays a lot of photographers go for very complex concepts in their photography. But it is the simple that gives you focus and direction.

For example, David Alan Harvey, Costa Manos, Susan Meiselas all liked my “Suits” project– because it was simple (I photograph suits), and it had a consistent mood (gloomy, depressing). They all encouraged me to continue to work on it – as it was a simple yet strong project that I could do well.

### Takeaway point:

When you are working on a photography project– avoid the art school approach. Don’t go for some super-grand

idea or concept. Keep it simple. Make photos that stick to your theme, and are easily understandable (but done well).

One approach is “typology”– in which you literally photograph a single subject matter. So for example in my “Suits” project– I just photograph men wearing suits (suit and tie). For Josef Koudelka’s “Gypsies” project– he traveled, lived, and photographed the Roma people (politically correct term for ‘Gypsies’) for 10 years.

Another approach is location-based. You can just photograph and document one area or location. For example, in Martin Parr’s “The Last Resort” – he photographed Brighton Beach in the UK for a few summers. Another example, William Eggleston has done most of his photography in his hometown– and the project and theme of his work is just based on that area.

## 9. Squeeze personal work from professional work

I have a lot of photography friends who work as professional photogra-

phers— and get burnt out and tell me that they have no time to work on personal work.

However one great insight I gained from DAH was this: “Squeeze your personal work from your professional work.”

David Alan Harvey told us it was a myth that all of these Magnum photographers would have unlimited time to work on their personal photography on the side. Rather, they would try to squeeze in their personal work (while on assignment), or in-between assignments.

For example, Elliott Erwitt has a lot of his professional work done during commercial shoots (when he sees something wacky or strange happening). I even know some photographers who make interesting candid ‘street photos’ while photographing a wedding (on the side).

If you work in a business (or something non-photography-related) try to squeeze in your personal work in your everyday life. If you work in an office, work on a project on offices (see Lars

Tunbjork’s “Office” book). If you work as a doctor, see if you can document your daily life as a doctor— or perhaps even photograph your patients (outside of the office). If you work as a teacher, photograph your students (if possible). If you are a student, do a self-documentary series of your life of a student, and photograph your friends.

I think the secret to being a great photographer is to have your photography accommodate your everyday life— rather than trying to accommodate our everyday life for your photography.

Personally even though I am technically a “full-time street photographer” in the sense that I make my living teaching street photography workshops, I very rarely have huge blocks of time to just wander and shoot. Like you, I have to answer emails, do my finances, go to the grocery for milk and eggs, run errands, fill the car with gas, drop off Cindy to class, and all the other things of everyday life.

So what I do is photograph every opportunity I can. I will go into a store



shopping for a watch, and ask the salesperson if I can take their portrait. I will be on the way driving somewhere, and see an interesting urban landscape— pull over, and take a photo. I will sometimes be stuck in traffic, and photograph from inside my car (looking out, similar to Lee Friedlanders’ “America by car” series). If I am at dinner with Cindy, I will try to take an artistic portrait of her.

Regardless of how busy you are, don’t make excuses— make photos.

## 10. Finish

According to David Alan Harvey, another big mistake that a lot of photographers make is the following: They don’t stick to something long enough, and they don’t finish. He elaborates below (paraphrased):

“Photographers tend not to finish. They get started, but don’t end it. Relationships with projects are like relationships with somebody. It is easy to get romantically involved in the beginning, with nice wine and candlelit dinners. The same is with a photography project. In the beginning, you are interested—

then most people quit. Personally I only finish 1/10 of the things I start, which is pretty good. However most people don’t even do any of the ten. Finish!”

David elaborates on the long process it takes to work on a project or book (paraphrased):

“The first photography project you work on is like a flutter of love— it is easy. But going all the way to a book or all the way to 60 years of marriage is the same thing. Finish the whole long process to make a book. You need fortitude.”

He also uses the analogy of the left brain (which is generally associated with the analytical and rational side of the brain) and the right brain (the more artistic side):

“You need to shoot with the right side of the brain (passion). To finish, you need to use the left side of the brain to get it done. If you can’t, you need help. Everyone has both sides. Figure out what is your weakest point, and have someone else help you with that side.”

Harvey brings up the importance of having a partner help you (paraphrased):

“With Sebastian Salgado, his wife ties his shoes, and is his business manager. So if you don’t have any business sense, get a wife or a husband to do the business side of things. Having a real partner is the way to go. It is very hard to have someone else dedicated to you for so many years. Think carefully who you choose.”

## 11. On editing

Some advice David Alan Harvey gave on editing (choosing your best images):

- David Alan Harvey recommends Photo Mechanic (or Lightroom) – whatever works for you.
- Don’t shoot both black and white and color in the same series.
- When sending your photos for critique, don’t send more than 10 photos in a day (less is more).
- Treat flash cards like film. Keep your flash cards, and don’t delete anything. Your flash card is the best hard drive– because they are more robust and not as likely to crash as a spinning

hard drive. But realize that eventually, everything will fail (importance of having multiple backups). DAH keeps all of his original flash cards in ziplock bags.

- When you share your photos for a critique, create an “A edit” (your best images) and a “B edit” (your ‘maybe’ photos that you are unsure about).

When presenting your work he told us: “You want to present the best work you can.”

## 12. On immersing yourself in great work

A quote I wanted to share from DAH I found inspirational (and insightful in building up your taste for good photography):

“The best is immersing yourself in all the great photo books that have been done. The more books you read is like the more music you listen to. If you look at a lot of photos, you subliminally take your taste level up. Suddenly, the more experienced you get, the people you first

really liked, you find that they're not that good."

So once again— look at the work of the masters, and invest in good photography books. Currently off the top of my head, the books I recommend everyone buy:

- "Exiles" by Josef Koudelka (available for pre-order)
- "The Last Resort" by Martin Parr
- "Veins" by Jacob Aue Sobol/  
Anders Petersen
- "The Americans" by Robert Frank
- "Magnum Contact Sheets"

Harvey also shared that, "The book is the ultimate goal of a photographer" and that it will always exist.

### **Takeaway point:**

I often get anxious because I want a lot of validation via likes/favorites on social media. But who gives a shit about my Facebook, Flickr, or Instagram 50 years from now. Will it still be around? I doubt it.

But books will remain. I hope to make at least 1 good photography book before I die. Then I will have accomplished my job as a photographer.

So make your goal as a photographer to make at least one good book before you die. "Divided Soul" by David Alan Harvey (I think it is his best work) took him 10 years to complete. "Gypsies" by Josef Koudelka took him about 10 years. "Wonderland" by Jason Eskenazi took him about 10 years. It doesn't necessarily mean you have to take that long to make a great project ("The Last Resort" took Martin Parr around 2 years)— but great work often takes a long time. So don't be in a rush— take your time.

I reckon if you can make 1 good photo once a month for your project, you should be able to make a good book in 3–5 years. And if you take 10 years and focus on just one project— you will make a damn fine book (if you work hard and edit ruthlessly).

You can see some recommended street photography books [here](#).

## 13. Avoid the negative bullshit

David Alan Harvey mentions that there are a lot of negativity in photography. What he said in the workshop (paraphrased):

“Pissed off photographers will always find something wrong with the system, and eat themselves alive. Avoid the negative bullshit. Do your best pictures, and pretend you have an assignment for a magazine.”

It is easy to get caught up with negativity and bullshit when it comes to social media. There are a lot of negative, dissatisfied, and frustrated photographers that vent on Flickr threads, Facebook groups, online forums, etc.

### **Takeaway point:**

Instead of focusing on negativity—focus on positivity. Surround yourself with other inspired photographers who spend more time taking photos than complaining about the photography market, and gossiping about other photographers.

## 14. On working on projects

David Alan Harvey further gave lots of good advice when working on projects, books, magazines, etc.

He talks about how a photographer can work in terms of publishing his/her work:

“We should try to get our photos to the magazine level, then a book/exhibition, then collector print.”

### **How to get your work into magazines**

Harvey also gave some good advice on how to get your work into magazines: First of all, have an idea, and if you do your homework, present the idea. Don't talk about the potential photos you will take, tell them about the story you want to take. Magazines are interested in stories, not just photographs.

In regards to getting an assignment, he also told us the following advice (paraphrased):

“It is always better to have something in progress to get an assignment. Have a unique story you're already work-



ing on. Nobody is going to sign you to a magazine based on your portfolio.”

He says that magazines need to know you are already resilient as a photographer– and you have the tenacity to work on a project under pressure. So therefore by showing a work-in-progress, you already show the magazine what you are capable of.

### **When working on a project**

Below are also some practical tips when it comes to working on a project:

- In a project, avoid photos that are too similar.
- “You either need variety or no variety in a photo project.”
- You need a ‘body of work’ – like putting together a set of poems.
- “Half of the battle is having a good sense of purpose, a good idea, and a good title.”
- “Once you pick your canvas size, you have all the freedom in the world.” (Canvas size as the camera, lens, equipment, subject matter, space).

- “Easy is hard. It is hard to get to easy.”

- Don’t get carried away with too many stories. Just focus on one story.

- “Don’t overthink this shit.”

- Great photographers have a simple idea: Ansel Adams just chose Yosemite. Most photographers do a really simple subject.

- “You can make your projects complex to some degree, but don’t make it complicated.”

- “The biggest mistake photographers make: don’t feel like you have to be an encyclopedia. Just get to the heart of a story. Just do one thing!”

### **On creating a title**

When creating titles for his books, David Alan Harvey gains inspiration from literature. For example, he got his title: “Divided Soul” from a book he read.

Another strategy is to write down keywords (cultural or literary-based). For example: Passion, blood, machismo. Stuff your brain with keywords, and sud-

denly good titles will go into your brain, and come to you like a flash of insight. It isn't a linear process. And it is really important to have a good title.

### **Finishing projects**

He also gave us the advice that when working on a project (of let's say 50 images) – the first 10 photos are easy. The last 40 are really hard– as you are competing with the first 10 images. A lot of images will replace the first 10 images.

Also he said: "Photos now need to be very sophisticated, so to just have a book of strong single images isn't enough."

## **15. On technology (shooting on iPhones)**

David Alan Harvey is quite progressive when it comes to technology and photography. For example for his "Based on a true story" book in Rio – he shot it on a Leica M9, Panasonic GF-1, and even an iPhone. The tool doesn't really matter to him much.

This is what he said about the benefits of shooting with a phone:

"Sooner or later, we will all take photos with the phone (think about the new iPhone 6 coming out). It is a part of your body. You turn it on quickly. The quality is good, you can't tell the difference once you get it printed in a magazine. Only problems with phones are that you can't get a shallow depth-of-field. But you can use a DSLR for low depth-of-field photos. With a phone, there is a certain type of looseness you have. If everyone shot with phones, we would all get better. You can dance with your phone. The phone is good to work with."

He also describes the experience shooting on a phone:

"You can use the phone like an 8x10 view camera– like looking through a ground glass. I don't use the viewfinder much anymore (I prefer live view). There's no machine in-between when taking photos with a phone. If I could choose my ideal setup, I would use a digital Leica (because it is simple and has very few dials) and a phone for every-

thing else. I would also stick with my Mamiya 7 and Bessa for film. I would put my other cameras somewhere else.”

### **Takeaway point:**

It honestly doesn’t matter what tool you use in street photography. Just use whatever works for you.

I personally like to shoot film because it gives me a peace of mind, I like the aesthetic, I like how it costs money (it makes me more serious when shooting), I like how I don’t have to worry about constantly upgrading my camera, how I don’t need batteries (besides the meter), how I can’t chimp when taking photos, and the excitement I get when sending in my film.

However I also been shooting a lot on my smartphone a lot– using the VSCO app to process my photos (I like the analogue preset) – and sharing it directly on Instagram. To be perfectly honest, I can’t tell the difference between photos on my phone processed in VSCO with my Portra 400 photos shot on my Leica MP. But I still prefer the Leica when I need to shoot quickly on the

streets (the phone is a bit slow, but ideal for portraits and urban landscapes).

I have personally seen a lot of street photographers who only use iPhones who are damn good. They get good quickly, because they always have their phone with them and are always shooting. I like the work of Oggsie and Misho Baranovic, Koci Hernandez, and a lot of guys part of the “Tiny Collective”.

If you shoot on the iPhone, I also recommend the “Pro camera” application– which allows you to pre-focus and manually adjust exposure on-the-fly, which is ideal for street photography.

So go sell your Leica, and go buy an iPhone for your street photography.

## Tips and Quotes from David Alan Harvey

Below are some tips from David Alan Harvey that didn’t quite fit into the above points:

- “When you see a particular situation that is interesting, find the right position and angle– and keep working

that angle. Don't move your feet too much."

- "If you don't take your work seriously, nobody will."
- "Be elitist with the art crowd (charge them a lot of money), and give away your work for free to school kids."
- "Make prints and put them on the wall when editing and sequencing."
- "Don't tell the back story of photos, there is no need to explain."
- "When I'm out shooting, I talk to myself, or sing to myself. I listen to songs in my head when shooting."
- "Don't be too tight. Make more edgy photos."
- "Reduce a subject until it is digestible."
- "Easy is hard. It is hard to get to easy."
- "Keep it simple."





15

## DAVID HURN

I recently finished reading a book "On Being A Photographer" which is an amazing instructional book for aspiring photographers. The book was written by Bill Jay, in collaboration with Magnum photographer David Hurn. The book covers many different things, such as how to select a subject, how to work on a photography project, as well as how to edit and select your best images.

### 1. Photographers Are Awful Editors

When I talk about editing, I mean the act of choosing your best images, not post-processing.

In the book, David Hurn discusses how photographers are often horrible editors of their own work. He brings to example W Eugene Smith and his Pittsburgh Project. When working with magazines and publications, it was the editors that often chose his best shots.

Smith hated this control that his editors had over his work, so he embarked on an epic project on Pittsburgh. The problem was that the project overwhelmed and consumed him, and he wasn't able to edit the entire project efficiently.

He ended up taking tens of thousands of shots, and couldn't edit down under a few thousand. Needless to say, it was a monumental failure and he couldn't find anyone to publish the photos in "it's true entirety".

Therefore as a photographer, it is hard to edit your own work. The reason is that we often get too emotionally attached to our images, including our bad shots. It is always important to get a second opinion on your shots, because it is others who can help spot imperfections in our shots.

Sure we shouldn't hand off all of the editing decisions to others. However if you are working on a project and have several hundred shots, try to edit down to around 20 or so images, and ask a photographer or editor you respect to help get down to those 10 or so final images.

## 2. Be Aware of "Pregnant Moments"

David Hurn describes "pregnant moments" as "decisive moments" waiting to occur. This means if you are walking down the street and you see a man about to jump over a puddle by crouching down and bending his knees, you can anticipate that a "decisive moment" or him jumping over the puddle will occur in about two seconds.

If you see these pregnant moments about to occur, make sure to have your camera ready and be mindful of how you want to frame and time your shot. For example, if I see a man about to take a puff of a cigarette and want to capture the shot, I prefocus my camera to 1.2 meters, set my aperture and shutter speed accordingly and step toward him and get

ready to snap the shot. Shooting with a 35mm focal length, I know that 1.2 meters framed vertically will approximately get the top of his head and around his waist in the shot. 2 meters (shot vertically) will roughly get a person's full height in the shot (from the top of his head, to the bottom of his feet).

Also when you see the "pregnant moment", don't just snap one photo and walk on. Rather, take several shots, at subtlety different angles, and wait for small variations.

For example, if you see an elderly couple interacting, you might want to take a shot at eye level or crouching down, or stepping a bit to the left to make sure an ugly car isn't in the background. You might also be patient for subtle variations. One second they may be making direct eye contact and you go "click". They turn away from each other and you go "click". You see them about to hold hands so you wait half a second. They then grab hands and you go "click". They start walking away and then you know that there is nothing else to be shot.

If you look at the contact sheets of some of the most famous photographs taken in history, rarely is there only one shot of the event. For example, the shot of the kids in front of a broken wall - Henri Cartier-Bresson shot around 6 shots in the series. For Elliot Erwitt's famous shot of the two bulldogs (one looking like its owner) he shot an entire roll to get precisely the right angle - 36 shots. Even Ansel Adams shot around 10 shots for his famous "moon and half dome" shot.

But how many shots should you make when you see a "pregnant scene"? David Hurn says he personally makes roughly 6 shots for each scene.

### 3. Realize You Only Can Control Two Things As A Photographer

According to David Hurn, there are only two things you can control as a photographer: position and timing.

Position is where you are standing when you see a scene, and whether you



are crouching, standing, or from a high vantage point.

Timing is when you decide to click the shutter.

Therefore when you are shooting street photography, realize that there is so little that you can control as a photographer. As Alex Webb says, 99.9% of street photography is failure. Even though you may capture an amazing subject, most likely your background will be really cluttered and busy with random people or cars. The light may be poor. There may be a random pole in the scene that you can't remove by position or framing.

Of course there are other things you can control, such as your aperture, shutter speed, focal length, etc. However at the end of the day, it is the position and the timing that makes the content of a photograph. Everything else might change the technical aspects or "effect" - which isn't as important.

Therefore in order to master your positioning and timing, it is crucial to stick to one focal length you are comfortable

with (I personally recommend either a 28mm or 35mm lens. 50mm is good too, but often too tight when shooting in large cities). By sticking to one focal length, you will be able to frame scenes in your head before even lifting the camera to your eye. I have shot with a 35mm focal length for roughly 5 years, which helps me focus less on my equipment and more on framing and composing my shot.

It is also really important to know your camera well. It isn't important what camera you use, as well as you can handle it with precision. You can shoot with a dslr, rangefinder, iPhone, whatever. Just make sure you don't miss decisive moments because of the limitations of your camera.

For example, if timing is crucial in street photography then you have to make sure that when you click the shutter, your camera will actually take a photograph. I know that some cameras out there have considerable shutter lag. If you know your camera has shutter lag, then compensate for it by shooting half a second earlier. If your camera has really



poor autofocus, it may be a better idea to stick at f/8 and zone focus manually.

Also make sure that you turn off "auto power off" in your camera to make sure your camera isn't off or sleeping when you decide to click the shutter. Oh yeah, and make sure to throw away all your lens caps in a box at home and use uv filters or lens hoods instead (there is nothing more frustrating than trying to take a photo to remember your lens cap is on).

## 4. The Most Memorable Shots Are Emotional

There was one quote I loved by Bill Jay which he said, "For me, the best photos are those which go straight into the heart and blood, and take some time to reach the brain".

As humans, we are emotional creatures. We connect with others and images often on emotional content. Think about all the cliched and popular images we remember. Typically they involve love (kissing), pain (starving children), or hope (people looking into the horizon).

A great photograph doesn't have to be emotional to be memorable, but it helps.

There is an over-abundance of images on the Internet nowadays, and it is quite easy to quickly flip through them and not spend more than half a second to look at them. However if they have something in the image that we connect on an emotional level, we will take more time to inspect the image, and often find the small details which makes the photo a great image.

## 5. The Photographer Is Simply A "Subject Selector"

A photograph is a reflection of the photographer. Meaning, we often take photos that interest us as photographers. As street photographers, we are drawn to people, as it shows our interest in humanity, society, and those around us.

David Hurn states that as photographers, we are simply "subject selectors". This means that your style and philosophy of image-making is less dependent on whether you shoot digital vs film,

color vs black and white, or sharp vs blurry images. It isn't the fancy effects or camera that make the photographer, but the subject matter that the photographer decides to capture.

For example, if you look at the work of Elliott Erwitt, he has a profound ability to capture the humorous and ridiculous things in the world. He also likes taking photographs of dogs. We can easily see his personality shine through his images based on the moments and subjects he selects (he loves dogs too btw).

Therefore focus your photography on the subject matter you capture, and carefully think about what statement you are trying to say through your photos. Are you a graphic designer? Then perhaps you should create images that are focused on shapes, forms, and shadows. If you have done social work in the past, perhaps you should document either the homeless or those struggling. Are you a businessman and hate your job? Perhaps you should do a project on other businessmen who look quite miserable.

Focus less on the effects, but more on the subjects you capture. This is your mark as a photographer.

## 6. Be Interested In Your Bad Shots, Not Your Good Shots

It is easy to fall in love with our good shots. However David Hurn recommends that we focus on our bad shots, not our good shots.

When you are looking and editing your images, don't consider what makes the photo good, but what may be potentially distracting or what may make it fail. Is the light flat? Are there too many subjects in the background? Is your subject centered too far in the middle of the frame?

Many photographers I know who took film photography courses at school weren't allowed to discard their bad shots, and had to turn in their full rolls to their professors. The professors would always be interested in their bad shots, and would discuss with them why the shots didn't work. By understanding why

your bad shots don't work, can you understand why your other shots are good.

## 7. Invest In A Pair Of Good Shoes

Often times photographers obsess too much about their gear (camera, lens, etc) yet forget the piece of equipment that is the most essential, the shoes.

If you have a comfortable pair of shoes, then you can shoot for a long time without slowing down. Having a good pair of shoes will also give you the flexibility to run to get a certain shot, to crouch down, or even jump over fences or walls (if need be).

If there is rain or mud, it also helps to get a pair of shoes that is waterproof.

## 8. Shoot With A Project In Mind

Although the tradition of street photography is wandering around public with no theme in mind, I highly encourage everyone who wants to take their photography more seriously to work on a project.

David Hurn mentions an account in which he met Garry Winogrand. When Winogrand died, he left thousands of undeveloped rolls of film. This caused people to believe that Winogrand would just randomly go out and snap anything that moved. However Hurn mentions that in a conversation he had, Winogrand said that he would always go out and shoot with a project in mind. For example, Winogrand mentioned he was in airports a lot. He then started to work on his projects on airports. He also worked on many projects at the same time, and would shoot a lot to have many photos to consider.

## 9. Edit With Prints

With digital, we spend all of our time editing (choosing our best images) via our computers, Lightroom, etc. However one thing that David Hurn mentions is that although we have the technology, there is still a merit in editing with prints.

If you edit with prints, the process is much more organic and natural. We can simply slide around prints on a table,

group them together, or remove the shots that are no good.

For example James Natchway, a war photographer, would often post up small 4x6 prints on a wall, and look at them constantly for months on end. The shots that were really good, he would keep, and the weaker shots he would eventually discard.

So what does this mean for us? If you are trying to compile a portfolio of your best 20 shots or so, it is a good idea to print out a ton of your best shots 4x6, and arrange them on a table. Keep your best shots, and remove your weakest shots.

If you are working on a project, start grouping images together that work, and even sequence them in order. For example, when Robert Frank was working on "The Americans" he grouped his images into several categories, some of them being "cars", "political rallies", "bars", etc. He would then make sure that there was enough variety in his shots, and would then continue to edit down and keep his best shots.

## 10. Cameras Are About Solutions, Not Problems

Hurn mentions in his book that many aspiring photographers have a fear of approaching strangers, and taking their photographs without permission. He also mentions now most photographers hate being seen with a camera, and wish they were invisible.

Hurn says this is all a bunch of nonsense. He mentions the camera as being about solutions, not problems. For example, for shy photographers he mentions that the camera is an excuse to be curious. It is an "entrance ticket" to moments in which you normally couldn't have access to.

For example, let's say you walk by a concert. If you approached the security guard and said you wanted to go in and check it out, he or she would probably decline. But if the security guard asks, "Why do you want to enter?" and you respond that you are a photographer and show him or her your camera, you are more likely to be able to enter.



Don't see the camera as something you want to hide, but rather as a symbol of power and authority. It is an extension of your body and eye.

As street photographers are inherently interested in people. Imagine how awkward it would be to simply stare at someone in public without saying anything. If you get caught (and you're not a photographer) that person may feel awkward or strange. However if you get caught staring at someone and you say that you are a photographer and think that they have a great face, they will be flattered.

## Conclusion

I highly recommend everyone to read David Hurn's book, "On Being A Photographer". It is one of the few photo books of its kind that is instructive and practical, yet written by a Magnum photographer.

Now go out and shoot!



16

## DIANE ARBUS

Diane Arbus is a photographer that has a very profound impact on me. When I first saw her photograph of the "grenade kid" -- it hit me in the chest and has burned

itself in my mind ever since. Upon studying more of Diane Arbus' work -- I found her photographs to be very applicable to my interest in shooting street photography of strangers-- mostly as a mode of portraiture.

There is a wealth of knowledge on Diane Arbus (several memoirs, books, and even movies have been made on her), and I cannot say I am an expert on her work. However here is some golden knowledge I have found from one her books published by Aperture that I found incredibly insightful that I wanted to share with you.

## Diane Arbus Biography

Diane Arbus is a photographer best known for her square-format photographs of marginalized people in society -- including transgender people, dwarfs, nudists, circus people. Although she has always expressed love for her subjects, her work has always been controversial and critiqued heavily by art critics and the general public for simply being "the photographer of freaks" and casting her subjects in a negative light.

Arbus studied photography under Berenice Abbott, and Lisette Model, during the period when she started to shoot primarily with her TLR Rolleiflex in the square-format she is now famous for. Most of her photographs are shot head-on, mostly with consent, and often utilizing a flash to create an surreal look.

Arbus was born in 1923, and it shocked the entire photographic community when she committed suicide in 1971 (at the age of 48). It was reported that she did experience many "depressive episodes" during her life.

Although it has been around 40 years since her passing, she has influenced countless photographers (including myself) and there is still much work being published on her life. In 2006, Nicole Kidman played as Diane Arbus in the motion picture "Fur" -- a fictional version of her life story. Also recently published (2011) a psychotherapist named William Schultz published a biography on Arbus named: "An Emergency In Slow Motion: The Inner Life of Diane Arbus".



## 1. Go places you have never been

When it comes to street photography, I feel one of the greatest joys is that it allows you to experience life in a novel and different way. Arbus shares some of her thoughts:

“My favorite thing is to go where I've never been. For me there's spending about just going into someone else's house. When it comes time to go, if I have to take a bus to somewhere or if I have to grade a cab uptown, it's like I've got a blind date. It's always seemed something like that to me. And sometimes I have a sinking feeling of, Oh God it's time and I really don't want to go. And then, once I'm on my way, something terrific takes over about the sort of queasiness of it and how there's absolutely no method for control.

I feel that one of the greatest traits that a street photographer has is his or her curiosity. Street photography gives us the wonderful opportunity to have the excuse to go to places we generally

don't go -- in order to look for interesting photographs and experiences.

### Takeaway point:

Explore and take the path off the beaten road. If you always shoot street photography in the same place, venture off elsewhere and go down hidden paths that you haven't been down before. Realize that there is little you can control in terms of what subjects appear, how your background will look at a given time, and how the weather will be for your shots. Simply let the shots come to you, and embrace them.

## 2. The camera is a license to enter the lives of others

In street photography, we are often timid to approach random strangers and ask to take photographs of them. After all, it may seem weird for us to simply approach someone we don't know.

However consider how much weirder it would be to approach a stranger without having a camera and having a reason to talk to them. Having



the camera is a license to enter the lives of others, as Arbus explains:

“If I were just curious, it would be very hard to say to someone, “I want to come to your house and have you talk to me and tell me the story of your life.” I mean people are going to say, “You’re crazy.” Plus they’re going to keep mighty guarded. But the camera is a kind of license. A lot of people, they want to be paid that much attention and that’s a reasonable kind of attention to be paid.

Arbus also continues by sharing the idea that many people are quite humbled by being paid a ton of attention by having you want to take their photograph.

#### **Takeaway point:**

Don't be embarrassed by your camera and try to hide it when shooting on the streets. Embrace it, and use it as a tool to help you get a license to enter the lives of others. If you see someone on the street that you find interesting and want to get to know more about them -- approach them and start chatting with them and explain that you are a photographer and you would like to take their

portrait for a project you are working on. Most people become quite humbled by this, and are generally excited to be part of the project.

If you want to take a photograph more candidly, go and take the photograph without permission and then afterwards -- explain why you took the photograph. Tell them what project it is for, and what unique part of them that you found that you wanted to capture. When you explain why you think that people are interesting and why you wanted to take a photograph of them, people are generally humbled by that.

### **3. Realize you can never truly understand the world from your subjects eyes**

As a photographer, it is easy to see things from our own perspective. However it is difficult to see the world from your subjects perspective (if not impossible). Arbus explains that although we can try to give our best intents in getting to know our subjects well- our photographs will not always show what we in-

tended. You might have a certain intent when photographing, but the result can be totally different. Not only that, but what we may perceive as a "tragedy" may not be considered as a tragedy to your subject:

"Everybody has that thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that's what people observe. You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw. It's just extraordinary that we should have been given these peculiarities. And not, content with what we were given, we create a whole other set.

Our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way but there's a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you.

And that has to do with what I've always called the gap between intention and effect. I mean if you scrutinize reality closely enough, if in some way you really, really get to it, it becomes fantas-

tic. You know it really is totally fantastic that we look like this and you sometimes see that very clearly in a photograph. Something is ironic in the world and it has to do with the fact that what you intend never comes out like you intended it.

What I'm trying to describe is that it's impossible to get out of your skin into somebody else's. And that's what all this is a little bit about. That somebody else's tragedy is not the same as your own".

Arbus took a lot of photographs of marginalized individuals in society (transgender, dwarfs, circus people, etc) and of course she had her natural prejudices when she took photographs (as well all do). Her individuals would try to present themselves to the world in a certain way, but other people might perceive them in a different way.

For example, if someone dressed up as a rockstar with chains and spiked studs, they may feel that they are giving off the image that they are powerful and

cool. However an outsider might see this as frightening, and something abhorrent.

### **Takeaway point:**

Realize that it is impossible to truly get into the mind of someone else.

When you are photographing someone in the streets, there is no way to know their entire life history or their character. Sure you might perceive them to be a certain way on the outside, but appearances can be deceiving.

Someone dressed extravagantly (wearing designer labels like Louis Vuitton and Chanel) may look rich on the outside, but can actually be loaded with thousands of dollars of debt. Someone with tattoos all over their face may come off as scary and unapproachable, but they actually may be the nicest person around.

Therefore know your own prejudices and what they are when you photograph. Realize that no photograph is truly objective, and that your photographs are more of a reflection of yourself than the subject. However if you wish, strive to get to know more about your subjects. If

you take a photograph of someone candidly and without their permission, perhaps approach them afterwards and chat with them and get to know their personal or life story.

I am currently working on a project titled: "Suits" - my critique on the corporate world and I see the suit as a symbol of oppression. Of course this is my biased view of suits (a lot of people really like wearing suits). Therefore although I am selectively trying to capture photographs of suits looking miserable, I have taken lots of photos of suits looking proud. Sometimes I ask for permission - other times I do it more candidly. However at the end I still try to chat with them about what they do for a living, how they enjoy their work, in order to better understand their stories (compared to my outsider observations).

## **3. Create specific photographs**

When we are shooting street photography, we tend to wander and take photos of anything that interest us. However my personal view (and that of Diane Ar-

bus) is that being very specific when you are out shooting is important- to make a stronger message in your photographs:

"A photograph has to be specific. I remember a long time ago when I first began to photograph I thought, There are an awful lot of people in the world and it's going to be terribly hard to photograph all of them, so if I photograph some kind of generalized human being, everybody'll recognize it. It'll be like what they used to call the common man or something.

It was my teacher Lisette Model, who finally made it clear to me that the more specific you are, the more general it'll be. You really have to face that thing. And there are certain evasions, certain nicenesses that I think you have to get out of.

On the streets there are so many things to photograph. But we have to be selective. There has to be a reason why we decide to take a photograph of let's say a little kid skipping in a puddle versus taking a photograph of an old person sitting in a wheelchair.

General photographs tend to be quite boring. If you are more specific in your approach in terms of either your subject matter or approach, not only will your photographs have a stronger collective strength - but they will have more power and meaning to the viewer.

However Arbus shares a problem of trying to be very specific when we are photographing -- namely that it can be quite harsh:

The process itself has a kind of exactitude, a kind of scrutiny that we're not normally subject to. I mean that we don't subject each other to. We're nicer to each other than the intervention of the camera is going to make us. It's a little bit cold, a little bit harsh.

Now, I don't mean to say that all photographs have to be mean. Sometimes they show something really nicer in fact than what you felt, or oddly different. But in a way this scrutiny has to do with not evading facts, not evading what it really looks like.

When you are specific when you are photographing, you are putting empha-



sis or a level of exactitude of certain parts of your subjects. For example, you might highlight the glasses on their face, their weathered hands, or the fact that they might be in a wheelchair. This is what you choose to show (or not to show) by framing your camera in a certain way, or even using a certain depth-of-field.

### **Takeaway point:**

Realize that as street photographers, we aren't always going to show our subjects in the most flattering light. After all, life isn't always flattering. As Arbus explains, it doesn't necessarily mean that you "have to be mean" -- but follow your gut and your heart. Strive what feels authentic to you.

## **4. Adore your subjects**

When you take photographs, select your subjects based on what interests you. In Arbus' example - she was drawn to "freaks" (I'm certain that the term was more politically correct 40 years ago). She explains that she adored them, and found them compelling:

"Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. It was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me. I just used to adore them. I still adore some of them, I don't quite mean they're my best friends but they made me feel a mixture of shame and awe.

There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats."

One of the unique parts of Arbus' work is that she approached subjects that nobody else was really photographing at the time. However rather than just looking at the "freaks" as despicable members of society - she made them human. She explains not only did they excite her, but she found a sense of honor in them - calling them "aristocrats". After all, they had to deal with much more difficulties in life than us "regular people" often don't have to. She

saw them in a different way than the average person - as venerable.

### **Takeaway point:**

Everyone is drawn to a certain type of subject. You might be interested in photos of couples, photos of people jubilant, depressed, photos of children, the elderly, and so on.

I feel it is important to be compassionate to the subjects that you photograph. However once again, we all have our natural prejudices when we photograph - and our photos may not always be so compassionate.

If you also approach a certain subject matter and you want to be unique - don't just see it how the rest of society sees it. For example children are generally seen as adorable and cute things. Why not try to do the opposite and show them as creatures that can be menacing? Elderly people are generally seen as old and grumpy. Why not take photographs that make them look gentle and compassionate?

Make sure whatever or whoever you photograph that you are passionate

about it. Treat your subjects with respect, and know the power of distortion that your lens can have.

## **5. Gain inspiration from reading**

I have written about this in the past, how in order to be more creative with our photography it is important to consume inspiration from places outside of photography. Arbus shares that where she gained some of her inspiration was from reading:

“Another thing I've worked from is reading it happens very obliquely. I don't mean I read something and rush out and make a picture of it. And I hate that business of illustrating poems.

But here's an example of something I've never photographed that's like a photograph to me. There's a Kafka story called “Investigations of a Dog” which I read a long, long time ago and I've read it since a number of times. It's a terrific story written by the dog and ts the real dog life of a dog.

Actually, one of the first pictures I ever took must have been related to that story because it was a dog. This was about twenty years ago and I was living in the summer on Martha's vineyard. There was a dog that came at twilight every day. A big dog kind of a mutt. He had sort of a Weimaraner eyes, grey eyes. I just remember it was very haunting. He would come and just stare at me in what seemed a very mythic way. I mean a dog, not barking, not licking, just looking right through you. I don't think he liked me. I did take a picture of him but it was very good.

I don't particularly like dogs. Well, I love stray dogs, dogs who don't like people. And that's the kind of dog picture I would take if I ever took a dog picture."

Arbus shares this example that from reading a book by Kafka of a dog- she was able to see something in real life that sparked her imagination. Although she didn't take a great photograph, it was still a great example of how she was able to gain outside inspiration and apply it to her photography

### Takeaway point:

Creativity and gaining insights into your photography often come from outside sources. Don't just consume images from street photography, but diversify. Look at paintings, sculpture, read books, and listen to music. You can never know when one of these outside pieces of inspiration can give your photography a boost of creativity.

## 6. Utilize textures to add meaning to your photographs

As photographers we can often get obsessed with "the look" of our photographs. We experiment with different focal lengths, shooting at different apertures, using a flash or natural light, color vs black and white, formats, and so forth. However rather than just experimenting for the aesthetic quality, Arbus feels that using different techniques should be for adding meaning.

Arbus shares her experiences in trying to create textures in her image to convey more meaning, rather than just be-

ing textured for the sake of being textured:

“In the beginning of photographing I used to make very grainy things. I'd be fascinated by what the grain did because it would make a kind of tapestry of all these little dots and everything would be translated into this medium of dots. Skin would be the same as water would be the same as sky and you were dealing mostly in dark and light, not so much in flesh and blood.

But when I'd been working for a while with all these dots, I suddenly wanted terribly to get through there. I wanted to see the real differences between things.

I'm not talking about textures. I really hate that, the idea that a picture can be interesting simply because it shows texture. I mean that just kills me I don't see what's interesting about texture. It really bores the hell out of me.

But I wanted to show the difference between flesh and material, the densities of different kinds of things air and water and shiny. So I gradually had to learn dif-

ferent techniques to make it come clear. I began to get terribly hyped on clarity.”

For Arbus' earlier work she started with a Nikon 35mm camera, but in order to better achieve her creative vision she switched to a TLR Rolleiflex - in which she worked the square format and achieved extra detail in switching from small to medium-format.

Arbus also worked quite a bit with flash, which brought out more textures and light in her photographs. Many of her photographs taken during the day (such as the photograph of the woman with the veil above) show that she balanced the fill flash and the background light - creating a quite surreal effect. Not only that, but it better brought out the texture in the woman's face, the fabric of the veil, and of her light-colored hair and fur coat.

### **Takeaway point:**

When you decide to use a certain camera, focal length, flash vs natural light, black and white versus color, etc -- think about the added meaning you want to give to your photographs. For exam-



ple, if you use a 28mm lens (rather than a 50mm lens) consider why you are trying to do that. Instead of just making more distortion for the sake of it -- perhaps you should use it to create a more sense of immediacy and intimacy with your subject. When shooting in black and white - are you trying to document something sad and depressing or want to focus on forms and shapes? If working in color- what about the color adds meaning to your photographs?

Experiment freely with your photography, but don't get carried away for trying something new for the sake of trying something new and trying to be different. Think about the meaning you will add to your images.

## 7. Take bad photos

As photographers, we all hit plateaus or feel lack of inspiration at times. How do we get over this? Arbus suggests the idea of purposefully trying to "take bad photos":

"Some pictures are tentative forays without your even knowing it. They become methods. It's important to take

bad pictures. It's the bad ones that have to do with what you've never done before. They can make you recognize something you had seen in a way that will make you recognize it when you see it again.

By forcing ourselves to take bad photographs, it will cause us to understand what makes a good photograph. Also when looking at our bad photographs, we can learn how to improve on our pre-existing photography.

Arbus also discounts the importance of composition in her photography:

"I hate the idea of composition. I don't know what good composition is. I mean I guess I must know something about it from doing it a lot and feeling my way into and into what I like. Sometimes for me composition has to do with a certain brightness or a certain coming to rightness and other times it has to do with funny mistakes. There's a kind of rightness and wrongness and sometimes I like rightness and sometimes I like wrongness. Composition is like that."

Looking at Arbus' photographs, I would say that they are well-composed. She fits her subjects well in the frame, and positions them which give the images a sense of balance and harmony.

However she also mentions an important point that sometimes good compositions come from funny mistakes. Good compositions (although they should be intentional) can sometimes be unintentional.

### **Takeaway point:**

Composition is very important in street photography - as it helps the viewer understand who the subject in your photograph is. Not only that, but there is a natural sense of balance and beauty in composing something well.

There are lots of photographs you are going to take that are bad. They are either going to be boring or poorly composed.

However learn from your mistakes, and realize that making mistakes is part of the creative process. Without making bad photographs, how would we know what are our good photographs?

## 8. Sometimes your best photos aren't immediately apparent (to you)

I believe that photographers (myself included) are awful editors of their own work. We often get emotionally attached to our images, and can often take our bad photographs as good photographs. On a similar vein, we can also overlook our best photographs and not realize that they are interesting. Arbus explains this more in-depth:

“Recently I did a picture—I've had this experience before—and I made rough prints of a number of them, there was something wrong in all of them. I felt I'd sort of missed it and I figured id go back. But there was one that was just totally peculiar. It was a terrible dodo of a picture. It looks to me a little as if the lady's husband took it. Its terribly head-on and sort of ugly and there's something terrific about it. I've gotten to like it better and better and now I'm secretly sort of nutty about it.”

First impressions aren't always everything. When we first look at our photographs, we may not see anything interesting. However once we sit on them- and think about them some more, they can become more interesting over time.

**Takeaway point:**

I feel it is always important to get a second-opinion on your photographs. If you took a photograph that you think is interesting - your own judgement may not always be the best. Ask people you trust and respect for their feedback both online and offline. Ask them both what they like and what they dislike about the photograph, as they are less attached to the photograph than you and can give you more honest feedback.

## 9. Don't arrange others, arrange yourself

One of the great appeals of street photography is that there is little we can arrange. Arbus shares that when she photographs people, she prefers to arrange herself instead of her subjects:

“I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things if I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself”.

I like to take lots of candid photos, but I also like to take photos when I arrange my subjects in a certain way I'd like to capture them. However it is true that the most interesting photos I have taken are generally the ones that aren't posed.

**Takeaway point:**

If you want to make an interesting photograph of someone but you don't want to arrange them in a certain way or ask them to pose for you - arrange yourself in a different way. Take a photo of your subject from different angles - from the left, head-on, and from the right. Crouch, or stand up. Change your positioning which will help give the scene a better sense of clarity.

## 10. Get over the fear of photographing by getting to know your subjects

Getting over your fear of shooting street photography is one of the biggest challenges all of us face. If you decide to photograph a certain location over and over again, it may be a good idea to get to know the community and your subjects to overcome that fear. Arbus shares her experiences shooting outsiders at a park:

“I remember one summer I worked a lot in Washington Square Park. It must have been around 1966. The park was divided. It has these walks, sort of like a sunburst, and there were these territories stalked out. There were young hippie junkies down one row. There were lesbians down another, really tough amazingly hard-core lesbians and in the middle were winos. They were like the first echelon and the girls who came from the Bronx to become hippies would have to sleep with the winos to get to sit on the other part with the junkie hippies.

It was really remarkable. And I found it very scary. I mean I could become a nudist, I could become a million things. But I could never become that,

whatever all those people were. There were days I just couldn't work there and then there were days I could.

And then, having done it a little, I could do it more. I got to know a few of them I hung around a lot. They were a lot like sculptures in a funny way. I was very keen to get close to them, so I had to ask to photograph them. You can't get that close to somebody and not say a word, although I have done that.”

Diane Arbus often describes herself as being quite awkward and shy when photographing. She had her doubts, fears, and concerns when photographing. The interesting thing to note is that most of her photos are very upfront and close to her subjects.

Therefore to overcome her fear of shooting these people in the park (who frightened her) - she would revisit over and over again, and found out over time she became less timid. Not only that but she got to know the people there, and asked for permission. This helped her feel more comfortable and photograph the people in the area.



### **Takeaway point:**

We all have a certain degree of fear when it comes to shooting street photography. Know that everyone has it.

There are many ways to get over the fear of shooting street photography (download a copy of my free e-book on overcoming your fear of shooting street photography here). However know that naturally the more you shoot street photography the more up-front and honest you are about it, you will become more comfortable over time. I can speak from experience that I am definitely more comfortable shooting street photography now than I was around two years ago.

Don't also be ashamed to ask for permission. If you feel uncomfortable and want to take a photograph, just ask for permission. The worst that will happen is that they will say no, and you simply move on. The best thing that can happen is that they will say yes- and you will build that connection.

## **11. Your subjects are more important than the pictures**

Although Arbus was criticized much during her lifetime (and even now today) for being uncompassionate - she certainly did care for her subjects more than the photos themselves:

“For me the subject of the picture is always more important than the picture. And more complicated. I do have a feeling for the print but I don't have a holy feeling for it. I really think what it is, is what its about. I mean it has to be of something. And what its of is always more remarkable than what it is.”

Arbus explains how for her the subject of the photograph is more important (and often more interesting) than the photograph itself. She explains that the photos can be interesting, but she doesn't get that same "holy feeling" she gets with her subjects.

### **Takeaway point:**

As street photographers we strive to take interesting photos. But remember to not let that overshadow the importance of your experiences and connections with your subjects.

Know that human beings are both more interesting and important than just images of them. Photos are two-dimensional while people are three-dimensional to them. Photos are mute while people can speak about their experiences.

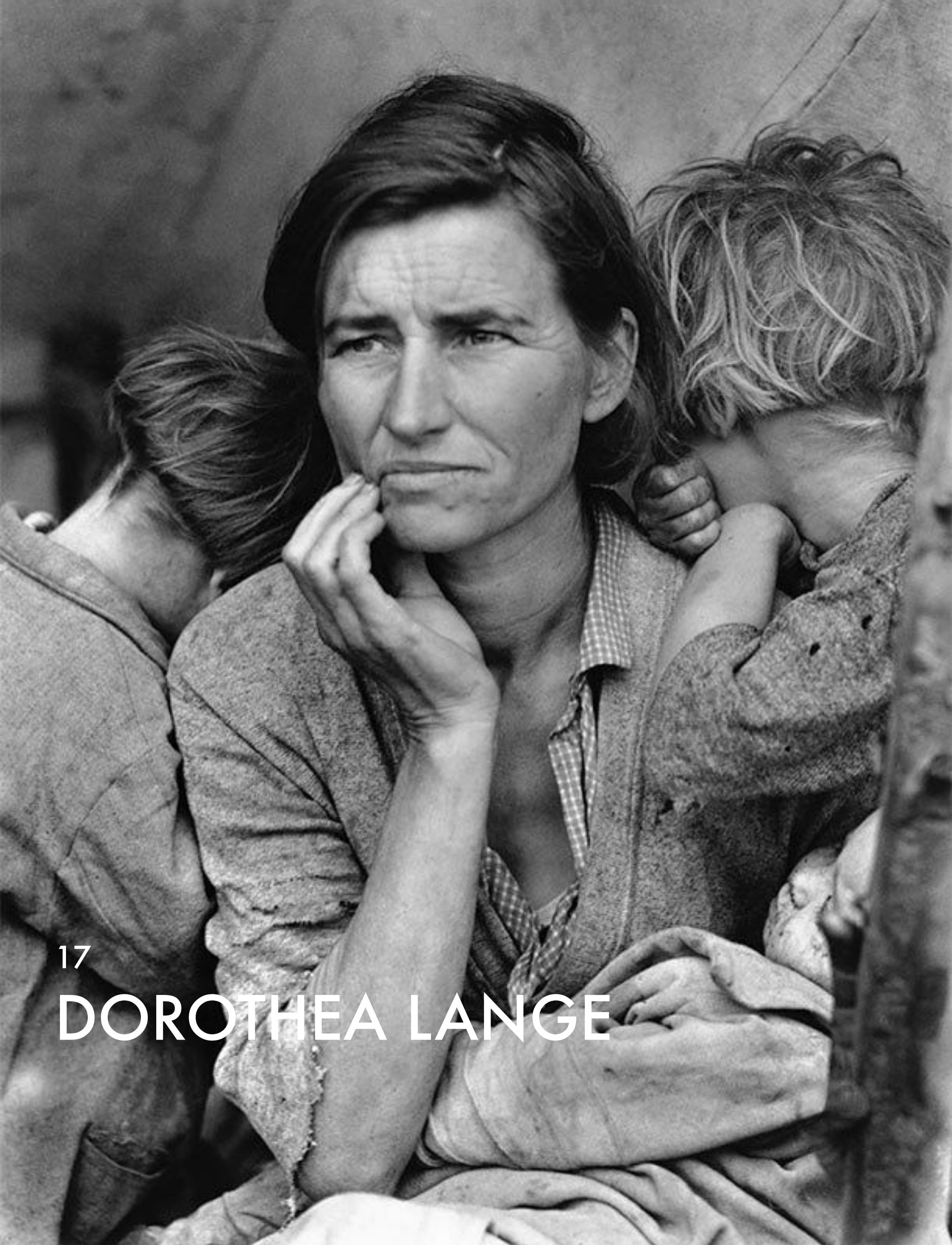
## Conclusion

Diane Arbus was not only an incredible photographer, but she also had deep feelings and emotions with her subjects - which I feel come across in her photography. She truly followed her heart in her photography, and took photos of subjects that both interested her - and that she felt compassion and warmth to.

As street photographers we can relate much with the types of photos that Arbus took (as many of them were on the street). Although we can learn much from the images that she shot, we can learn more from her personal philosophy around why she took the photos the way she did- and even her approach.

Don't be shy to ask for permission, and get close and intimate with your subjects. You may have natural fears ap-

proaching people (as all of us do) - but photograph openly, honestly, and from the heart. People may criticize you for what you do, but as long as you follow your own moral compass- ignore what others have to say.



17

DOROTHEA LANGE



I recently got a new book in the mail: “Dorothea Lange: Aperture Masters of Photography” (courtesy of Aperture) and was deeply inspired and moved by her work, life, and philosophy.

I have always known Dorothea Lange’s work documenting the Great Depression (and her famous “Migrant Mother” photograph), but didn’t know much about her life and philosophy. In this article I will share some of the lessons that Dorothea Lange has taught me about photography, and how you can apply that philosophy to your own work:

## Dorothea Lange’s history

Dorothea Lange was born on May 26, 1898 in New Jersey, and traumatically contracted polio at 7 years old, which left her with a weak right leg and permanent limp. Regardless of this disability, she was able to pursue her photography with full zest. This is what she says of her disability:

“It formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me and humiliated me. I’ve never gotten over it, and I am aware of the force and power of it.”

Lange ended up studying photography at Columbia University in New York City, and after her studies moved to San Francisco, where she opened up a successful portrait studio. For the majority of her life, she lived in Berkeley. In 1920 she married the painter Maynard Dixon and had two sons with him.

On the onset of the Great Depression, she started to photograph more photographs on the street, and less in the studio. Her emotional and raw photographs of unemployed and homeless people caught the attention of local photographers, which lead her to getting a job with the federal Resettlement Administration (RA), later called the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

In 1935, Lange divorced Dixon and married economist Paul Schuster Taylor, Professor of Economics at the University of California, Berkeley. This gave her the economic freedom to pursue her photography full-time. This ended up being a beautiful partnership, as Taylor was able to educate Lange in social and political matters. Together, they were able to document poverty and the exploitation



of sharecroppers and migrant laborers for 5 years. Taylor's job was interviewing the workers (he was fluent in Spanish), and also gathering economic data. Dorothea Lange focused on documenting the conditions with her camera.

Lange's work from 1935 to 1939 brought a lot of attention of the horrible living conditions of the sharecroppers, displaced farm families, and migrant workers to the public attention. Many of her images have become iconic of the Great Depression.

### **Different versions of "Migrant mother"**

Lange's most famous photograph is titled "Migrant Mother." The woman in the photo is Florence Owens Thompson, and Lange explained the experience of shooting that photograph in 1960:

"I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direc-

tion. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it."

Once Lange returned home, she gave the photographs to an editor of a San Francisco newspaper about conditions of the camp. The editor then told the federal authorities whom urged the government to rush aid to the camp to prevent starvation.

In 1941, Dorothea Lange was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for excellence in photography. However after Pearl Harbor (when Japanese-American citizens were forced into internment camps), she gave up the award and dedicated her efforts to documenting the injustice of the Japanese-American internment.

Her images were very critical of the American government — so much that the Army impounded the majority of the images. Most of them haven't been seen for the last 50 years. You can now see the images in the newly published book: "Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment".

In 1945, Lange was invited by Ansel Adams to accept a position at the fine art photography department at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA). Later in 1952, Lange co-founded *Aperture* magazine. Lange continued to photograph and worked on her one-woman show at the NY MOMA for a retrospective of her work. Unfortunately she died before the show was exhibited. She passed away on October 11, 1965 in San Francisco, California at age 70.

To learn more about Dorothea Lange's work, I recommend watching the film: "Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning":

Even though Dorothea Lange was a documentary photographer (not a street

photographer), I feel many of the precepts are the same. She had a deep love of humanity, people, and wanted her photographs to make a difference in society. Here are some lessons she has taught me:

## 1. Learn how to see

A lot of times we are obsessed with cameras, gear, lenses, and other things to help us become better photographers. We learn endlessly about technique, approaches, and technical settings to improve our image making.

But what is the best way to become a better photographer? Learn to become better at seeing.

This is what Dorothea Lange had to say about the importance of seeing in photography:

"Seeing is more than a physiological phenomenon... We see not only with our eyes but with all that we are and all that our culture is. The artist is a professional see-er."

Seeing in photography isn't just seeing what might make a good photo-

graph. Rather, you see with all of your ideology and perceptions of the world. We see the cultural context of scenes we want to photograph. But as a photographer, we are able to “see” deeper into reality than others.

What is the benefit of seeing, and how can we become better at seeing? Lange gives us some advice in terms of not rushing things, taking our time, and meditating upon what is before our very eyes:

“This benefit of seeing... can come only if you pause a while, extricate yourself from the maddening mob of quick impressions ceaselessly battering our lives, and look thoughtfully at a quiet image... the viewer must be willing to pause, to look again, to meditate.”

The best images are the ones that are full of information, emotion, and context that challenge the viewer to “... pause, to look again, to meditate.”

How important is the camera in terms of seeing? According to Lange—not very much:

“A camera is a tool for learning how to see without a camera.”

I have personally found that photography has given me the opportunity to be more curious. Now with photography, I look at scenes more intently. I can now “see” things that I didn’t see before. I have also discovered a phenomenon in which I can see more things when I have a camera around my neck or in my hand.

Remember, seeing is a gift. The last words of wisdom Dorothea Lange gives us is this:

“One should really use the camera as though tomorrow you’d be stricken blind.”

### **Takeaway point:**

No amount of camera gear, lenses, or technical know-how will teach us to be more empathetic, loving, and curious “see-er’s.”

The best photographers are the ones who are able to see the world in a unique way. They are able to look at people, scenes, and moments with a different perspective from others.

So as an exercise— try to be more mindful when shooting street photography. Don't look at things quickly and fleetingly. Look at things deeply. Think about the significance of how something looks like.

Also create open-ended photographs. Don't have your photographs simply tell the facts. Provide more questions than answers in your photographs, which will cause your viewers to be more engaged (emotionally and intellectually) with your images.

## 2. Work your theme to exhaustion

“Pick a theme and work it to exhaustion... the subject must be something you truly love or truly hate.” - Dorothea Lange

I think in today's day and age, we are quickly bored and exhausted. We want to finish things quickly, efficiently, and go onto the next project.

However I think if you want to really create a strong body of work, you should try to work on a long-term pho-

tography project, and as Dorothea Lange said, “work it to exhaustion.”

Dorothea Lange also mentioned when working on a project, “...the subject should be something you truly love or truly hate.”

So if you are working on a long-term photography project, make sure it is something you are really passionate about. If it is something you deeply love, you will continue to pursue it like you would continue loving a person. If the project you are pursuing is something you really hate or something that makes you really upset (let's say the gentrification of a neighborhood, social injustice, or homelessness) you can put your passion to it in a good way.

But how long should we work on a project? How long is “long enough”— and how do we know when we have truly “exhausted the possibilities” of a project? There is no real way to know— but Dorothea Lange says we often stop our projects “too soon”:



“Photographers stop photographing a subject too soon before they have exhausted the possibilities.”

**Takeaway point:**

When you are working on a photography project, keep pushing forward. When you think you’re done with it—you’re not quite done. Keep working until you can exhaust all the possibilities.

This is the same with camera equipment and gear. Don’t try to upgrade your gear until you think you have truly exhausted all of the possibilities of your medium.

One of the lessons I learned about working on photography projects is when you no longer have passion for a project, that is the moment you need to keep pushing forward. When you keep pushing forward, it forces you to be more creative to approach your project in different ways that you might have not explored yet.

So what are some ways you haven’t exhausted all of your creative possibilities yet? Keep working your themes until exhaustion.

### 3. Every photograph is a self-portrait

“Every image he sees, every photograph he takes, becomes in a sense a self-portrait. The portrait is made more meaningful by intimacy - an intimacy shared not only by the photographer with his subject but by the audience.” - Dorothea Lange

The photographs we take are less of a reflection of our subjects, and more of a reflection of ourselves.

Dorothea Lange agrees with this mentality by taking it further—the images we also see are self-portraits.

Generally we are interested in photographers or subject matter that resonate with us. That is something that is extremely personal. The photos we are interested in are a reflection of our own self-values, and how we see the world.

For example, if you are drawn to raw and gritty street photography—perhaps you grew up in a raw and gritty environment. Therefore it resonates with you. Or perhaps the opposite—you grew up

in a safe and sheltered environment, and therefore your interest in raw and gritty street photography is a reflection of the fact that you despised the safe and sheltered environment in which you grew up.

Personally I grew up in a socio-economically disadvantaged background in which I had to worry about whether my mom could pay the bills at the end of every month. Many of my friends succumbed to joining gangs and drugs. Therefore whenever I see people on the streets who are tatted up and perhaps gang-affiliated, I think of my friends growing up.

Even though I am a happy and smiley guy on the outside, I feel that there are parts of me that are deeply cynical inside. Therefore for my street photography, I think my work is very dark, grim, and a little bit on the pessimistic side. My photos reflect of my inner being and soul.

### **Takeaway point:**

So how are your street photos a reflection of yourself? What kind of sub-

ject matter are you drawn to? How do you empathize with your subjects? How do the photos you take reflect your own personal history or background?

Make your street photography personal and a self-portrait of yourself.

## **4. Live with your camera**

“I believe in living with the camera, and not using the camera.” - Dorothea Lange

The worst feeling is when you see a great street photography opportunity, but you accidentally left your camera at home.

I feel that photography has helped me so much in my personal life. When I have a camera with me, I am much more attentive and attuned to my surroundings— in terms of what I am doing, who I am with, and what I am experiencing.

Don't just think about using a camera and making photos, think about living with the camera— and having your camera become another appendage of your body, as Dorothea Lange explains below:

“... put your camera around your neck along with putting on your shoes, and there it is, an appendage of the body that shares your life with you.” - Dorothea Lange

The camera isn't just a tool or a device that captures images. It is an extension of your body. It is an extension of your eye. It is another appendage, like an extra arm or a limb. The camera is a loyal partner that shares your life experiences with you, and a partner who helps you live life more vividly.

### **Takeaway point:**

What are some other ways you cannot just use the camera, but live with the camera?

One of my suggestions is to always have your camera sitting next to you. If you are sitting at work, just keep your camera on your desk right next to your computer. If you are driving, keep your camera in the passenger seat. If you're going for a walk, keep your camera around your neck or in your hand.

I think the one device we have the closest physical and intimate relation-

ship with is our smartphone. If you find yourself having a tough time always carrying your camera with you on a daily basis, perhaps you should make your smartphone your primary shooting device.

With programs such as VSCO, you can truly make great photos regardless of the camera you use.

So how are some other ways you can spend more time with your camera, and make your camera your partner for life?

## **5. Dorothea Lange's working approach**

How did Dorothea Lange make such riveting, emotional, and timeless images? She talks about her working approach below:

“My own approach is based upon three considerations: First – hands off! Whenever I photograph I do not molest or tamper with or arrange. Second – a sense of place. I try to picture as part of its surroundings, as having roots. Third – a sense of time. Whatever I photograph, I try to show as having its position in the past or in the present.”

I don't think we necessarily have to shoot how Dorothea Lange does, but thinking about her working method does give us some insight on how we can become better street photographers:

### **First: “Hands off”**

Dorothea Lange was a purist in the documentary sense— she didn't like tampering or influencing the scene. She didn't like pre-arranged or setup photographs.

However at the same time, she would take portraits of her subjects with their consent and permission.

I think the way we can interpret this in street photography is to try to capture what you see before you as “authentically” as you can. We all have different interpretations of reality, and there is no true objective “reality” of what we experience or see.

But stick to your heart, and photograph what feels authentic to you.

### **Second: A sense of place**

When you're making street photographs, try to also include a “sense of

place” — meaning, putting your subject in the context of a background or environment.

So when you're taking photos of people on the streets, try to incorporate the background as much as your subject. If you're shooting a street in New York City, what part of the scene screams “New York City?” How does the environment influence your subject, and vice-versa?

A tip to get better photos with a good sense of place is to take a step back. I do believe that “if your photos aren't good enough, you're not close enough”— but there are times where taking a step back and getting a “sense of place” will make a stronger image.

### **Third: A sense of time**

What about the street photographs you take show a “sense of time?” Is it the clothing of people? Is it the environment? Is it the devices they are holding?

If you want to truly make timeless street photos— perhaps photograph in areas that you know are rapidly changing and developing. If you live in an area



that has construction, go there and photograph. It will look dramatically different in a year, two, five, or ten years from now.

But also realize that any street photograph you take is technically history. Sometimes we romanticize the past. We look at street photos taken in the 1920's by Henri Cartier-Bresson and we day-dream about the people who used to walk the streets with top hats. But back then, it was normal to wear top hats in public.

Perhaps 20 years from now, it will look really strange to see "old" photos of people on their iPhones. So perhaps that is a phenomenon we can document right now. It isn't too late to make history, and to show a sense of time.

## 6. Don't shoot preconceptions

"To know ahead of time what you're looking for means you're then only photographing your own preconceptions, which is very limiting, and often false." – Dorothea Lange

One of the most difficult things to do when you're out shooting street photography (or traveling) is not to be prejudiced and to shoot your pre-conceptions.

For example, let's say you go to Paris. You might have seen tons of photographs of old couples kissing at cafes, and you might try to shoot those clichés.

Or let's say you have seen lots of photographs of homeless people. You might go out and just try to shoot photos of homeless people looking sad and depressed.

One of the things I learned from studying sociology and doing "field research" is to go into any scene with an open mind. Rather than having a preconceived notion before you go out and shoot, go with an open mind and photograph what you see and experience.

So when it comes to traveling, I try not to do too much research before going to a certain place. Rather, once I arrive in a certain place, I ask the locals and people I meet about the place. They then tell and teach me about the culture, customs, and history of the place. I feel

this gives me a much more open-mind about the environment which I visit.

And also when you're working on a street photography project, don't always try to force things into your project. For example, let's say you are trying to do a project of homelessness. You might go in with a pre-conceived notion that everyone who is homeless is depressed and sad. But the reality of the matter might be that not everyone who is homeless is unhappy. So by having pre-conceived notions, you close off your mind to other opportunities and realities.

Dorothea Lange gives us further instructions when going to photograph—to be “as ignorant as possible”:

“The best way to go into an unknown territory is to go in ignorant, ignorant as possible, with your mind wide open, as wide open as possible and not having to meet anyone else's requirement but my own.”

### **Takeaway point:**

We often look down on ignorance. We think that being ignorant is a dis-

ease, and that people who are “smart” aren't ignorant.

But sometimes being selectively ignorant can be a strength. Children are ignorant, and therefore their minds are open to endless possibilities. When we fill our heads with too much preconceived ideas, we close off our opportunities to imagination, ingenuity, and creativity.

So if you were to start off street photography all over again, what are some pre-conceived notions you would kill to help you become like a child again? To help you be more happy, fun, and curious when it comes to street photography?

## **Conclusion**

The work of Dorothea Lange is hugely inspirational—in terms of how she lived her life, how she documented her subjects with great sincerity and emotion, and how she photographed social injustice and used her photography to raise political awareness.

So how can you learn how to see more conscientiously on the streets? How can you learn to be more tenacious and “work your themes to exhaustion”? How can we learn to apply our photography to become more of a self-portrait of ourselves? How can we spend more time “living” with our cameras, and making it an extension of ourselves? How can we better show “authenticity”, a sense of place, and a sense of time with our photos? How can we be more open-minded with our street photography?

There are all questions we can ponder— and learn how to become more loving, empathetic, and conscientious street photographers.



18

## ELLIOTT ERWITT

If you are not familiar with the work of Elliott Erwitt, you have definitely seen many of Elliott Erwitt's iconic work all around the globe. As one of the original Magnum members and former president, he has one of the longest spanning photography careers- spanning over 50 years.

What I most appreciate about Elliott Erwitt is his wry sense of humor when looking at the world-- as well as his straightforward and nonsensical philosophies about photography. When sharing his thoughts and advice, I think he is one of the most practical and helpful- especially based on his decades of experience.



# 1. Don't plan too much

I think that personally as a street photographer, sometimes I fall into a trap of planning too much. I generally try to focus my attentions in projects (having a pre-conceived project in mind when shooting in the streets) but I often find it also takes away from the shooting experience at times. I think it is all a balance: one needs to work on projects and be focused, but at the same time not plan too much.

Erwitt shares his thoughts on how he doesn't plan too much before going out to shoot:

Interviewer: As an on-going project, is your study of dogs a way of documenting the relationship between animals and humans?

Erwitt: I don't start out with any specific interests, I just react to what I see. I don't know that I set out to take pictures of dogs; I have a lot of pictures of people and quite a few of cats. But dogs seem to be more sympathetic.

**Takeaway point:**

Erwitt has a fascinating way of editing his work and creating books. His methodology is that he just goes out and shoots whatever he finds interesting, and after looking at his archives of images-- then he creates books/projects based on the shots he already took.

I personally prefer a more methodological approach (starting off loose with an idea, but then pursuing it more diligently) but I think there is also merit in the way that Erwitt works.

I think at the end of the day, it all depends on your personality. If you prefer to have more of a goal, structure, and pattern-- then working in a project-based mindset may be advantageous to you. However if you consider yourself more of a free spirit and don't like to work feeling restrained- the Erwitt way of just reacting to what you see may be better for you.

I recommend you to try experimenting both approaches (and even combining them) and seeing what works best for you.

## 2. Wander around

One of the best things about street photography is to be a flaneur-- someone who wanders around without a specific destination in mind.

Based on my travels, I have found the most beautiful and scenic places this way. Erwitt also shares how he enjoys just wandering when going out to take photos in the streets:

Interviewer: How do you approach a city like that - do you plan something particular or just wander and watch?

Erwitt: I just wander around. Having been raised in Italy myself, in Milan, I have a particular affinity for the country. I come at least two or three times a year - Italian is my first language. This book is just random pictures of Rome - there is no shortage of books about Rome but this will be more personal, there'll be monuments, there'll be Coliseums, of course, but there'll be people, life!

### Takeaway point:

I think that one thing that all street photographers should avoid is being tour-

ists. One of the worst things about being a tourist is that it is too predictable and no fun. Sure you will be able to see all the famous monuments and sights-- but those rarely make interesting photos.

Rather, the next time you travel or hit the streets-- let your curiosity lead you. Go down roads that may seem a bit foreign, and you might be lucky enough to stumble upon great street photography shots (that nobody else has shot before).

## 3. Don't just take photos of people

I think that as street photographers, we often forget to take photos not of people. I think that the best street photographs generally include people, but they don't necessarily have to.

Some of the best photos of Elliott Erwitt don't include any people at all- but show as he mentions, "...the manifestation of people":

Interviewer: People are your main interest?

Erwitt: The manifestation of people, whether it's actual people or what people do, it's the same thing.

What exactly does Erwitt mean by the "manifestation of people?" He is talking about taking photos that show you humanity-- whether it be photos of the actual people or not.

For example, one of the most powerful photos that I have seen by Erwitt is a photo of Jesus on the cross next to a PEPSI advertisement. To me, it is a critique on Western society. Who in their right mind would put an advertisement of sugary water next to Jesus?

#### **Takeaway point:**

When you are on the streets, don't just focus all your attention and energy to people. Rather, look for elements that might juxtapose each other and make a statement about society. This can be manifested through billboards, of things you find on the ground, urban landscapes, and other messages you might find.

## 4. Don't take things too seriously

When one thinks about Magnum, some adjectives that come to mind are: hardcore, gritty, and raw. One might think about Robert Capa crawling on his chest in the mud, avoiding gunshots and grenades, to get shots of the soldiers in action.

However Erwitt (although he was a younger contemporary of Capa, Cartier-Bresson, and others) his style was vastly different. He didn't go out and take photos in conflicts or war-- but his photos tended to be more playful, humorous, and amusing.

Erwitt mentions in interviews that his colleagues in Magnum are generally seen as more "serious" photographers-- who photograph more "serious" events. However Erwitt tries to not take himself too seriously:

Interviewer: You often seem to be having fun with your photographs, do you find it a playful medium or have you turned it into one for yourself?

Erwitt: Well, I'm not a serious photographer like most of my colleagues. That is to say, I'm serious about not being serious.

**Takeaway point:**

To be a great street photographer, don't feel that you need to be hardcore like Bruce Gilden, William Klein, or Garry Winogrand and shoot head-on and in-your-face. Rather, follow your own heart and approach.

If you want to create more amusing and humorous street photographs that aren't so serious-- go ahead. If you don't like taking photos of people and mostly of objects go ahead. If you enjoy taking photos of the urban landscape-- go ahead.

Don't take yourself and your street photography too seriously-- and remember at the end of the day you want to enjoy yourself.

## 5. Use different cameras for different things

One of the big questions that gets thrown around a lot is the debate be-

tween shooting digitally versus film. People from both camps generally argue on the pros and cons-- and ultimate what is "better."

I feel that at the end of the day, what camera, lens, film, or digital is a personal choice. And you don't need to be stuck in the mindset that it has to be one way or another.

For example, Erwitt shoots both digitally and with film. The way he balances both is that he uses digital when shooting his commercial work, and uses film for personal work:

Interviewer: One of today's main discussion points amongst photographers is about the use of digital photography; do you use digital cameras?

Erwitt: I do use digital cameras - but only for assigned work; for my own work, I don't. A digital camera is a lot more practical and more convenient than film when you have to deliver a project."

**Takeaway point:**

When I started shooting street photography, I first used digital cameras and



loved the learning process and the instant feedback. It taught me a lot about the technical aspects of photography, and the fundamentals. I shot digitally the first 5 years this way, and loved every moment of it.

However around 2 years ago, I stumbled upon shooting street photography on film-- and haven't turned back. I prefer the challenge of shooting on film, the aesthetic, as well as the excitement of not seeing what photos you got (until you get them processed).

Ultimately I don't think that shooting street photography on film will make everyone a better street photographer-- but I can personally vouch it has helped me a ton. It has taught me patience when it comes to editing (I generally wait 3-4 months before processing my film), technical skills (I shoot fully manually on my film Leica), as well as discipline (taking photos of things more mindfully).

However at the end of the day, I still shoot digitally and on film. I use digital when taking fun snapshots of friends

and family, slices from my everyday life, as well as what I am eating for breakfast. However I shoot all of my personal street photography work on film- and prefer the process.

So at the end of the day- I would say it isn't about shooting either film or digital. It is about embracing both mediums and using them for different things.

So if you shoot only with film, perhaps it is a good idea to bust out your iPhone when taking photos of your cappuccino. And if you only shoot digital on the streets, it might be fun to take the opposite approach and only shoot snapshots of friends and family on film. Experiment and have fun.

## 6. Fame is often beyond your own power

Erwitt has shot some of the most iconic photos in history-- from the times of segregation (think of his "colored water fountain photo"), famous actors/actresses (think Marilyn Monroe), as well as the best dog photos.

However when it comes to creating an iconic image or becoming famous as a photographer, much of it is out of your control.

For example, many of Erwitt's shots are so famous because he happened to be alive during some of the most eventful things in history (like his photo of Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, the chief of the Soviet Union). Not only that, but because some of his photos happened to be used at the right time-- they have been now widely circulated and part of the public consciousness:

Interviewer: An iconic picture is probably taken in an exact time, in a rare moment. What is necessary to shoot an iconic picture?

Erwitt: I do not think that you get up in the morning with the goal to take an iconic picture. It simply does not work that way. Perhaps you get lucky enough to get a picture that is good and that gets good use and is then seen by many people. I suppose a picture has to be seen by many people before it can be iconic. That is part of the definition.

Interviewer: You are the photographer known for many iconic pictures. How did that happen?

Erwitt: I take pictures, some of them get recognized, some of them get used and some of them get used a lot because the picture happens to be of an important subject or an important person. There are many reasons why a picture might become iconic. And not all of them are necessarily good.

Erwitt also shares the importance of luck in many different ways:

Interviewer: Have you had luck with taking many pictures?

Erwitt: Well, luck is certainly always been part of my budget. Absolutely, yes.

Interviewer: But you never can rely on it.

Erwitt: That is true. You cannot rely on it. But can you rely on a lot in general? No. Some people are just luckier than others.

Interviewer: How much luck does a photographer need?

Erwitt: Luck is always important and of course it depends on what it is that you do. If you are a war photographer, luck is really very important because you might get killed. When you are a studio photographer, it is of course a different kind of luck. These questions are quite subjective.

**Takeaway point:**

I am not saying that it is simply luck that helped Erwitt become a photographer with many memorable images. It was certainly skill plus luck that helped bring him where he is-- as one of the master contemporary photographers.

Many of us struggle to get our images seen to a wide public. When I first started off in street photography, I remember when I would struggle to get even 50 views on a single photo of mine on Flickr. I would spam all the street photography groups that I could find on flickr-- and hope that I would get people to comment and "favorite" my image.

However now fortunately through my blog- I have gained a strong following on social media and Flickr. Now

most of the photos I post get thousands of views- and many more comments and favorites I could have even imagined to get even a few years ago.

However at the end of the day, it is the popularity of my blog that has brought me a following on social media-- and less on the photos themselves. Not only that, but even my blog becoming popular has been a huge stroke of luck (when I started this blog, there were very few active blogs on street photography).

So realize that in life (and especially in photography) there is so much luck involved that is beyond your control. My advice? Don't worry so much about gaining social media fame. Rather, strive to impress yourself. Also meet a few other like-minded photographers and share your work with them. Even in the time of Garry Winogrand and Joel Meyerowitz, they only shared their prints with very few people-- and were content with that.

## 7. Focus on content over form

Great photos are a combination of content (what is happening in the frame) as well as form (composition).

One question I often think to myself is: "What is more important? Content or form?"

Surely both are essential-- but at the end of the day, I think it is content that is more crucial than form.

In an interview, Erwitt shares that photographers should focus on the human condition and content over form:

Interviewer: What is your biggest wish for the future of photography?

Erwitt: My wish for the future of photography is that it might continue to have some relevance to the human condition and might represent work that evokes knowledge and emotions. That photography has content rather than just form. And I hope that there will be enough produce to balance out the visual garbage that one sees in our current life.

### Takeaway point:

There are a gazillion street photographs on the internet, most of them aren't very good. Even out all the street photographs I have ever taken, I think that I have probably only gotten around 2 good shots I am proud of. (my shot of the guy sleeping at the beach in Marseille, my photo of the red cowboy in LA). What I love about the shots is that I feel they convey a meaning and mood - and both having strong form (composition and framing).

However in street photography, one of the most difficult things is to capture both content and form powerfully in the same image. We often find fascinating characters in the street and take photos of them-- but the compositions may not be so good. On the other hand, we might take well-composed photos of a street scene, but there is nothing going on in the photo-- it is boring and without soul.

At the end of the day, I agree with Erwitt that we should as street photographers put more emphasis on content over form. I feel that photos that evoke



emotions and the human condition are far more powerful and meaningful than just photos with good composition.

## 8. Put your photos on the ground

Erwitt has shot hundreds and thousands of photos in his career. How does he manage to look at all at them at once, and sequence and edit them for books? His tip: put them on the ground. In an interview regarding his new "Kolor" book, he shares his methodology:

Interviewer: How did you skim through over half a million images to select the 420 that were included?

I had help from a team of two. Most of these images were in storage. We had been at it for a long time. We made little prints and began putting them on the floor to begin sequencing. We were looking for flow. We began to cut down our selections from there.

Interviewer: Regarding layout, how did you decide to place the photos together?

Erwitt: I once again worked with designer Stuart Smith, who came in from London. We began laying everything out on the floor to see what we had.

### Takeaway point:

The next time you want to edit your photos or select them for a book or an exhibition a good tip is to print them out as small 4x6 prints, and lay them on the ground.

Move around your prints in the order you imagine to see them in a book, and see which images flow together well-- while what other photos look side-by-side.

Another option: I often edit and sequence my shots on my iPad, as I enjoy the feeling of moving around my images with my finger. But at the end of the day, using prints is a far better method.

## 9. Focus on the next shot

One of the questions that are often asked in interviews with photographers are: "What is your favorite photo?" or something of the sort. Most photographers I know generally have a personal

favorite photo (or a certain image that is meaningful to them).

However Erwitt takes the opposite stance and shares that he doesn't have a personal favorite photo-- and rather he is more interested in the next photo he is going to take:

Misha: David asks: What was the most interesting shoot or subject you ever had to photograph? And what's your favorite locale to work?

Elliott: The most interesting one is the one that is the next one, I hope. Which is going to take place in Scotland in the months of June and August. I know it's going to be the best one, even though I haven't done it yet.

Misha: Do you have a favorite picture of yours?

Elliott: I have a few pictures that I like, but I hope I haven't taken my favorite pictures yet.

Misha: Is there anything out there that really makes you happy or proud knowing that you've done it, that you have it, after all these years?

Elliott: You can say that my pictures are like my children and I don't have a favorite.

Whenever I hear photographers who say they don't have a personal favorite photo it always feels like a cop-out to me. However I can still understand how having the mentality of not having a favorite photo is productive.

For example, I feel if you do have a favorite photo you become satisfied with your work, and don't work hard to hustle to get an even better shot.

Erwitt, with his career spanning over several decades has certainly used this framing to his advantage. Because he finds the most interesting photo the next photo he is going to take, he continues to strive to go out-- and hunt for that next photo.

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't become attached to your current photos or portfolio-- as it might prevent you from going out and taking even better photos.

Look forward to the photos you are going to take, rather than the photos you have already taken.

## 10. Hone your skills of observation

One of the things I love most about Erwitt's work is that they show his immense curiosity and observation about the world. Some of his most famous images-- anyone could have taken the photo (I'm thinking of his shot of the bird next to a water facet that look like one another). Rather than having fancy cameras and technical know-how, it comes down to having a sharp eye.

Erwitt shares that a photographer should always be keen of his or her environment-- and never stop noticing what is around you:

Misha: Jennifer asks: You have been traveling around the world with a camera for almost seven decades. Do you still see pictures all around you? Or do you ever get tired of noticing?

Elliott: Noticing possible pictures — with or without carrying a camera — is

fundamental to any working photographer. I would never get tired of noticing, although I would probably not be moved to take pictures that repeat and repeat.

Although Erwitt doesn't have a favorite photograph of his-- he has a favorite photographer, being the great Henri Cartier-Bresson. Erwitt describes the shot that got him started in photography ["The Quai St. Bernard, near the Gare d'Austerlitz train station."] and how he loved the emotions the photo evoked.

The Quai St. Bernard, near the Gare d'Austerlitz train station. © Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos

But more than that, how it was an act of observation which made the photo great and how he realized he could do something similarly as well:

Misha: Who's your favorite photographer, living or dead?

Elliott: The gold standard of photography remains, as it has always been, Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Misha: Do you have a favorite picture of his?

Elliott: Yes, I do. It's a picture that sort of got me started in photography. It's a picture that's hard to describe in words. It's a picture he took in 1932 at a railway station.

Misha: The one with the lines from a concrete overpass converging with the rails below and two people in the frame? ["The Quai St. Bernard, near the Gare d'Austerlitz train station."]

Elliott: Yes

Misha: What was it about that photo that made you want to go out and take pictures? Could you elaborate a little about Cartier-Bresson's photos and how they influenced your interest in photography? Was he a mentor like [Robert] Capa?

Elliott: The picture seemed evocative and emotional. Also, a simple observation was all that it took to produce it. I thought, if one could make a living out of doing such pictures, that would be desirable. Capa was [a mentor] in that he liked the pictures I showed him and thought I might be a useful addition to the nascent agency Magnum.

### Takeaway point:

One of the things that is the most beautiful about street photography is that it doesn't rely on having an expensive camera or exotic lenses. Rather, it comes down to having an observant and curious eye-- for people and the world around you.

Therefore cultivate your vision and way of seeing the world. I recommend you to always carry a camera with you-- because you never know when the best street photo opportunities will present themselves to you.

A fun exercise: pretend like you are an alien from another planet-- and you have come to the planet Earth for the first time. Imagine how weird you would see human beings-- and the urban environment they built themselves around them. As an alien-- what would you find fascinating and interesting?

Keep that mindset to always be amazed by what you see around you.

## 11. Make time to take photos



Whenever I talk to photographers (either professional or amateur) they always say how they wish they had more time to take photos.

However in-between having a family, having a significant other, having a full-time job (in an office or even as a photographer), it becomes difficult to make time to go out and shoot.

Even Er Witt shares that the most important thing in his life is how to manage his time-- so he spends more time out there shooting. He admits life gets busy, but one should never forget what is the most important-- to photograph:

Misha: What's important to you now?

Elliott: The important thing is management of time, because there's so much going around. There's so many things happening that take your concentration away from things that you want to be doing. What I want to be doing is taking pictures. Management of time becomes more complicated as your photographic life gets complicated.

**Takeaway point:**

I have always been fascinated with time-management techniques and how to become more efficient. However over the years, it isn't about cramming more things to do into your schedule. Rather, it is about removing things from your schedule-- things that aren't that important.

For example, when I worked a full-time job at my office, I would always make lunchtime my time to shoot on the streets of the 3rd street promenade in Santa Monica (I worked there). However before I went out, there would always be something that held me back (oh, I need to send this one last email-- or I need to add this one last point to my presentation). If I succumbed to work, I would end up having a "working lunch" and just have some nuts and Redbull at my desk-- and never go out and shoot.

I then realized it was important to make shooting a priority-- and that I could fit everything in afterwards (which was less important).

There is a fun story about a zen master who had an empty jar and asked his

student to fill it up as much as he could with a bunch of big rocks, medium-sized rocks, small rocks, and sand. In the end, the student figured out the best way was to start off with the big rocks, and fill in the sand at the end.

The big rocks are a metaphor for the most important things in our life: our family, loves, and passions (photography). The sand at the end are emails, Facebook messages, and busywork.

So always make time to shoot by making it a priority. If you don't make it a priority, you will never find time to shoot.

## 12. Let your style find you

One question we often search for as photographer is how to find our own personal vision or style. Rather than having grand philosophical ideas about his work-- he takes a no-nonsense down-to-earth approach: he just goes out and takes photos and lets other people dictate what his style is:

Interviewer: Do you remember a point when your personal style had devel-

oped enough for you to stop trying to emulate your photographic heroes?

Erwitt: I am not conscious of a personal style of mine. I just like to take pictures. My 'visual' heroes are mostly painters. But I do not paint.

Interviewer: Despite having your own very distinctive style, there is nevertheless a great feel of mid twentieth century 'America' in your photography, even if the subject is elsewhere. They fit in with Robert Frank, Bruce Davidson, Lee Friedlander et al, even Harry Callahan – did you ever feel yourself stylistically aligned with your contemporaries?

Erwitt: 'Stylistically aligned' is the least of my concerns. Of the people you mention, I like much of their work, and some I don't. Form and content is what counts for me.

### **Takeaway point:**

I think in photography it is very important to have a certain aesthetic style (using similar equipment, post-processing, black and white or color) as well as subject matter you end up shooting.

However I think when it comes to finding your style, the more you hunt for it the more it will run away from you. An organic way of finding your style is simply going out and taking strong photos (with good form and content) and then letting your style find yourself.

So if you aren't sure what your personal style or vision is-- just go out and shoot. Over time, you will accumulate enough strong images that depict what subject matter interest you-- and your personal vision. Then from there, you can start better understanding your photography and pursuing your vision even more strongly.

### 13. Focus on making books

Most of us (myself included) are mostly "online photographers" in which we take our photos and the majority of images we share just end up online and on social media networks. This generally causes us to focus on the single image-- rather than on projects and sets of images.

Although Erwitt does shoot very much in a "single photo" manner-- his ul-

timate ambition for his photography is to produce photo books:

Interviewer: So you've done more than 40 books now.

Erwitt: For the exhibit, we counted how many books might be in the showcase there, and we came up with 45. There may be more, I don't know. But I would say my important books or major books, from my point of view, are the ones from the last 10 years.

Interviewer: Do you enjoy putting the books together?

Erwitt: Well, I try to justify my existence by doing [them]. Making books is a very specific kind of activity. It's not really a collection of your best pictures—although it is—but it's also a way of presenting your work so that it's not repetitive, so that it flows, and so that it makes sense in a book. Working for a book is different than working for an exhibition or working for a magazine story, or for an essay.

**Takeaway point:**

One direction I am trying to take my photography is to upload fewer images on the web as single-images, and focus on projects and books. When I die, I doubt anyone will check out my Flickr, Facebook, or website. However if I have a book published, it will be able to live on for a much longer period of time (who knows if social media will be around a few decades from now).

So if you find yourself being stuck in just making photos for the internet-- I also recommend you to try focusing on making a book. And you don't need to get a fancy publisher either. I love self-publishing platforms like Blurb because you can still make a quality book without investing tens of thousands of dollars. Blurb and similar services has made book-making much more democratic.

The way I recommend putting a book together is to look at lots of photo books. Find photo-books that you admire, and see how they are put together. How did the photographer sequence his/her images? Which photos are big, and which are small? Why did a photographer pair two photos together? Are the

pairing images similar or dissimilar?  
How does the photo-book flow?

Keep all these questions in your mind-- and pursue making a book of your own. Making a book is the ultimate expression of a photographer.

## 14. Don't be sloppy

One of the questions that Erwitt has been asked a lot in interviews is his thoughts about shooting film versus digital. He has pretty strong opinions on this. First of all, he shoots all his personal work on film. However for commercial work, he shoots it all in digital.

He personally prefers film and doesn't hate on digital (simply because it isn't film). However he notices that a lot of photographers nowadays are far too sloppy and don't think enough when taking photos. He feels that digital has made it a bit too easy to take photos-- in which people have stopped thinking as much:

Erwitt: The problem with digital photography is that it's too easy. When things get too easy people get sloppy.



And sloppiness is not a good thing in photography—even though photography is fairly simple stuff. When it was non-digital it still took a little bit of effort and thought. But now I think a chimpanzee with a digital camera can get pretty good results as well, but at least visible results. And I think that is the problem. Too easy, too much, and maybe not too much thinking behind it.

What Ervitt ultimately hates is the "sloppiness" that many photographers have taking photos without thought of composition, framing, and the content in the frame.

I feel that one of the beauties of photography is now that anyone can take a technically good photo (even with a smartphone). However just because you have the tools to make a good photo-- doesn't mean you will take good photos. Ervitt encourages us to work hard in constructing our life's vision through photography:

Misha: The playing field seems to have changed. Everybody who owns a

cellphone is a photographer now. Do you think that's going to change things?

Elliott: No, everybody is a photographer and that's going to continue to be. It's very seductive. But by the same token, everybody who has pencil is not necessarily a fine writer. It doesn't mean you really have to know that much to get a picture. I mean, photography is not brain surgery. It's not that complicated. It's easier now than it was before, but before it wasn't that hard. It was reasonably easy. It's not the ease; it's what you do and how you do it and how you construct your life and your vision.

### **Takeaway point:**

It doesn't ultimately matter if you shoot street photography digitally or on film. You can take terrible photos on either medium, and take great photos on either medium.

However regardless of what equipment you use-- try hard to be deliberate and don't be sloppy. Don't take photos mindlessly. Have a certain vision and intent when you are taking photos. Be de-

liberate with your framing and how you position your subject in your frame.

The more you focus your photography, over time--your life and vision will be constructed around it.

## Conclusion

Erwitt has photographed for over 70 years, and has created an incredibly strong body of work over his years. However he hasn't ceased to photograph. His life is to photograph-- and he makes it his priority in life.

Erwitt didn't make out to become a great or famous photographer. Rather, he saw it as an enjoyable activity-- and let his photography be an extension of himself. He is naturally curious, quirky, and humorous-- and used his camera to capture that in the world around him.

I think what we can all learn from Erwitt is to not take ourselves too seriously as photographers. Let us simply go out, be curious, and explore the world (with camera in hand). Everything else like finding your style, finding an audience-- will come afterwards.



19

## EUGENE ATGET

Eugene Atget has always been sort of an enigma to me. When I started to delve into the history of street photography, a lot of people credited him to being one of the “fathers of street photography.” But when I first looked at his work, I was a bit confused. Most of his photos didn't have any people in them. His photos were mostly of the architecture of Paris: doorways, arches, door handles, street facades, and the streets themselves.

I always thought that street photography had to include people in it. But Atget was talked about thoroughly in "Bystander: A History of Street Photography" by ac-

claimed photo historian Colin Westerbeck and by the great Joel Meyerowitz.

Westerbeck further explains the relevance of Eugene Atget by writing the following:

“While stop action images of people are bound to figure prominently in many collection of street photographs, this book also contains many pictures in which there are no people at all. The most salient examples are to be found in the works of Eugene atget. Yet even he was, through implication and inference, trying to show us life on the streets. Suggesting presence in these midst of absence, he was attempting to reveal the character of the street as it inherited in the setting itself. Like every other practitioner of this genre, he wandered the streets with his camera, looking for what would they be called photo opportunities. More important, he'd was also like every other street photographer in his readiness to respond to errant details, chance juxtapositions, odd non sequiturs, peculiarities of scale, the quirkiness of life on the streets.”

Did Atget even consider himself a street photographer? Certainly not. In no records of him did he ever call himself a street photographer (the term was coined centuries after he even took photos). Not only that, but Atget saw himself as a “collector of documents” rather than being an artistic photographer.

However the more I studied Atget, the more I began to appreciate his work. First of all, nobody was as fervent as Atget when it came to completing his “life's task” of documenting every facet of Paris. Although he sold his photos of Paris to museums and publications to make a living (he was probably the worlds first stock photographer) he did it all out of his own initiative and drive. At the end of his life when he was in his 70's he was able to say proudly that his work was finished.

Through this article I want to better express some of the lessons I learned from Eugene Atget, both photographically and philosophically. Note that these are all personal interpretations, as Atget never spoke about his photography or explained any of it.



## 1. Be self-driven

The incredible thing about the work of Eugene Atget was how self driven he was. On a nearly daily basis, he rode the bus around Paris, lugging his large-format wooden camera (8x10) which with the tripod weighed over 40 pounds. He made it his life's mission to document every facet of Paris.

Atget left no stone uncovered or detail overlooked. It is estimated that his archive of images is over 8,000 (not much to a digital photographer, but a massive archive considering he shot large-format entirely).

What spurred him to embark on this journey to photograph Paris? Well historically by the late 1890s there were many citizens who were concerned about the preservation of the historic districts in the city. That led to the establishment of the "Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris", which encouraged preservation of the historic aspects of the city. This caused there to be a revival of an interest in the "old Paris" which stirred a "Romantic revival." With this

interest in the historic parts of Paris, Eugene Atget had plenty of clients to supply photographs with.

The question I am not sure about (not sure if anyone has the answer) is what actually spurred him to start taking photos. He was a struggling stage actor for a while (people say this is what made him a "romantic") and he was also known to be a painter.

Regardless, his actions showed his philosophy of tenacity and hard work. He photographed Paris for decades, using the same equipment-- to capture the city as faithfully as he could in its entirety.

I have been to Paris a few times, and some of the local Parisians describe Paris as a city that you can always find something new. Even people who have lived their entire lives there admit they haven't seen all of Paris. This makes me think that nobody knew Paris as well as Atget (at least during his time alive).

While Atget never talked about his own images, he shared his life's vision for his work in this excerpt:

“For more than twenty years by my own work and personal initiative, I have gathered from all the old streets of Vieux Paris photographic plates, 18 x 24 format, artistic documents of the beautiful civil architecture of the 16th to the 19th century: the old hotels, historic or curious houses, beautiful facades, beautiful doors, beautiful woodwork, door knockers, old fountains... This vast artistic and documentary collection is today complete. I can truthfully say that I possess all of Vieux Paris.” - Eugene Atget

### **Takeaway point:**

I would say personally I am less inspired by Atgets' photographs and more by his passion and hustle.

I think as a photographer one of the most difficult things is to have a strong vision and to have the tenacity to actually carry it out.

One great quote I read about the importance of execution of art (rather than just having a vision):

“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.

Therefore I think one lesson we can all learn from Atget is to have a grand vision with your photography (it can be as simple as documenting every facet of the city you currently live in) and having the hard work ethic to actually go out every day and shoot it.

With life and work this becomes difficult. We are bogged down by work, obligations, and other duties which tie us down. But rather than trying to accommodate photography to our busy schedules, why not try to make our busy schedules accommodate to our photography?

Make photography the center point of your life and hopefully one day (like Atget) we can proudly say that our life's work has been accomplished.

## **2. Make your photos benefit society**

“Now that I am approaching old age—that is to say, seventy years old—and have neither heir nor successor, I am worried and tormented about the future

of this beautiful collection of negatives, which could fall into hands unaware of its import and ultimately disappear, without benefiting anyone.” Eugene Atget, (1920)

Philosophically, I feel that the purpose of taking a photo is to share it. After all, what is the purpose of taking a photo (or doing anything in life) if it won't benefit society as a whole?

While I do believe it is important to shoot for yourself (and not to simply please others) I feel that as street photographers we have a duty and obligation to create images that will somehow help society.

Now this can be as simple as creating aesthetically beautiful street photography (with nice light and compositions) to show our viewers the beauty of everyday life. Or we can make it our mission to be more of a documenter or historian like Eugene Atget to create images that our children in the future can reference to better understand the past. Or capture “socially-conscious street photography” that shows the ills and unfairness of soci-

ety (different socio-economic and racial factors) to make a statement about the world.

### **Takeaway point:**

Understand why you take photographs. Realize that the point of a photograph is to ultimately share it-- and hopefully benefit others.

So ask yourself: “Why do I photograph and who will this ultimately benefit?” This will give you more clarity and purpose with your street photography.

## **3. Focus on “reality unadorned”**

"The impact was immediate and tremendous. There was a sudden flash of recognition - the shock of reality unadorned. The subjects were not sensational, but nevertheless shocking in their very familiarity. The real world, seen with wonderment and surprise, was mirrored in each print. Whatever means Atget used to project the image did not intrude between subject and observer." - Berenice Abbott on the shock she had when she first saw Eugene Atget's work

One thing that was quite revolutionary in Atget's work at the time is that he didn't romanticize his subject (although many people from the "romantic school" were inspired by him). He shot them head-on, without any fancy tricks or gimmicks, and printed them faithfully.

There is so much beauty in life, especially in the everyday things. There is inherent beauty in a doorway, a door handle, the pattern of stones on the street, of a rail. However the problem is that these things are so ordinary and mundane that we often overlook it.

However imagine what Atget did. He looked at these everyday ordinary objects with fascination and curiosity. He took his massive 8x10 camera, carefully extended the tripod legs, turned his camera to his subject, focused, calculated the aperture and shutter speed, put himself under the black cloth, held his breath, and took a photograph. He put all this consideration when photographing something as simple as a door handle.

Of course taking photos of ordinary objects is much easier nowadays with

our iPhones and automatic settings. But it is truly the slow and methodical nature of the large-format camera of Atget which allowed him to really consider his subject--no matter how ordinary.

### **Takeaway point:**

I think that street photographers often look and hunt for the sensational and extraordinary. We look for people doing backflips, double rainbows in the background, or surreal situations.

However I think we should also focus on "reality unadorned." To look at our everyday environments and objects and concentrate on them. Taking a second to consider them for their intrinsic beauty however simple they may be.

I think William Eggleston and Martin Parr are great sources of inspiration when it comes to photographing ordinary objects and making them fascinating. Martin Parr often gives photography students the advice to find boring things and make interesting photos out of them.

## **4. Avoid famous landmarks**



"Atget's Paris was an ancient city of small scale. He rarely photographed large buildings or famous landmarks, and he avoided such modern monuments as the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe. His Paris was a private city, with no palaces, and few churches." - Eugene Atget and old Paris

When it comes to photographing while in the streets or traveling, it is easy to get drawn to the iconic landmarks. If you are in London, you might want to photograph around Big Ben. If you are in Tokyo, it might be Shibuya crossing. Paris, it might be the Eiffel Tower.

Although Atget photographed the city of Paris extensively, he focused on the city on a "smaller scale." He avoided the iconic landmarks and instead put his attention on parts of the city that was less adorned.

### **Takeaway point:**

When it comes to photographing your own city or when photographing while traveling, steer clear of the touristy hotspots and landmarks. Rather, take a

path off the beaten road-- and pursue photographing where not many other people have photographed.

This means tossing away your map, and simply following where your curiosity leads you. Talk to locals, ask them where they generally hang out (away from the tourists) and I guarantee you will find much more interesting and personal photographs.

## **5. Avoid publicity**

"Little is known of Atget's life, because he was not considered an artist, by others or even by himself. In 1926, Man Ray reproduced an Atget photograph a group of pedestrians shading their eyes as they looked at the sky, watching an eclipse on the cover of a Surrealist magazine. When he told Atget of his intention, the older man replied, "Don't put my name on it. These are simply documents I make." Nearly 50 years later, the self-promoting Man Ray was still amused as he told this story, explaining, "You see, he didn't want any publicity." Man Ray described Atget as "a very simple man, almost naïve, like a Sunday

painter, you might say, but he worked every day." - Luminous Lint: Biography on Eugene Atget

One of the ills that we fall victim to (myself included) is searching for fame and popularity for our photography. This is self-destructive in many different ways. First of all, it can compromise our own self-vision that we have for our photography (we might get suckered into creating photos that our audience like, rather than we like). Not only that, but fame can be distracting and take us away from our work.

Atget preferred to be low-key when it came to his photography. As shown from the excerpt above, he didn't want his name on his photos for a front-cover of a magazine and wanted to avoid publicity.

He also referred to his photos as simply "documents that he makes"-- rather than them being art pieces. Atget was very clear why he was photographing: not to earn critical acclaim but to create documents of the city of Paris for future people to appreciate and admire.

Not only that, but during his entire life he never exhibited his work. Many of us strive to have exhibitions of our own, yet this master never made it a point to show his work publicly.

### **Takeaway point:**

It is in our blood and genes to be appreciated by others in society. However too much preoccupation with fame and popularity is unhealthy and will ultimately compromise our work.

Who knows what Atget would have done if he was born in this social media age? He might have a simple portfolio page for his photography, but he probably wouldn't Instagram and upload every photo he took to social media and adding hundreds of tags on Flickr and submitting his images to dozens of Flickr groups.

I imagine Atget would simply focus on his photography, and not worry about how many likes or favorites he would get on his images.

A practical tip to not worry about fame or recognition in your street photography : take a social media fast. In-

stead of fasting on food (avoiding red meat, desserts, etc) take a break from social media. For starters, you can take a month off social media. So for a month, don't upload any of your photos online. You might even try longer: 6 months or even a year.

I personally took a social media fast for about 10 months and found it to be the most refreshing thing ever. It helped me focus on my own work, rather than worrying about how popular my images would be online. And I think this ultimately helped my photography tremendously (in terms of focus, and also editing my work to the best photos).

## 6. Avoid artistic pretentiousness

I think as photographers we think it is important to have our work presented on the the finest papers, framed with fancy frames, and in respectable institutions.

First of all, he focused on his photography and ignored photographic clubs and institutions used to promote work:

“Throughout his career, Atget firmly embraced the milieu of the archive and rejected any artistic self-consciousness. He failed to join the numerous photo clubs or societies that flourished with the expansion of the medium. He insisted more than once to Man Ray that his job was to provide 'documents, documents for artists'.” (Except continues below)

Atget also presented his work very plainly and simply:

“Atget eschewed any 'artistic pretensions' when presenting his sample copies to potential clients, using torn and mended prints and reusing album covers. Such presentation announced their status as simply catalogues of content that could be modified to suit a wide range of clients. At one point during the time that the artist was in correspondence with the V&A, the Museum asked for a quote for photographs produced in the more stable platinotype process. Atget refused, explaining that his workshop was not set up to produce anything but albumen prints for libraries, artists and editors to use for phototype and pho-

togravure methods of reproduction. In this way, Atget insisted upon his status as the document maker, resisting the more expensive plantinotype process, which was later often associated with art photography” - Luminous Lint: Biography on Eugene Atget

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't get caught up in artistic pretentiousness when it comes to street photography and your own work. Embrace simplicity and plainness.

For example, you don't need to shoot street photography with a Leica to get good images. Your compact, iPhone, or whatever camera you own will do.

You don't need to print out your photos with expensive inks, expensive papers, and in pro labs. Embrace simple and cheap prints that you can readily get at drugstores, online, so you can share them widely. Forget about “limited edition prints” and wanting to sell them online for money.

Don't add fancy borders to your images, watermark your photos, or feel that they need to be exhibited at fancy places.

Get cheap and simple frames from IKEA and see if your local coffee shop would be interested in featuring them.

Street photography at its core is the most democratic form of photography. So let's embrace that, avoid pretentiousness, and focus on being simple and down-to-earth with our work.

## **Conclusion**

We all have a large deal to thank Eugene Atget. For one, he inspired leagues of master photographers such as Man Ray, Berenice Abbott to Walker Evans, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams. If Atget didn't create the work he did, his inspiration wouldn't have profoundly influenced generations of photographers to come.

In today's digital age, it might be difficult to relate to Atget and his work. Very few of us (if any) have ever used a large-format camera in street photography (myself included) in the streets. We have no idea what it is like to lug around a 40-pound camera (and we complain about our “heavy DSLRS”). Not only that, but his photos (at first glance) just



look like a bunch of snapshots of architecture and buildings.

So I think it is important for us to consider the historical context of his pioneering work in street photography. He was one of the very few and earliest photographers who did so much work in the streets (while his contemporaries were shooting artsy nudes, flowers, fine art).

At the end of the day for me, Atget reminds me how important it is to have a vision for your photography and having the tenacity to execute it with passion and fervor. We should take photos that benefit society as a whole, while not making excuses that we are “too busy” to go out and take photos.

So let's all appreciate and respect the work of Atget and what he did to pioneer the genre of street photography and simply go out and shoot- not worrying about fame, fortune, or external recognition. Let us do our work to benefit others and create historical documents for our future children.



20

## W. EUGENE SMITH

W. Eugene Smith is one of the legends of photography. Although he was notorious for being maniacal, emotionally distant, and unreasonable-- he channeled those energies into being one of the best photographers history has ever seen. I consider his approach to be very similar to that of Steve Jobs.

I hope that this article can help you get a better understanding of W. Eugene Smith, his work, and his philosophies of photography-- to take your own work to new heights:

# 1. Have a purpose for photographing

W. Eugene Smith was a humanitarian photographer. He documented countless wars, social issues, and even put his life on the line in doing so. He wasn't interested in just making pretty photos--he wanted his photos to create an emotional resonance with his viewer, and to bring a certain story to life.

In a rare interview in 1956 with the great portraitist Philippe Halsmann they discuss the point of why W. Eugene Smith photographs the way that he does:

Halsmann: "When do you feel that the photographer is justified in risking his life to take a picture?"

Smith: "I can't answer that. It depends on the purpose. Reason, belief and purpose are the only determining factors. The subject is not a fair measure.

I think the photographer should have some reason or purpose. I would hate to risk my life to take another bloody picture for the Daily News, but if it might change man's mind against war,

then I feel that it would be worth my life. But I would never advise anybody else to make this decision. It would have to be their own decision. For example, when I was on the carrier, I didn't want to fly on Christmas Day because I didn't want to color all the other Christmases for my children."

W. Eugene Smith was often at the front-lines of many conflicts and wars--when his life was literally on the line. But he wasn't putting his life at risk for the sake of it. Rather, he had a clear purpose. He knew exactly what he wanted to capture because he had a reason and a purpose behind his photos.

## Takeaway point:

Often times us as street photographers have a hard time figuring out why we photograph. However this is a very important question to ask ourselves, or else we are just wasting our time.

Are we out there trying to just take snapshots? Or are we trying to capture something deep and meaningful about society? Are we trying to discover ourselves through our photography? Are we

trying to connect with a community or individuals to show their way of life with the rest of the world?

This is a question you can only answer yourself.

## 2. Be respectful

Although W. Eugene Smith was notorious for being aggressive person and a recluse, he was at heart, a humanitarian photographer. He genuinely cared about his subjects, and wanted to photograph to show social injustices and bring light to facts through his photography.

There were many times in which he captured intimate moments. But how could he capture these moments without intruding and being respectful? For example, there was a case in which W. Eugene Smith used a flash to photograph a mourning family. Halsmann challenges Smith in their interview on why he used a flash and decided to "intrude" this emotional moment:

Halsmann: "I remember particularly your pictures of a Spanish wake [above],

of people looking at the dead man's face — how many exposures did you make?"

Smith: "Two, and one to turn on. I didn't wish to intrude."

Halsmann: "Piero Saporiti, the Time-Life correspondent in Spain, told me once that you had used petroleum lamps."

Smith: "Saporiti has a marvelous memory, so imaginative! This was my version of available light. I used a single flash in the place of a candle."

Halsmann. "Here were people in deep sorrow and you were putting flash bulbs in their eyes, disturbing their sorrow. What's the justification of your intrusion?"

Smith: "I think I would not have been able to do this if I had not been ill the day before. I was ill with stomach cramps in a field and a man who was a stranger to me came up and offered me a drink of wine which I did not want, but which out of the courtesy of his kindness, I accepted. And the next day by coincidence, he came rushing to me and said, 'Please, my father has just died, and



we must bury him and will you take me to the place where they fill out the papers?'

And I went with him to the home and I was terribly involved with the sad and compassionate beauty of the wake and when I saw him come close to the door, I stepped forward and said, 'Please sir, I don't want to dishonor this time but may I photograph'" and he said, 'I would be honored.'

W. Eugene Smith continues by sharing that potentially intrusive photos are only justified in having an important purpose:

"I don't think a picture for the sake of a picture is justified — only when you consider the purpose. For example, I photographed a woman giving birth, for a story on a midwife. There are at least two gaps of great pictures in my pictures."

Smith also brings up the point that being human is more important than being a photographer. In certain life-or-death situations, to help your subjects is

more important than just making a photograph:

One is D-Day in the Philippines, of a woman who is struggling giving birth in a village that has just been destroyed by our shelling, and this woman giving birth against this building — my only thought at that time was to help her. If there had been someone else at least as competent to help as I was then, I would have photographed. But as I stood as an altering circumstance — no damn picture is worth it!"

### **Takeaway point:**

As photographers, our purpose is to take photographs that have purpose. However at the same time-- there are situations in which we are put into uncomfortable conditions in terms of ethics. When is it right or wrong to take a photograph?

If we can take a cue from Smith, it is that we need to once again-- be very purposeful when taking a photograph. Are you just taking a photograph in the hope of getting lots of "favorites" or "likes" on Flickr or Facebook? Or are you trying to

say something deeper about humanity through the photograph that you are capturing?

As street photographers, we also dance between the grey line of the ethics of photographing people. However remember at the end of the day, it is important to be a human being first, a photographer second. If there is someone who genuinely doesn't want you to photograph them-- I would respect that.

Also don't just see your subjects as content. They are living, breathing, human beings. Connect with them, treat them with respect, and treat them like how you would like to be treated yourself.

### 3. On posing photos

One fascinating interview question that Halsmann asked Smith is about the ethics of posing a photograph. During this time, the philosophy of Henri Cartier-Bresson was that it was "unethical" to pose any photograph (although some of HCB's most famous photos in history were indeed, staged. You can just

see the contact sheets of the transgender man in Spain).

Smith didn't see it as a problem to pose a photograph, as long as it was to intensify the authenticity of a place or a scene. He elaborates below:

Halsmann: "I remember your picture of a Spanish woman throwing water into the street. Was this staged?"

Smith: "I would not have hesitated to ask her to throw the water. (I don't object to staging if and only if I feel that it is an intensification of something that is absolutely authentic to the place.)"

Halsmann: "Cartier-Bresson never asks for this.... Why do you break this basic rule of candid photography?"

Smith: "I didn't write the rules — why should I follow them? Since I put a great deal of time and research to know what I am about? I ask and arrange if I feel it is legitimate. The honesty lies in my — the photographer's — ability to understand."

**Takeaway point:**

Street photography is generally understood as being about candid photographs taken in public places. However there have also been very famous street photographs taken in history which were posed (and not exactly candid). For example, when William Klein took a photo of a kid with a gun he told the kid: "Look tough!" Another case was in which Diane Arbus took a photograph of kid with a grenade in a park. The kid was looking straight at the camera, with an awareness that he was being photographed (not exactly candid).

I think that street photography is often best when candid-- but it doesn't have to be. As long as you are trying to capture something authentic about the person, I feel it is fine. I think Smith would agree as well.

About 90% of the photos I take in the streets are candid, while 10% of them are posed. I generally take candid photos of people, and sometimes interact with them afterwards and ask to take a posed portrait of them. It is a great chance for me to interact with my subjects, and get to know them better.

There are other cases in which I want to be more respectful to my subject, and ask for their permission to photograph them. I generally have found that a more "genuine" expression shows through them when I ask them not to smile. It is a tip I learned from Charlie Kirk and Martin Parr as people generally don't smile when they are out and about on the streets.

Whether or not you prefer candid or posed images-- just remember, try to gain understanding of your subject and follow your gut.

## 4. Have control over your images

W. Eugene Smith was obsessive when it came to printing his own work. He wouldn't stop until he created what he believed was a "perfect" print. Why was he so obsessive when it came to this? He shares to Halsmann:

Halsmann: "Why do you print your own pictures?"

Smith: "The same reason a great writer doesn't turn his draft over to a secretary... I will retouch."

### **Takeaway point:**

To some people, it is very important to have creative control over how a photograph looks in the end.

Of course now that the majority of us shoot digitally, we no longer print our images--but post-process them. For those of us who do shoot film, either we send it to a lab or process it ourselves.

I personally don't think you have to always post-process or develop your own film. For example, Henri Cartier-Bresson knew how to (but wasn't very interested) in developing and processing his own film. He would also get his work printed by a master printer he trusted. He was more interested in photography.

Personally I don't really process my own work either. For my color work, I send it to Costco and get them to scan it for me (a great deal at \$5.00 USD). For black and white work, of course I develop it myself (sending it to a lab is too

expensive) but I prefer to have someone else do it if I can. I am more interested in photographing.

However I think what we should focus on is consistency in terms of the output of our images. For example, if you shoot digital-- use the same preset or try to simulate the same "look" in your photos every time. If you work in black and white, don't have some photos that have low contrast, high contrast, and others sepia. Keep it consistent.

The same goes with color-- don't make some of your images desaturated, some of your images high-saturation, or add limo effects to only some of your photos. Keep your 'look' consistent.

With you film shooters, I recommend sticking with one type of film and processing method for a long time. I think it is fun to try out new types of films, but in the end-- try to stick to one (once you find one you like). Personally I prefer Kodak Portra 400 (the new one) for color, and Kodak Tri-x for black and white (you can't go wrong). And for your



developing methods, try to use the same chemicals and processing times.

## 5. Take your time

W. Eugene Smith literally put his life into his work-- and it killed him (literally). He often took lots of drugs to keep him constantly producing work and printing his photos-- and did it for his entire life (until he passed away tragically at an early age).

One of the projects that he spent a lot of time and energy was his Pittsburgh project. What was supposed to be a three week project turned out to ~17,000 pictures (~472 rolls of film), in his "Dream Street Pittsburgh Project."

To the disdain of his editors, he kept working on the project-- and refused to stop until he felt that it was complete or finished. Smith explains the importance of time in terms of the project (and life):

Halsmann: "How much did your Pittsburgh Opus cost in time?"

Smith: "It cost the lining of my stomach, and much more beside. ... While

working on it I resigned (from a certain unnamed picture magazine)."

[At this point in the transcript, the Q. and A. format is broken, though it goes on: "After questioning back and forth, Philippe pinned him down to this: Smith had explained that he had worked on the opus for a period of several years, which included three months that he was on staff, which he considered 'stolen.'"]

Smith expands on why his project took so long, and why he needed so many images to complete his vision:

Smith: "There's no way to evaluate it," Smith said. "If I was able to print exclusively, it still would take at least a year. I now have 200 prints from 2,000 negatives...."]

Halsmann: "What would anybody in the world do with 200 prints?"

Smith: "Each print I have made represents a chapter — the 200 represent a synthesis."

Halsmann: "You won't put any time limit on this work?"

Smith: "It was also sidetracked for a period of time for doing an almost equally difficult color project — one of my worst failures, which I consider a going to school."

### **Takeaway point:**

17,000 pictures or roughly 472 rolls of film is a prodigious amount of photos (even by digital standards). However Smith wasn't just photographing like crazy just for the sake of it. He had a certain vision of Pittsburgh he wanted to convey-- which took him a long time (and through a lot of photographs).

Smith suffered lots of doubts and setbacks in his Pittsburgh project, but he continued to persevere and take his time. He had all these editors and outsiders clawing his back to rush his project (after all the project was initially supposed to only take three weeks) but Smith took the unreasonable route and continue his project.

We often rush our own work. We don't let our photos sit and marinate long enough, and we often don't spend enough time editing our shots. There-

fore this leads us to uploading too much work on the internet, some which are good-- but others which are only "so-so."

I think especially in today's digital age: less is more. To show less work is to show more discipline of yourself as a photographer. Not only that, but the work that you put out will obviously be stronger as well.

So don't feel the need to rush things-- take your time with your work. The best projects take years, or even decades to finish. Take your time, and you will be rewarded.

## **6. Don't worry about the finances**

When Smith was working on his Pittsburgh project, he faced many financial setbacks. He wasn't making money at the time, he was borrowing money from his family, and constantly short on funds (he could barely afford film and paper to print on). However he didn't let this set him back. Halsmann inquires about the issue of finances:

Halsmann: "How can this be financed? Is there any way, here in America today, to pay a man back for this work?"

Smith: "How long did it take Joyce to do "Ulysses"? I could never be rested within myself without doing this."

Halsmann: "But what if the photographer does not have the financial means?"

Smith: "I will advise them not to do it, and I will hope they do."

Halsmann: "What if nobody sees it? Besides a few friends?"

Smith: "Answer this and you will see how artists have acted throughout the bloody ages. The goal is the work itself."

### **Takeaway point:**

This is quite possibly one of my favorite excerpts from Smith. He was a man who didn't get a damn about the issues of finances, fame, or reputation. He was only interested in making great work-- it was an end into itself. He didn't even care if nobody ever saw the photos, he had a deep drive in himself to create this work.

We are all social beings--and we crave for attention and admiration from our peers and family. It is natural. However at the same time, this can be a slippery slope. Rather than doing work for the sake of it, we do it to please others.

When it comes to street photography, we can also get suckered into getting praise for our photos (rather than making great photos). How many "likes" or "favorites" is enough?

We should shoot in the streets as an end in itself. Meaning, we do it for the sake of it-- to improve our own work for our own love, rather than trying to impress others.

An easy antidote to focus on your own work: take a hiatus from sharing your work on social media for a year. Trust me, it seems like a long time-- but it passes pretty quickly and it will probably help your photography incredibly. I know it did for me.

About a year ago from the advice of Charlie Kirk I decided not to upload any of my new work for a year. Sure it was incredibly difficult (I have always been a

sucker for getting lots of views, likes, and favorites) but it helped me focus on my own photography. It made me focus less on the admiration of others, and more on myself-- to create great images for myself.

Nowadays I'm sharing more of my images that I have shot from 6 months-year ago, but I still try not to share too much of my work. I find once I get into the habit of regularly uploading work, once again-- it causes me to get hooked on external recognition and validation, rather than my own validation (and that of close friends and colleagues).

## 7. Tell a story

One thing that I always admired from W. Eugene Smith was his ability to make incredible "picture stories." Some of his works come to mind like the Japan Minamata Bay series in which he photographed the after-effects of toxic mercury poured into the river (and the effects on its civilians). My other favorite project of his was his "Country Doctor" series in which he spent 23 days following a doctor in Colorado, documenting his day-to-

day challenges and interactions with his patients.

W. Eugene Smith had a burning curiosity to "go deep" with his projects. He didn't just take a few pretty photos and take off. Rather, he embedded himself into the lives of his subjects and got to know them inside and out. This helped him create intimate portraits and images which really told stories. The way that he also edited and sequenced his photographs also added to the "picture story" which was famous with LIFE magazine in the 50's.

### Takeaway point:

Nowadays with social media, I would say that working on projects or a "picture story" is a lost art. The majority of street photographers focus on single, memorable images (rather than larger projects which have more of a story and depth behind it).

Don't get me wrong, I love memorable single images. However I think that at the end of the day, they pale in comparison to projects which have more



depth and soul and get to know people on a deeper level.

Therefore I recommend you rather than just focusing on single images, to work on longer-term projects. You can start working on your own street photography project with this article: "How to Start Your Own Street Photography Project."

## Conclusion

W. Eugene Smith was one of the great photographers of history who didn't take bullshit from anyone else-- and follow his own gut and soul when it came to his own work. Although he wasn't the friendliest guy and a bit neurotic at times, he had deep compassion for his subjects and a burning sense of curiosity which helped him connect on a deep level with those he photographed.

I think as street photographers, we can learn much from his philosophies (and his stunning images).

Don't worry so much about fame, recognition, or money when it comes to photography. Let's follow in Smiths' foot-

steps and do the work as an ends to itself-- to uncover something about society and for ourselves.

## Quotes by W. Eugene Smith

Below are some of my favorite quotes by W. Eugene Smith:

- "The world just does not fit conveniently into the format of a 35mm camera."
- "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."
- "Passion is in all great searches and is necessary to all creative endeavors."
- "I've never made any picture, good or bad, without paying for it in emotional turmoil."
- "I wanted my pictures to carry some message against the greed, the stupidity and the intolerances that cause these wars."

- "Each time I pressed the shutter release it was a shouted condemnation hurled with the hope that the picture might survive through the years, with the hope that they might echo through the minds of men in the future - causing them caution and remembrance and realization."

- "Whats the use of having a great depth of field if there is not an adequate depth of feeling?"



21

## GARRY WINOGRAND

Garry Winogrand is one of my favorite street photographers that I have gained much photographic insight and wisdom from. He was in-arguably one of the most prolific street photographers of his time (he shot over 5 million photographs in his career) and one of the most passionate. However, he hated the term "street photographer" and simply saw himself as a "photographer". It is an idea I later understood and respected very dearly, as Winogrand was more interested in making photographs than classifying himself for art historians.



I never understood a lot of the things that he said about photography like why you should wait a year or two before developing your shots, why photographs don't tell stories, and how photographers mistake emotion for what makes great photographs. Although I didn't really get what he was saying, I was intrigued.

After having done a ton of research on Winogrand and finding out more about his philosophy in photography, I found a treasure chest. Although I am not an expert on Garry Winogrand, he has influenced my street photography profoundly. I wish through this article to illustrate some things that Winogrand taught to his former students (the bulk of the quotes are from "Class Time with Garry Winogrand by O.C. Garza" as well as "Coffee and Workprints: A Workshop With Garry Winogrand" by Mason Resnick).

## 1. Shoot, a lot

Garry Winogrand shot a lot of photographs. To give you a sense of how much he shot, read this one account of him

shooting on the streets from a former student that he had:

"As we walked out of the building, he wrapped the Leica's leather strap around his hand, checked the light, quickly adjusted the shutter speed and f/stop. He looked ready to pounce. We stepped outside and he was on.

We quickly learned Winogrand's technique--he walked slowly or stood in the middle of pedestrian traffic as people went by. He shot prolifically. I watched him walk a short block and shoot an entire roll without breaking stride. As he reloaded, I asked him if he felt bad about missing pictures when he reloaded. "No," he replied, "there are no pictures when I reload." He was constantly looking around, and often would see a situation on the other side of a busy intersection. Ignoring traffic, he would run across the street to get the picture." - Mason Resnick

Wow, shooting an entire roll in a short block without breaking stride? Many street photographers struggle to



finish an entire roll in a day, let alone in a short block.

If you want to see how much film he shot, you can see the image of film worn onto the pressure plate of his Leica M4 here.

Not only that, but at the time of his unfortunate early-death (at age 56) he left behind 2,500 rolls of undeveloped film, 6,500 rolls of developed but not proofed exposures (not made into contact sheets), and contact sheets made from about 3,000 rolls. In addition to that, the Garry Winogrand Archive at the Center for Creative Photography has over 20,000 fine and work prints, 20,000 contact sheets, 100,000 negatives and 30,500 35mm colour slides as well as a small group of Polaroid prints and several amateur motion picture films.

Winogrand shot at a pace in which he couldn't even see his own photos (because he was always out on the streets, shooting). In an interview that he did with Barbara Diamonstein she asks him:

Diamonstein: When you looked at those contact sheets, you noticed that

something was going on. I've often wondered how a photographer who takes tens of thousands of photographs — and by now it may even be hundreds of thousands of photographs — keeps track of the material. How do you know what you have, and how do you find it?

Winogrand: Badly. That's all I can say. There've been times it's been just impossible to find a negative or whatever. But I'm basically just a one man operation, and so things get messed up. I don't have a filing system that's worth very much.

Diamonstein: But don't you think that's important to your work?

Winogrand: I'm sure it is, but I can't do anything about it. It's hopeless. I've given up. You just go through a certain kind of drudgery every time you have to look for something. I've got certain things grouped by now, but there's a drudgery in finding them. There's always stuff missing."

Winogrand accepted the fact that he wouldn't ever have enough time to see all of his photographs that he shot, and

that there would be negatives he could never find (because of the volume of photographs that he took).

I always wondered whether I should shoot a lot or be as selective as I can when shooting on the streets.

I have always shot a lot in street photography. For example, when I shot digitally, I would often take 300-500 a day (no problem). Now with film, I have slowed down a bit (generally 1-3 rolls a day). 5-6 rolls if I am feeling really ambitious (like my recent trip in Istanbul).

However I wasn't quite sure if I was simply wasting my time by taking so many photographs, and not improving as a street photographer (because I would take more photographs "than necessary").

One quote that really struck me from my friend Charlie Kirk:

**"When in doubt, click"**

Now when I am out shooting, I always make sure to take at least 2-5 shots of a scene that I see (because a subtle change of gesture, position, or people in

the background can change in a fraction of a second). If you also study the contact sheets of very famous photographers (and their photographs) you will see that they don't just go for one shot when they see "the decisive moment" about to happen:

Not only did Winogrand shoot a lot, but he was always out on the streets. People described him as being restless, and always shaking around in his seat (even while seated). He had an insatiable urge to be out and about, photographing life around him.

As Michael David Murphy said on his essay on Winogrand, Winogrand was indeed "...the first digital photographer".

I think it is difficult for the majority of us to shoot 445 photographs a day (12 rolls of film a day). However I think one thing that we can take is that with sheer amounts of volume, we can increase our odds of getting memorable images.

Of course we cannot simply equate what makes a memorable street photograph down to a mathematical equation, but my point is in order to take memora-

ble street photographs, we need to subject ourselves to more "decisive moments". Generally that is increased by spending more time shooting on the streets, and shooting a lot.

So not to put your camera into burst mode and take tens and thousand of photographs a day (for the sake of shooting a lot) - try to be intentional in the photographs that you take, but don't try to limit yourself in terms of the number of photographs that you take.

## 2. Don't hesitate and follow your gut

Hesitation is one of the things that kills most potentially great street photographs. We might see a great scene unfold before our very eyes, but we may hesitate for one reason or another (the person is too far away, they might get angry at us, I don't want to be disrespectful).

When Winogrand would shoot on the streets, he wouldn't hesitate to take his shots, and would actively pursue his shots. As mentioned from Mason

Resnick in his 2-week long workshop with Garry Winogrand:

"He was constantly looking around, and often would see a situation on the other side of a busy intersection. Ignoring traffic, he would run across the street to get the picture."

I am not advocating for you to be reckless and getting hit by cars while chasing decisive moments.

However I think one thing that we can learn from Winogrand is to follow our instincts and our guts, and go for our shots. If a person is too far away, we should either run (or walk) to them and go for the shot. If we think that they may get upset for us taking the shot, we should put away those assumptions and go for the shot anyways. If we are concerned of offending people, take the shot anyways. If you feel guilty afterwards, you can always delete the photograph afterwards (or never show it to anyone else).

## 3. Smile when shooting on the streets

Garry Winogrand shot with a 28mm lens for most of his life, which meant that for the majority of his shots he had to be quite close to his subjects (and in front of them). Therefore Winogrand wasn't Henri Cartier-Bresson (trying to be invisible) but was actively a part of the action and immersed in the crowds. He would be very obviously taking photographs in the streets and would stick out like a sore thumb. (You can see a clip of him shooting in the streets here.

Mason Resnick continues about his experiences seeing Winogrand shooting on the streets:

"Incredibly, people didn't react when he photographed them. It surprised me because Winogrand made no effort to hide the fact that he was standing in way, taking their pictures. Very few really noticed; no one seemed annoyed.

Winogrand was caught up with the energy of his subjects, and was constantly smiling or nodding at people as he shot. It was as if his camera was secondary and his main purpose was to com-

municate and make quick but personal contact with people as they walked by."

Winogrand's experiences mirror mine as well. When I am shooting on the streets, I always try to do it with a smile on my face, and generally nod to people after taking their photograph, saying "thank you", complimenting them, or even chatting with them after taking their photograph. This sends off a positive aura in which people don't feel as suspicious of you taking a photograph.

I am sure that there were many times in which people got pissed off when Winogrand took their photograph, and would react hostilely to him. However that is inevitable in street photography and cannot be avoided. I am not sure how Winogrand would have reacted, but he never got sent to the hospital for being physically attacked after taking a street photograph of someone.

Remember to keep smiling when shooting on the streets :)

## 4. Don't shoot from the hip



Garry Winogrand would discourage "shooting from the hip" - as Resnick recounts this story:

"I tried to mimic Winogrand's shooting technique. I went up to people, took their pictures, smiled, nodded, just like the master. Nobody complained; a few smiled back!

I tried shooting without looking through the viewfinder, but when Winogrand saw this, he sternly told me never to shoot without looking. "You'll lose control over your framing," he warned. I couldn't believe he had time to look in his viewfinder, and watched him closely.

Indeed, Winogrand always looked in the viewfinder at the moment he shot. It was only for a split second, but I could see him adjust his camera's position slightly and focus before he pressed the shutter release. He was precise, fast, in control."

Therefore when shooting in the streets, use your viewfinder (if you have one). It is possible to get good shots when shooting from the hip, but you will have far less control over your fram-

ing and composition when shooting on the streets.

In an interview Winogrand did during a few Q & A sessions in Rochester, New York in 1970 in which "shooting from the hip" was mentioned:

Moderator: Actually, what I'm asking is do you often shoot without using your viewfinder?

Winogrand: I never shoot without using the viewfinder—Oh, yes, there'll be a few times,—I may have to hold the camera up over my head because for just physical reasons, but very rarely does that ever work."

If your camera has a viewfinder, use it- that's why it's there. I used to shoot quite a bit from the hip when I started off (because I was shy to take photographs of people) but found it to personally be a crutch to me. When I got really lucky, I would get a decent shot. But the majority of my shots were generally poorly framed, blurry, or out-of-focus.

Once I started using my viewfinder religiously, not only did my composition

and framing improve, but also my framing.

Of course if your camera only has an LCD screen (or you don't want to buy an EVF for your micro 4/3rds or point & shoot camera) you can't use a viewfinder. But try to keep in mind to always shoot with intent, and focus on your framing.

## 5. Don't crop

Another thing that Winogrand advocated (which Henri Cartier-Bresson also advocated) was not cropping.

As O.C. Garza recounts in a photo class he took with Winogrand:

"The rest of the workshop followed the same pattern. I shot like a maniac all day (as did most of the other students), worked in the darkroom until dawn, schlepped my pile of 8x10s back into New York from Long Island for the 9 a.m. class.

Winogrand divided the shots into good and bad. I studied his selections, trying to divine his logic. I eventually realized that when the whole photograph worked--an intuitive response to some-

thing visual, unexplainable in words--he liked it. If only part of the photo worked, it wasn't good enough.

Cropping was out--he told us to shoot full-frame so the "quality of the visual problem is improved." Winogrand told us to photograph what we liked, and to trust our choices, even if nobody else agreed with them."

Although cropping can be a great tool to improve your photographs, it can also be another crutch. I used to crop quite a bit for my street photographs (when I had a messy background or distracting elements). However this led me to having the mentality of not getting the photo right "in-camera" as I would subconsciously think to myself: "If the framing isn't good, I can always crop later".

Once again, try to get your framing right in-camera- as it will force you to "dance around" more on the streets to get a more coherent shot. Instead of shooting people against distracting backgrounds, it will encourage you to walk around them, taking a photograph of

them behind a more simple background (that is less distracting). We will also get closer to our subjects to frame them better, rather than just cropping in from around the frame.

I am not saying that you should never crop a photograph (if you look at Robert Frank's contact sheets of "The Americans" - he cropped a lot of his photographs), but try to do it in moderation and sparingly.

## 6. Emotionally detach yourself from your photographs

Winogrand once famously said, "Sometimes photographers mistake emotion for what makes a great street photograph." When I first read the quote, I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that.

To clarify what he meant, let's go back to the class that O.C. Garza took with Winogrand:

"By the second week, Winogrand had opened up and told us about his working methods, which were rather unorthodox but not sloppy.

He never developed film right after shooting it. He deliberately waited a year or two, so he would have virtually no memory of the act of taking an individual photograph.

This, he claimed made it easier for him to approach his contact sheets more critically. "If I was in a good mood when I was shooting one day, then developed the film right away," he told us, I might choose a picture because I remember how good I felt when I took it, not necessarily because it was a great shot.

You make better choices if you approach your contact sheets cold, separating the editing from the picture taking as much as possible."

I agree much with this sentiment of waiting an extended period of time before editing your shots. One of the great parts of digital (seeing your images instantly) can also be it's downfall. Even Alex Webb talked about his frustrations moving from shooting Kodachrome slide film into shooting digital by saying that it didn't give him enough time to wait before seeing his images, and that he saw

his photos almost "too quickly" before he was emotionally prepared to look/edit them.

Therefore when I was shooting digitally, one of the issues I had was always having the urge to look at my photographs instantly. If I was shooting on the streets and took a photograph of something I thought was amazing (let's say a little girl with a red umbrella jumping over a puddle) I might confuse the emotion I felt with taking the photograph of thinking that it was good (rather than the photograph itself).

I would then look at my LCD, scream in delight, rush home, post-process it, and then upload it directly to Flickr. After a few days I would be dismayed to see how many few "favs" or comments I got from the shot (in compared to the rest of my shots), and be confused why the shot wasn't good. Of course after a few weeks I would realize that the shot wasn't "as good as I remembered it" and would have compositional flaws as well as timing.

One of the benefits I personally have had when shooting film is that it has helped me emotionally distance myself from my shots. I generally shoot around 50 rolls of film for every month of traveling and shooting street photography, and I don't look for my photographs at least for a month after taking it.

When I finally look at the images I took, I would forget taking half of them, which would help me be much more objective during the final editing (selection) process.

Whether you shoot digital or film, I think we can all learn from Winogrand in waiting before seeing or processing your shots. Let your shots marinate like a nice steak, or aerate like a nice red wine. Waiting for a year or two before seeing your photographs may be a bit hardcore, but it will definitely help you forget the images you took and be more objective when looking at your shots.

Perhaps if you shoot digitally, wait a few days or even a week before looking at your shots in-depth in Lightroom.



Hell, you can even make it a month or longer! Same applies to film.

## 7. Look at great photographs

No photographs live in a vacuum, and certainly Winogrand didn't. He was a great fan of many of his contemporary street photographers (as well as those who came before him).

Going back to Resnick's workshop with Winogrand:

"He encouraged us to look at great photographs. See prints in galleries and museums to know what good prints look like. Work.

Winogrand recommended looking at *The Americans* by Robert Frank, *American Images* by Walker Evans, Robert Adams' work and the photographs of Lee Friedlander, Paul Strand, Brassai, Andre Kertesz, Weegee and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Also in another interview with *Image Magazine* in 1972:

"Moderator: Do you look at a lot of other people's photographs?

Winogrand: Sure. I look at photographs.

Moderator: Whose photographs do you find interesting?

Winogrand: Quickly, off the top of my head: Atget, Brassai, Kertesz, Weston, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Bresson.

Moderator: Do you like them for different reasons or do you find a reason?

Winogrand: I learn from them. I can learn from them."

Winogrand also discusses in the same interview about how he got inspired to start shooting photography:

"Nobody exists in a vacuum. Where do you come from? The first time I really got out of New York as a photographer was in 1955 and I wanted to go around the country photographing. And a friend of mine at that time, I was talking to him about it—a guy named Dan Weiner. I don't know if you know his name. He's dead now.

[He] asked me if I had ever seen Walker Evans' book and I said, no. I had never heard of Walker Evans. He said, if you're going around the country, take a look at the book. And he did me a big fat favor.

And then it's funny, I forget what year when Robert Frank's book came out. He was working pretty much around that time, '55 or whenever it was. And there were photographs in there, particularly that gas station photograph, that I learned an immense amount from. I mean, I hope I learned. At least, I feel very responsible..."

Draw inspiration from other photographers. See what about their work that resonates with you, and take bits and pieces and synthesize it with your own photography. Whether it be the subject matter that they shoot, the framing and angles they use, or the certain techniques they use.

I think it is dangerous for street photographers to put themselves into a bubble, and not be influenced by great work.

"You are what you eat". Consume tons of great photography books, check out other street photography blogs, and visit local exhibitions and libraries.

## 8. Focus on form and content

Winogrand famously said, "Every photograph is a battle of form versus content" and that "Great photography is always on the edge of failure."

With lots of the word games that he says in his quote, I never quite understood what he meant. OC Garza shares his experience with Winogrand:

"Later on I began to see the headlights coming at me. If all the graphic elements are coming together, why do my photos still look like crap? Studying more of Garry's work, I reasoned that not only were his photos working graphically, but something was happening in them. He would call this "content."

Garry repeated often this phrase; every photograph is a battle of form versus content. The good ones are on the border of failure."

Form & content are two keys which make a memorable street photograph. Consider "form" as the composition, framing, and technical aspects of a photograph. Consider "content" as what is actually happening in the photograph (whether it be an old couple holding hands, a boy holding two bottles of wine, or a man looking through a peephole).

We need both strong form and content to make a memorable street photograph - but rarely does it ever happen. That's what makes street photography so hard.

I am sure we have all had street photographs that we took that we weren't quite sure were good or not. I like to call these the "maybe shots". I have an entire folder full of them, but they usually are strong in terms of form, but have poor content. Others have strong content, but poor form.

I think that's what Winogrand meant when he said that "Great photography is always on the edge of failure." There are many things that can make our

photographs fail. But if you are lucky enough, have enough dedication, and can create a well-balanced frame with interesting content- you can make a great street photograph.

## 9. Become inspired by things outside of photography

I think that in order to be more original and unique in your street photography, look outside of photography for inspiration. Winogrand shares the same sentiment in his interview with Image Magazine in 1972:

"Moderator: You feel you've been hustled in a pool room. . . . Are there any other things that relate photographically that are not necessarily other photographs? By this I mean, do you ever get ideas—not ideas—is your education ever expanded by an interest in something else other than photography?"

Winogrand: I would think so. A heck of a lot. Reading and music and painting and sculpture and other stuff. Basketball, baseball, hockey, etc. Cer-

tainly, you know, you can always learn from some—from somebody else's—from some intelligence. I think. I hope."

Consume art, books, music, painting, sculpture, and things outside of street photography. This will help you get a new angle in your photographic vision.

For example Sebastião Salgado, one of the most influential social documentary photographers and photojournalists started off his career as an economist, studying work. However after going to the work sites in-person, he soon chose to abandon economics (too focused on theory) and chose to pursue photography to more vividly show working conditions of people all around the world. Salgado took his outsider's experience as an economist, and applied it to photography beautifully.

I started off being a sociology student at UCLA, and my interest in photography started at around the same time. When I was trying to think of what type of photographs I liked to make, I quickly

realized that they were generally about people in society. Now I try to use my interest in sociology to apply to my street photography projects.

Think about how your personal experiences and interests (outside of photography) influences your street photography. This will help you discover a much more unique voice and help you create photographs that resonate who you are as a person.

## 10. Love life

In Garry Winogrand's retrospective book published by MOMA, former curator John Szarkowski wrote a very lovely biography of the life of Winogrand.

One of the things that stood out to me the most was the conclusion, in which Szarkowski wrote (recited loosely by memory) was in which he discusses the confusion that people had about Winogrand (why did he take so many photographs if he knew he wasn't going to look at so many of them?)

Szarkowski wrote quite eloquently how Winogrand was less interested in



photography, and more interested about living and capturing life.

I think as street photographers we can all learn wisdom from what Szarkowski, and the example that Winogrand lead in his life.

As street photographers we should strive to take memorable street photographs of people, society, and how we see the world. But let's not forget, photography comes second after living life.

## 11. Don't call yourself a "street photographer"

Garry Winogrand hated the term "street photographer". He simply called himself a photographer -- nothing more, and nothing less.

One of the dangerous things about classifying yourself as a certain type of photographer is that it can pigeon-hole you. After all, it is Robert Capa who advised Henri Cartier-Bresson the following:

"You must not have a label of a Surrealist photographer. If you do, you won't have an assignment and you'll be like a

hothouse plant ....The label should be photojournalist."

Furthermore even though Henri Cartier-Bresson was undoubtedly the godfather of "street photography" - he never referred to himself as a street photographer either.

Of course we call ourselves "street photographers" for a practical reason. After all, if you meet someone who asks you what kind of photos you take-- you won't tell them you are a landscape photographer or a bird photographer. However it can be a pain to tell them, "Oh, I like to take photos of strangers on the street, sometimes with permission and sometimes without permission". Calling yourself a "street photographer" is simply easier.

However even within the street photography community, street photographers come in many different colors. You got street photographers that focus more on the face, others that focus more on "the decisive moment", others that focus on still lives, and others that focus on unusual or canny situations in public.

## **Garry Winogrand Technical Information:**

Below are some technical points about Garry Winogrand (his film, his equipment, focal lengths) that I would also like to share:

### **1. Winogrand shot often pushed his film to 1200 ASA**

"We were using Tri-X film pushed to 1200 ASA, whereas the normal rating is 400. The reason was to be able to shoot at 1/1000th of a second as much as possible, because if you made pictures on the street at 1/125th, they were blurry. If you lunged at something, either it would move or else your own motion would mess up the picture. I began to work that way after looking at my pictures and noticing that they had those loose edges, Garry's were crisp." - via Joel Meyerowitz  
From Bystander: A History of Street Photography.

### **2. Winogrand shot with a Leica M4's, mostly with 28mm lenses:**

"He opened his camera bag. In it were two Leica M4's, equipped with 28mm lenses and dozens of rolls of Tri-

X. The top of the bag was covered with yellow tabs. He told us he wrote light conditions on the tabs and put them on rolls as he finished them so he would know how to develop them.

As we walked out of the building, he wrapped the Leica's leather strap around his hand, checked the light, quickly adjusted the shutter speed and f/stop. He looked ready to pounce. We stepped outside and he was on."

### **3. Winogrand experimented with different focal lengths (21mm, 28mm, and 35mm, but shot mostly with a 28mm).**

From an interview:

"Moderator: In his essay in your new book, Todd Papageorge talks about your changing, in the period 1960-1963, I guess, to a wider-angle lens. Is that right?

Winogrand: Yeah, I started fooling around with a 28 - from a 35.

Moderator: You said of that, that it made the problems more interesting -

was that just because there were more things to account for?

Winogrand: More or less, sure. Ideally, I wish I had a lens that took in my whole angle of vision, without mechanical distortion - that's the headache with these things. Ideally, that would probably be the most interesting to work with. The 28 is probably where the mechanical distortion is least limiting - much less limiting than a 21. It's closest to the angle of attention. It's pretty close to at least my angle of attention. Probably the 21 is more so, but it's just extremely limiting. You have to use it very carefully.

Moderator: If you tilt it at all, you get very strange angles ...

Winogrand: Well, it's not a question of tilting; the minute you get in the center of people, a little bit close, you get another kind of nonsense happening, that falling over. In the end, those pictures wind up being primarily about what the lens is doing. If there was a 21 that didn't behave that way, I'd probably use it.

Moderator: Do you shoot with anything other than the 28 at all?

Winogrand: Yeah, in the last six months I've gone back to a 35mm lens, because I'm sort of bored looking at 28mm contact sheets! So I just started fooling around with the 35mm again. There's nothing very complicated about my reasons!

Moderator: Does that make the problem easier, then?

Winogrand: No; I can manage to keep it interesting for me.

Moderator: Do you find that you're putting less in the frame now, with the new lens?

Winogrand: I don't really know; I just take pictures, and they look almost the same to me. I really don't know how to answer that question. The only real difference is, with a 28, racking it out as far as it'll go, let's say in terms of a face, there's a lot less space, with a 35mm, left. It's an interesting little difference. The minute you back up a little, then it becomes a question of how far you've got to back up. So with a 35 you're probably

going to back up more, usually. Or you'll do things without feet... I really don't want to look at contact sheets that are going to look the same as a 28. Even if I could do that with a 35, by changing my distance or whatever. I'm playing, in a sense. It's all about not being bored.

## Quotes by Garry Winogrand

Below are a list of some quotes that Garry Winogrand is famous for:

- "Photos have no narrative content. They only describe light on surface."
- "Photographers mistake the emotion they feel while taking the picture as judgment that the photograph is good."
- "Great photography is always on the edge of failure."
- "Every photograph is a battle of form versus content."
- "I photograph to see what the world looks like in photographs."
- "I like to think of photographing as a two-way act of respect. Respect for the medium, by letting it do what it

does best, describe. And respect for the subject, by describing as it is. A photograph must be responsible to both."

- "I don't have anything to say in any picture. My only interest in photography is to see what something looks like as a photograph. I have no preconceptions."
- "There is no special way a photograph should look."

## Winogrand's application to the Guggenheim Foundation

"Photography, photographers, photographs deal with facts.

I have been photographing the United States, trying by investigating photographically to learn who we are and how we feel, by seeing what we look like as history has been and is happening to us in this world.

Since World War II we have seen the spread of affluence, the move to the suburbs and the spreading of them, the massive shopping centers to serve them, cars



for to and from. New schools, churches, and banks. And the growing need of tranquilizer peace, missile races, H bombs for overkill, war and peace tensions, and bomb shelter security. Economic automation problems, and since the Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools, we have the acceleration of civil liberties battle by Negroes.

I look at the pictures I have done up to now, and they make me feel that who we are and how we feel and what is to become of us just doesn't matter. Our aspirations and successes have been cheap and petty. I read the newspapers, the columnists, some books, and I look at some magazines (our press). They all deal in illusions and fantasies. I can only conclude that we have lost ourselves, and that the bomb may finish the job permanently, and it just doesn't matter, we have no loved life.

I cannot accept my conclusions, and so I must continue this photographic investigation further and deeper. This is my project.”

### **Guggenheim Foundation Follow-Up by Winogrand:**

“Since receiving my grant, I have spent most of my time working on my project. I left New York in mid-June and returned late in the October. The time was spent driving through the country in a slow car photographing all the time. I got a tremendous amount of work done. A large amount of this work was done in Texas and California. I would estimate that I spent half my time in those two states. Since I returned to New York, I have been spending most of my time in the darkroom processing the results.”



22

## HELEN LEVITT

Helen Levitt is known as a "photographer's photographer" a photographer who is admired by photographers everywhere, but not that well known. Since the raise of fame of Vivian Maier-- I wanted to profile the work of Helen Levitt, and share the work of talented female street photographers.

### Helen Levitt's background

Helen Levitt was born in 1913 in a middle-class family of Russian-Jewish parents in Brooklyn, New York. She dropped out of high school, and worked for J. Florian Mitchell, a portrait photographer. Commercial photography didn't interest her.



Her true passion was photographing people in their natural environments-- which she learned from the Film and Photo League.

In 1935, Levitt met and befriended Henri Cartier-Bresson. Inspired by him and his work, she bought a small 35mm Leica in 1936 and started to take her early street photographs.

In 1937, Levitt visited Walker Evans, and started to grow a friendship with him, James Agee, and their friend, the art critic Janice Loeb.

In 1959 and 1960, Levitt received two subsequent Guggenheim Fellowships and started to work in color.

40 of her color street photos were shown as a slide show at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1974 — one of the first times photographs were formally displayed this way in a museum. Her work was also part of the famous "Family of Man" exhibition.

The main books she published during her life include: "A Way of Seeing" (1965), "In the Street: Chalk Drawings and Messages, New York City, 1938-

1948" (1987), Crosstown (2001), Here and There (2004), Slide Show (2005), and Helen Levitt (2008).

Below I will share some lessons Helen Levitt has taught me about street photography and life:

## 1. Let setbacks empower you

Helen Levitt was one of the early pioneers of color street photography, starting in 1959 when she received a Guggenheim grant to shoot the streets of New York City. Her grant was also renewed in 1960, and she recorded hundreds of color street photographs during those 2 intense years.

Unfortunately, a burglar broke into her apartment in 1970 and stole almost all of her color slide film and prints.

Whereas some photographers would've given up entirely-- Levitt was unfazed and went out back to the streets in the 70's to start all over again. Her best color work as we know it today are from this period (as well as a few from 1959-60 which survived).

40 of her color street photographs ended up showing up as a slide show at the New York MOMA in 1974, which was one of the first exhibitions of "serious" color photography in the world.

### **Takeaway point:**

We have all encountered setbacks and frustrations in our photography. We might have had a hard drive crash, lost a job, family problems-- anything that might frustrate or distract us from our photography.

However rather than letting those negative experiences discourage you-- turn those lemons into lemonade.

For example, if your hard drive crashes-- firstly try to recover the images. If it is hopeless, tell yourself, "All those photos I took were rubbish anyways-- let me go out and start taking better photographs."

If you lose your job, of course it sucks. But see the opportunity in the chance to pursue your photography more seriously. If it wasn't for me losing my job in 2011, I would've never been able to blog and teach street photogra-

phy workshops full-time. My good friend Rinzi Ruiz also lost his job, but used that opportunity to pursue his photography full-time and really started to hone his style and voice. My other friend Dana Barsuhn lost his job, and used it as an opportunity to focus on his photography and now is also working as an archivist (in photography) at the Huntington library. My other friend Charlie Kirk lost his job as a lawyer, and has used the opportunity to travel to Istanbul and pursue a long-term photography project there. I could count tons of other photographers who have lost jobs and used it as an impetus to start off their career in photography.

If you are having personal or family problems-- use your emotions and channel them through your photography. Photographers like Josef Koudelka and Jacob Aue Sobol have channeled negative life experiences to produce phenomenal photography.

So know that in every negative in life, there is a positive-- an upside. See every negative experience in life be an opportunity to create more beautiful art.



## 2. Follow your eyes

"I never had a 'project.' I would go out and shoot, follow my eyes—what they noticed, I tried to capture with my camera, for others to see." - Helen Levitt

I am a big fan of projects in street photography. However realize that there are many ways to do projects in street photography. Firstly, you can go out with a project in mind (and focus on that). Secondly, you can take the "stream of consciousness" approach-- and photograph what interests you and edit it into a project afterwards. Photographers such as Elliott Erwitt, Anders Petersen, Daido Moriyama, and Helen Levitt all embraced this approach.

### **Takeaway point:**

When you're out on the streets, follow your eyes. Photograph what interests you. Don't feel forced to photograph what doesn't interest you. Use your camera as an extension of your eye-- and follow your guts. If you find a scene, a subject, or an object that interests you in the streets-- don't think too much, just photograph it.

Helen Levitt has done exhibitions that have been focused on certain subject matter-- such as chalk-drawings, children, and just color.

So when you out shooting, focus on what interests you--disregard what others think. Follow your own unique vision and path, and make photographs that bring you satisfaction.

## 3. Don't worry about the theory

"It would be mistaken to suppose that any of the best photography is come at by intellection; it is like all art, essentially the result of an intuitive process, drawing on all that the artist is rather than on anything he thinks, far less theorizes about." - Helen Levitt

Knowing some theory in photography is good-- but don't let it take over. I know some photographers who know tons of photographic theory, knowledge of history, and technical details-- but don't actually go out and make photographs.

I am a big believer that we only truly learn from action. So the best education is street photography is to go out there and shoot. And based on your experiences, you can create some theories on street photography (rather than using theories about photography, and going out and shooting).

Curators, art historians, and editors are all important figures in photography-- but think hard about what side of photography interests you the most. If you are more interested in the photographic theory of things-- go for it. If you are more interested in the shooting side of things and don't care about theory-- pursue that too.

### **Takeaway point:**

The best way to get better in swimming is to not read books on swimming-- but to actually go out and swim.

Photography is the same way. Whenever you click the shutter, you are training your eyes like a muscle. Not only that, but you learn how to better interact with people, know when to click the

shutter, and also how to frame your scenes.

Whenever I make excuses for not feeling inspired, or that I don't have the 'ideal' gear for street photography-- I shut up that voice by just going out on a walk with my camera. Once I start shooting, I get in the zone and disregard everything else. This is the best way I have found true happiness in street photography.

## **4. Find the comedy in life**

"A lot of my early pictures are, I think, quite funny. And these days I tend to look for comedy more and more." - Helen Levitt

There is a lot of darkness and sadness in everyday life. But there is also tons of happiness and joy.

What I love about Helen Levitt's photographs are that they celebrate the happiness and joy of everyday life. She doesn't focus on misery and the negatives of the human condition. Rather, she looks for the comedy, fun, and excitement.

ment of everyday life-- often through children.

**Takeaway point:**

Some of the best street photographs are the ones that make you laugh. I think comedy is a great way of communicating and connecting with other human beings. This is why we love comedians, actors, and other entertainers. Life is tough-- having comedy takes the edge off.

So know that all the street photography you capture doesn't have to be dark, gritty, and grungy. Look for the happy and the uplifting moments as well.

Some of my favorite humorous street photographers include Blake Andrews, Matt Stuart, Elliott Erwitt, and Jack Simon.

## 5. Go to where people are

Much of Helen Levitt's early work includes taking photographs of children in the streets of NYC. However the sad thing is that over the years-- fewer kids are out on the streets. Levitt shares:

"The neighborhoods are different. They're not full of children anymore. In the 1930's there were plenty of kids playing on the street. The streets were crowded with all kinds of things going on, not just children. Everything was going on in the street in the summertime. They didn't have air-conditioning. Everybody was out on the stoops, sitting outside, on chairs."

However she didn't let this discourage her. Rather, she started to photograph in different areas, such as the garment district. Levitt shares:

"You have to go where something's going on. In the garment district there are trucks, people running out on the streets and having lunch outside. But no children. They'd be run over by all those trucks."

**Takeaway point:**

I don't think you don't have to photograph people for it to be "street photography". However street photographs are often much more interesting when they include people in it.

So if you live in an area where there isn't much foot traffic-- try to get to areas of your town or city where there is a lot of people. Try to go to the downtown areas, to flea markets, farmer's markets, festivals, parades, or even to the mall. Figure out where people congregate and go there.

But if you live in a city without any people in the streets-- don't fret. Lee Friedlander and William Eggleston have taken some incredible street photographs without any people in them at all. Use them as a source of inspiration as well.

## 6. Create social meaning

"I decided I should take pictures of working class people and contribute to the movements. Whatever movements there were Socialism, Communism, whatever was happening. And then I saw pictures of Cartier Bresson, and realized that photography could be an art and that made me ambitious." - Helen Levitt

It is good to make funny and interesting street photographs. It is even better to make street photographs with a

greater and deeper social purpose and meaning.

Sometimes street photography is criticized for it being too "snapshotty" and being a bit too random or pointless. I agree with some of the critiques people have on street photography.

I feel the most meaningful street photographs are the ones that serve some social purpose, and have a meaning.

### Takeaway point:

When you're out shooting on the streets ask yourself, "Why am I shooting street photography?" It is good fun to make funny and interesting photographs of weird things, people, or events. But also try to think about the social purpose your images serve. How will your street photographs influence and affect people 10, 20, 50, or even 100+ years from now? Realize that your street photographs are important social documents as well-- and they will survive if they have some deeper social impact.



## 7. Only show photographs worth showing

One reporter who was interviewing Helen Levitt shared the following story:

When I was in her apartment, I saw boxes of prints stacked up. One was labeled simply "nothing good." Another one was marked "here and there."

"That's the beginning of another book," she said about the box.

"Can I take a peek?" I asked.

"Nope," she said. "'Cause I'm unsure about it. If I was sure that they were worth anything, I'd show it to you. But I can't."

Well, she must have decided they were worth something. That book, "Here and There", came out a few years later.

When it comes to the editing process (choosing your best images to publish) ask yourself, "Is this photograph worth showing?"

Based on my studies on great street photographers, most admit to only taking around 1 good photograph a month.

Martin Parr, one of the most prolific photographers, admits to only making 1 good photograph a year.

### Takeaway point:

There are bazillions of photographs being uploaded to the internet daily. There are so many uninteresting photographs out there just clogging the internet. Because it is so easy to shoot and upload a photograph, a lot of bad photos are being shared.

Ask yourself, "Am I just adding to that glut of bad images on the internet? Or am I making beautiful art that will affect, influence, and inspire somebody?"

Editing your street photographs and choosing which photos are worth showing is extremely difficult.

## Conclusion

Helen Levitt is one of history's best street photographers who unfortunately didn't gain the fame and recognition during her lifetime she deserved. However she was a mostly private woman-- who followed her passion (which was shooting in the streets). Very much like Vivian

Maier-- she shot for herself and aimed to please herself (before pleasing others).

So when it comes to your street photography, find the comedy of life-- but also make photographs that serve a larger purpose. Think if your photograph is worth showing, and pursue it with determined focus, love, and passion. Let everything else go.



23

## HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON

I recently picked up a copy of "The Mind's Eye" -- which is a great compilation of thoughts and philosophies Henri Cartier-Bresson wrote. Aperture published this great volume (as they are an amazing non-profit dedicated to promoting photography, education, and great ideas).

Ever since I have been back home, I have been dedicating more of my energy, attention, and focus to great photography books -- and trying to distill the information. I've learned all of these great lessons personally-- and I want to share that information with you.

## Personal thoughts on Henri Cartier-Bresson

Henri Cartier-Bresson was one of the first street photographers who deeply inspired my photography and work. Of course-- whenever you google "Street photography" he is always the photographer that comes up the first (then the fact that he shot with a Leica camera, which takes a lot of photographers, including myself, down a rabbit hole of wanting to purchase a Leica camera to get great shots like him).

Anyways, early on-- I was fascinated with this concept of "the decisive moment" -- how Henri Cartier-Bresson was able to capture the "peak moment" of every photographic scene. He was able to time his images perfectly, composing his photographs with great elegance (and supposed "ease").

After a few years of research and getting more passionate about street photography-- I soon started to learn about the "myth of the decisive moment" -- in the sense that Henri Cartier-Bresson didn't just shoot 1 photo of a single scene. If he

saw a good scene, he would "work the scene" -- shooting sometimes 20+ images of one scene, and would try to time the scene as best as possible.

Of course Henri Cartier-Bresson never claimed to only take 1 photo of a certain scene. However I think a lot of street photographers make the wrong assumption that "the decisive moment" is just one moment. Rather in reality, there can be dozens of different "decisive moments", even within a certain scene.

Regardless to say-- Henri Cartier-Bresson was one of the earliest teachers I had in terms of teaching me about composition, timing, and "the beauty of the mundane" (ordinary moments). While I wish he could have taught me directly (haha I wish), his photography was the greatest inspiration.

## Henri Cartier-Bresson: a painter or a photographer?

One of the most interesting things I've learned about Henri Cartier-Bresson was that he started off interested in painting, and found photography as a



way to make "instant sketches." In-fact, I think that he secretly wanted to be a painter all along, but found photography to be his natural calling. In-fact, towards the end of his life (after 30+ years of photography), he gave up shooting all together-- and decided to pursue drawing and painting full-time for the rest of his life.

So why did Henri Cartier-Bresson decide to quit photography -- and focus on painting instead? The closest "evidence" I have found was in this letter he wrote about his friend Sam Szafran in "The Mind's Eye".

"Sam [Szafran]-- I owe him a lot; he is one of those very rare people, along with Teriade, who some 25 years ago encouraged me to quit playing the same old instrument forever.

Cartier-Bresson starts off by saying that Sam encouraged him to "quit playing the same old instrument forever"-- perhaps signaling that he was tired of playing his same old instrument (the Leica) -- and perhaps felt that he was just repeating himself (just working in black

and white, film, mostly 50mm, and capturing "decisive moments"). Perhaps Cartier-Bresson got bored of playing this instrument (the camera) over-and-over again (just as some musicians get bored of playing the same instrument, or how some painters like Picasso get bored painting the same old thing).

Cartier-Bresson continues:

To those who were surprised that I abandoned photography, he says: "Let him draw if that's what he likes, and anyway, he never stopped taking photographs, only now it isn't with a camera but mentally."

Sam Szafran defended Cartier-Bresson by saying that "he never stopped taking photographs, only now it isn't with a camera but mentally".

I think this is an interesting point-- perhaps it wasn't photography which ultimately interested Cartier-Bresson, but it was just capturing emotions and life in general. Whether this was done with a camera, a pen, or a paintbrush-- I think the tool mattered a lot less for Cartier-

Bresson (than the ultimate meaning he was trying to gain from it).

Josef Koudelka also made an interesting point that he thinks the reason why Cartier-Bresson gave up photography was because he didn't push himself as a photographer hard enough-- that he didn't evolve in his photography (and kept shooting the same way over-and-over again, which could lead to boredom and repetition). Koudelka, on the other hand, has evolved much with his photography-- switching from 35mm black-and-white to shooting panoramics. At the moment, I understand that Koudelka shoots his panoramics digitally with a medium-format digital camera (the Leica S2). Even Lee Friedlander (after shooting decades with his Leica), moved up to shooting 6x6 medium-format photos on a film Hasselblad.

**Case-in-point: perhaps photographers need to evolve the way they shoot (and sometimes their equipment, but not always).**

But in the end, I still greatly admire Cartier-Bresson for giving up photogra-

phy and pursuing what I think his "true" passion was-- painting. It takes a lot of courage for someone who was considered a "master" and pioneer of the genre of photography to give up photography all-together. He disregarded what the critics said, the opinions others had of him, and followed his own path and heart. You go Cartier-Bresson.

## The life and philosophy of Cartier-Bresson

Many suspect that Cartier-Bresson was a buddhist, as his writings and philosophies seem to reflect that. In-fact, one of the books that inspired him the most in his photography was "Zen in the art of archery" by Eugene Herrigel-- a book that focuses on archery (there seems to be a lot of parallels between archery, photography, and a lot of other "meditative sports" in general).

Based on "The mind's eye" I have distilled the key philosophies from Cartier-Bresson. This is all just my interpretation-- and the lessons I've personally learned. But the reason I am compiling all of this information is that I hope it is

useful to you, my fellow street photography friend, that it inspires you in one way or another. You don't need to take it all at face-value (just be picky in terms of what inspires you, and discard the rest). Now let's move on:

## 1. On giving meaning to the world through photographs

Cartier-Bresson wasn't interested at all in "staged photography" -- he was only interested in capturing candid and unposed photographs.

Personally I don't think a "candid" photograph is necessarily better than a photograph with either implicit or explicit permission from a subject. In-fact, Cartier-Bresson shot a lot of portraits of artists, friends, and famous people in his life-- and all of those people were aware that they were being photographed by Cartier-Bresson.

Anyways, this is what Cartier-Bresson had to say about "manufactured" or "staged" photography:

"'Manufactured' or staged photography does not concern me. And if I make

a judgement it can only be on a psychological or sociological level. There are those who take photographs arranged beforehand and those who go out to discover the image and seize it."

Cartier-Bresson continues by explaining what the camera means to him:

"For me the camera is a sketchbook, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant which, in visual terms, questions and decides simultaneously."

You can see how Cartier-Bresson uses the analogy of the camera being a "sketchbook" -- and how important intuition and spontaneity is in terms of clicking the shutter.

Furthermore, Cartier-Bresson is interested in using photography as a way of constructing meaning out of the world (with his camera):

"In order to "give a meaning" to the world, one has to feel oneself involved in what one frames through the viewfinder. This attitude requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry-- it is by great econ-

omy of means that one arrives at simplicity of expression. One must always take photographs with the greatest respect for the subject and for oneself."

There are several points which I find fascinating with this excerpt from Cartier-Bresson.

a) "In order to 'give a meaning' to the world, one has to feel oneself involved in what one frames through the viewfinder" : Cartier-Bresson espouses the importance of being emotionally or personally involved in the photography one does. You can't just be an outside observer, you are more of an active participant.

b) "This attitude requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry": To capture meaning in the world, you can't get distracted (only focus on shooting, don't think about anything else), having the discipline to capture a great moment, sensitivity (being emotionally empathetic towards your subject), and a sense of geometry (composing your photograph well, by framing it well, and having com-

positional elements which complement your subject).

c) "It is by great economy of means that one arrives at simplicity of expression": I like this quite zen-like philosophy of "simplicity of expression" -- that great photographs don't need to be complicated-- they should be distilled to say the most in a photograph without being overly complex. Most of Cartier-Bresson's finest images are quite simple and minimalist geometrically speaking, whereas photographers such as Alex Webb tend to be "maximalists". d) "One must always take photographs with the greatest respect for the subject and for oneself." Photography as being a two-way street, an interaction between the subject and photographer. You need to shoot from the heart, and try to understand your subject -- and know there is a strong, almost spiritual connection between you and who is on the other side of the viewfinder.

### **Takeaway point:**

I think one of the most important questions to ask yourself as a photogra-



pher is: "Why do I shoot? And what is it about street photography which appeals to me the most? Why do I shoot 'street photography'? What does it do for me on a personal basis? How does it change how I see and interact with the world? Does street photography make me a better person-- if so, how? What makes my photography unique from other street photographers, or other photographers in general?"

Cartier-Bresson was quite clear why he shot photography: he wanted to give meaning to his world.

I think the way he also constructed his emotions were two-fold: trying to capture emotion and empathy for his subjects, while also composing them in a geometrically beautiful way. Generally I think Cartier-Bresson was more biased towards making beautiful images (some of his images lack emotion, but are composed really well). Not to say that Cartier-Bresson's photographs lack emotion and empathy-- he has captured many emotional images (which I think tend to be his best work).

Regardless, I think Cartier-Bresson is definitely onto something. As photographers and human beings, we are constantly trying to construct meaning in our lives and in the world. And I think street photography is one of the most beautiful vehicles to better explore, interact, dissect, and understand the world through image-making.

## 2. On the joy of photography

I think sometimes we get too focused on making great images, getting lots of followers and likes on social media-- that we forget the inherent joy of photography.

Cartier-Bresson in 1976 wrote this about the joy of photography:

"To take photographs is to hold one's breath when all faculties converge in the face of fleeting reality. It is at that moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy."

I love this quote for so many different reasons.

First of all, literally writing that photography is to hold one's breath makes it so much more vivid-- and alive. I sometimes get quite nervous when I am shooting street photography-- but it is in those moments that I totally lose a sense of myself, and totally get enveloped in "the moment" or "the zone" (similar to being in a "flow state" as psychologist Mihaly Csizsimihaly writes).

Also Cartier-Bresson says that when taking photographs, the key moment is when "all faculties converge in the face of fleeting reality" -- meaning that all of his senses become heightened (his vision, his reflexes, etc) when he sees reality (what he sees before him) going away before his very eyes (fleeting). As photographers, that is what we are trying to do-- capture reality before it fades before our very eyes. Especially in street photography-- where moments come and go quite quickly, and are fleeting in nature.

And one of the great joys that Cartier-Bresson gains in trying to capture these "fleeting moments" and using all of his skills with the camera, composi-

tion, and timing his images (that he feels great physical and intellectual joy).

I think Cartier-Bresson brings up a great point: that photography (especially street photography) incorporating both the physical and intellectual joy.

*The physical:* Running around on the streets, being physically quick to capture moments, being physically adept with your camera (knowing how to focus quickly, change your aperture, shutter speed, ISO, etc), and framing your camera with ease.

*The intellectual:* Using your brain when shooting, knowing how to frame your photograph, how to incorporate graphical and geometrical shapes and balance in your image.

A lot of psychology I have been studying stresses the importance of having a good balance between the physical/mental in our life. When our bodies are physically well and thriving, we tend to do better mentally. And vice-versa: when we are mentally well and happy, our bodies tend to be physically better as well.

**Takeaway point:**

In street photography, if you want to heighten your experience and the joy you get out of it-- try to see how you can combine both the physical and mental in the streets.

*The physical:* make sure you practice your timing in street photography. Try to be faster when it comes to shooting. Don't hesitate. Approach strangers and interact with them when you feel your heart pounding and you are nervous. Also get so trapped in the "flow" of the streets-- that you lose yourself physically. Don't do the walking-- let your feet do the walking, and over time the more skilled you get in street photography, your camera will shoot itself (without your mind thinking).

*The mental:* Try to really get into a meditative state when you're shooting in the streets. You can do this by turning off your smartphone, turning it to airplane mode, or muting it. Don't let any external things distract you. I know some street photographers who like to listen to music to "zone out" -- personally I don't like doing this as it makes me lose

focus from the streets. But if this works for you-- go for it.

Furthermore, make sure when you're shooting your mind is actively composing the scene-- looking at the edges of the frame, and being intellectually challenged and stimulated. If you shoot mostly single-subjects walking by billboards or posters (and are bored by that)-- try to capture more layers, nuances, and depth in your photographs. Study Alex Webb, Garry Winogrand, and Nikos Economopoulos for more complex compositions and images.

Ultimately what you want when you're shooting in the streets is to fall into a "flow state" -- when you are 100% focused at the task at hand, when you lose a sense of time, and a loss of "self". It will almost become like an out-of-body experience. I often find this when I disappear into the waves of people in New York City or London, or even when I am writing for this blog.

Seek these "flow states" -- and lose yourself in the moment of shooting in the streets.

### 3. On capturing the "decisive moment"

"There is nothing in this world without a decisive moment." - Cardinal Retz

I think one of the best ways to describe street photography is to capture "decisive moments" (or Kodak moments).

I also am quite aware that the use of the "decisive moment" in street photography is a bit over-used and cliché. But at the same time, I don't think there is a better term to describe the importance of both recognizing a great image/moment and having the intuition and skill to capture it quickly.

This is what Cartier-Bresson said about capturing "the decisive moment":

"To take photographs means to recognize-- simultaneously and within a fraction of a second-- both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis." - 1976

I wrote in an article titled: "The Myth of the Decisive Moment" that the recognition of great images and when to hit the shutter varies (even within a scene). Meaning, if you see a great scene (which you think you can get a great street photograph)-- don't just take one image. Work the scene. Take lots of images (as Cartier-Bresson did if you inspect his contact sheets).

But I think we shouldn't misconstrue Cartier-Bresson's exact words. I think people (including myself) misinterpret what Cartier-Bresson said and intended. To be more clear about "the decisive moment" -- let's try to break it down together below:

**a) "To take photographs means to recognize-- simultaneously and within a fraction of a second-- both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning."**

Cartier-Bresson tells the importance of recognition of "the fact itself" (the subject matter) and "rigorous organization of perceived forms" (composition), "that



give it meaning" (what emotion/meaning/message are you trying to get through a photograph). Therefore I think the decisive moment includes 3 key elements:

1. Identifying a great moment or potential photograph
2. Composition
3. Emotion/meaning/message

Let's break this down a little further below:

#### *1. Identifying a great moment or potential photograph*

To identify a great moment or potential photograph is to study a lot of great photography, and to study the masters. It is to study a lot of great photography books (mostly artist books) and to know what makes a great image-- by seeing the great work that has been done before us, and by ingesting lots of great photographs into our visual vocabulary. It is also studying outside fields in art: painting, sculpture, film, drawings, and even music to inspire our work.

#### *2. Composition*

To make a great composition is to study composition itself. If you want to learn more about composition and street photography, I have done an entire series on it.

But composition in street photography is to use framing, leading lines, and contrast to best highlight your subject, and to separate them from the background. Composition are like little arrows that point at your subject and tell your viewer: "hey, look here" -- while composition also serves to add balance, rhythm, and visual harmony and beauty to an image.

#### *3. Emotion/meaning/message*

Ultimately I think a photograph without emotion, meaning, or a message is a dead photograph. Who cares about a photo of anything-- unless we are able to construct some sort of meaning, emotion, or message from it? Often I see a lot of street photography that is composed well and has a nice "moment"-- but doesn't say anything to me, or strike an emotional chord for me.

So when you are editing your street photographs (choosing your best images) ask yourself: "What am I trying to say with this photograph? What does this photograph mean to me? What emotions come forth in this image?"

So to sum up, you need these 3 things to create a strong "decisive moment".

**b) "It is putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis."**

Cartier-Bresson sums up very eloquently that creating a great "decisive moment" in photography is to combine your head (intellectual abilities), your eye (vision), and heart (emotions) on the "same axis".

You need to be attuned to all of these aspects of photography: the intellectual, the visual, and the emotional to create a memorable and meaningful photograph.

### 3. Why take photos?

We discussed this a bit earlier in point #1, but Cartier-Bresson expands

on what photography means to him-- ultimately visual expression:

"As far as I am concerned, taking photographs is a means of understanding which cannot be separated from other means of visual expression. It is a way of shouting, of freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one's originality. It is a way of life."- 1976

Cartier-Bresson also tells us what photography and visual expression isn't about-- which is "proving or asserting one's originality".

Sometimes us as photographers try so hard to show how different and original we are as human beings and image-makers, that we forget that isn't the most important thing.

Rather, Cartier-Bresson just tell us photography is simply "a way of life".

I have to agree with Cartier-Bresson on this point: I think street photography isn't just wandering the streets and making images. It is a way of life-- it is a lifestyle and an approach to the way we see and interact with the world.

For example, street photography has helped me become a better human being in many different ways:

**a) Street photography has helped me become more empathetic**

I feel that through shooting photos of strangers, I can become more empathetic to their situation. I can feel their heart, their emotions, and I try to capture these feelings through my camera. I become more attuned to individuals around me, whereas I used to be caught up in my own bubble and world.

**b) Street photography has helped me become more attuned to life**

Nowadays with my smartphone and technology, I am always distracted. I am always in a daze. From the moment I wake up, and to the moment I sleep-- I am distracted (and eyes glued to my smartphone more than I would like). Even when I am eating I catch myself reading books or articles on my phone, or listening to music or podcasts. I need constant stimulation, and never do just one thing at a time.

But with street photography, I have no other distractions. I just focus on shooting. I don't listen to music, and have any other external forms of distractions. Street photography is one of the few times in my everyday life and existence when I just tune out from the bullshit of everyday life-- financial stress, stress about my relationships and family, stress about how others perceive me, and the stress I get about the purpose of my everyday life and existence.

**c) Street photography forces me outside of my comfort zone**

Street photography at times still can be terrifying to me. I still miss dozens of great "decisive moments" because I am too nervous to bring up my camera, or afraid of pissing somebody off.

However street photography has helped me become a more confident person. I used to never have the courage to take a photo of a stranger before street photography-- but now it has become much easier.

I also used to never talk to strangers before street photography. But street pho-

tography has helped me approach strangers I would have never had the confidence before to do so. And also small things: I have no problem approaching strangers and asking for help, directions, or questions.

Street photography has also helped me be more assertive and confident when I am in a room full of strangers. If I have the confidence to take a photo of a stranger with (or without) permission-- I can interact with a group of strangers. I used to have (somewhat) severe stage fright and would tense up, stutter my words, and my heart rate would go dramatically up when speaking before a large crowd. But that has mostly disappeared after being a more confident street photographer.

**d) Street photography has helped me appreciate the small things of everyday life**

I think street photography can also be well described as "capturing the beauty in the mundane". It is capturing the beauty of everyday things, and everyday ordinary moments.

I was initially drawn to street photography because I didn't need crazy events happening-- like thunderstorms or double-rainbows to make interesting photographs. The world was my oyster-- I could just go explore by leaving my apartment, walk around my neighborhood-- and experience life in the small things.

I now take great pleasure in noticing (and photographing) the small joys of everyday life: seeing an old couple (still in life) holding hands and talking at a cafe, a little child smiling at his/her parent, or a cat enjoying a nice walk in the park.

All of this was totally hidden to me before I started shooting street photography.

## 4. On Buddhism

As I mentioned earlier in the introduction of this article that many people have claimed that Cartier-Bresson was a "stealth buddhist". In-fact, it mentions the link between Cartier-Bresson and buddhism on the front-cover of "The mind's eye".



So what does Cartier-Bresson himself think about buddhism? He explains his thoughts below:

"Buddhism is neither a religion nor a philosophy, but a medium that consists in controlling the spirit in order to attain harmony and, through compassion, to offer it to others." - 1976

I have personally been influenced highly by Buddhism (although I am Catholic by religion and birth). I have learned a lot from Buddhism in terms of finding more peace, harmony, and compassion in my everyday life. It has helped relieve a lot of the "mental suffering" that I experience in my everyday life.

Cartier-Bresson says that Buddhism isn't a religion nor a philosophy (so don't worry if others judge you as being "new-agey" when you are interested in Buddhism) and how it is a medium that "consists in controlling the spirit to attain harmony".

I think a lot of live "un-harmonious" lives in the sense that we feel discomfort, dissatisfaction, and edginess in our everyday lives. We feel dissatisfied with

what we currently own (let's say our cameras and equipment, our cars, our homes), we feel dissatisfied with our relationships with others, and we sometimes feel dissatisfied with our jobs and what we are doing with our lives.

However I found that street photography is one of the best ways to gain more appreciation in our everyday lives--it helps us achieve harmony in our lives in the sense that it brings joy to our lives, and helps us focus on the present moment (without lamenting about the past, or feeling anxious about the future).

Furthermore, Cartier-Bresson saw Buddhism as a way of offering harmony to others, through compassion.

I also feel that is another gift of street photography: you are capturing beautiful (and sometimes not so beautiful) moments of everyday life-- and offering it to others. I think your street photographs can help inspire your viewers to be more attuned to everyday life, to appreciate life, and also to find more happiness. And through shooting street pho-

tography in a compassionate way-- we can achieve this.

### **Takeaway point:**

So remember, you are doing a good thing through street photography. You are contributing to others in society. You are capturing beautiful "decisive moments" of everyday life which can sometimes relieve the suffering of your viewers, by making them appreciate the small things.

Let's say you shoot a street photograph, show it to someone, and it makes them laugh or smile. Congratulations-- you just made their day much happier and upbeat. You have made the world a slightly better place (by influencing that one person).

Let's say you shoot a street photograph that is a little more depressing or sad. Then you show it to someone-- and it deeply touches or moves them emotionally. You get your viewer to empathize with the subject in your photograph. Congratulations-- you have given your viewer the opportunity to be more empathetic to the suffering of others

through your photograph. You have made the world a slightly better place.

Through street photography you are making the world a better place-- one image at a time, and by influencing one person at a time.

## **5. On the passion for photography**

As mentioned earlier, Cartier-Bresson wasn't so interested in photography "in itself"-- but rather, capturing emotion and beauty in the world:

"My passion has never been for photography "in itself," but for the possibility-- through forgetting yourself-- of recording in a fraction of a second the emotion of the subject, and the beauty of the form; that is, a geometry awakened by what's offered. The photographic shot is one of my sketchpads." - 1994

Street photography isn't the only way of "forgetting yourself" or capturing emotions of your subjects, or the beauty of the forms in the world.

Other artists can do this via sketching, via making movies, via making sculptures, via writing, and via painting.

However as street photographers, we choose to capture beauty in the world with our cameras. Perhaps we aren't so good at drawing or sketching-- so we use our cameras instead.

### **Takeaway point:**

I think sometimes we lose inspiration for street photography. But at the end of the day, you don't need to be interested in photography. You just need to be interested in life, and curious about the beauty in the world.

I know a lot of street photographers who don't shoot street photography anymore. While part of me feels like that is a shame-- they have gone onto doing different and sometimes better things. Some have picked up painting, some have picked up writing, some have picked up music. They have found other ways to express themselves, and the beauty of the world they experience around them.

So if street photography no longer interests you, or you no longer have a

passion for it-- perhaps it is healthy to take a break from it, and see if it is truly the best way for you to express yourself.

Even Cartier-Bresson did this at the end of his career and life: he gave up photography and decided that painting and drawing was a better way he could express himself and the beauty of the world around him.

For me personally, I gain a lot of the meaning I experience in the world through reading, writing, and teaching. Taking photographs is just one of the very many ways I create meaning in my world.

So don't feel photography needs to be the only way you can more vividly experience the world-- it is just another tool.

## **6. Cartier-Bresson's personal history in photography**

In "The mind's eye" Cartier-Bresson talks a little about how he got started in

photography-- and his personal background and story:

### **Picking up photography as a small boy:**

"I, like many another boy, burst into the world of photography with a Box Brownie, which I used for taking holiday snapshots. Even as a child, I had a passion for painting, which I "did" on Thursdays and Sundays, the days when French school children don't have to go to school. Gradually, I set myself to try to discover the various ways in which I could play with a camera. From the moment that I began to use the camera and to think about it, however, there was an end to holiday snaps and silly pictures of my friends. I became serious. I was on the scent of something, and I was busy smelling it out."

You can see Cartier-Bresson's first foray into photography-- when he started off not taking it too seriously-- just taking holiday snapshots (like many of us). We also learn that Cartier-Bresson had a passion for painting as a small child (he

did this on his own, as he didn't have to do it while at school).

Furthermore, you see how he started exploring the possibilities of working with a camera-- as he went out to "discover the various ways which I could play with the camera."

However he soon discovered that he wanted to become more serious with his camera-- and like a bloodhound, he started to detect the scent of the possibility of photography-- and became dedicated to pursuing it and "sniffing it out".

### **Early inspiration from films:**

Cartier-Bresson also got a lot of inspiration early-on from films. He explains:

"Then there were the movies. From some of the great films, I learned to look, and to see. "Mysteries of New York", with Pearl White; the great films of D.W. Griffith-- "Broken Blossoms"; the first films of Stroheim; "Greed"; Eisenstein's "Potemkin" and Dreyer's "Jeanne d'Arc"-- these were some of the things that impressed me deeply.



Cartier-Bresson describes that seeing films early-on helped him to "look, and to see."

I think these are very important aspects-- to be curious in terms of looking at visual forms. To be excited by what the camera can do. The there is the second part: learning how to see (seeing the possibilities of what a camera could achieve).

This takes us back to an important part of photography in general: learning how to see with your eyes, knowing what interests you, and being curious is much more important than what camera you shoot with or being technically proficient in photography.

### **Going to Africa:**

Cartier-Bresson also embarked on an epic trip to Africa (at the ripe age of 22). He tells us his journey below:

"In 1931, when I was 22, I went to Africa. On the Ivory Coast I bought a miniature camera of a kind I have never seen before or since, made by the French firm Krauss. It used film of a size that 35mm would be without the sprocket

holes. For a year I took pictures with it. On my return to France I had my pictures developed-- it was not possible before, for I lived in the bush, isolated, during most of that year-- and I discovered that the damp had got into the camera and that all my photographs were embellished with the superimposed patterns of giant ferns."

Every photographer's nightmare happened to Cartier-Bresson as a young man: after shooting for a year in an exotic and remote place in the world, he discovered all of his film was ruined.

However he didn't let this huge setback disappoint him or prevent him from being curious in photography. Rather, it was almost like a fire which made him even more curious and passionate about photography.

### **Discovering the Leica and trapping life:**

Cartier-Bresson then continues by sharing how he discovered the Leica, which liberated him (being a small, easy-to-use camera) to hunt moments in the street and pursue "trapping life":

"I had had blackwater fever in Africa, and was now obliged to convalesce. I went to Marseille. A small allowance enabled me to get along, and I worked with enjoyment. I had just discovered the Leica. It became the extension of my eye, and I have never been separated from it since I found it. I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strung-up and ready to pounce, determined to "trap" life-- to preserve life in the act of living."

Although now we look at the Leica as an expensive, luxury item for only rich people-- it was revolutionary when it was first invented. It was the world's first 35mm camera. It was the first truly compact and usable camera both for amateurs and working professionals. Before the Leica, most photographers used bulky and clunky large-format or medium-format cameras. Cartier-Bresson found the small Leica to free himself to prowl the streets all day, and to "preserve life in the act of living." Photography was a way for Cartier-Bresson to augment his experience in living life-- by capturing life and making it more vivid, and experiencing it more vividly.

Cartier-Bresson continues what he wanted to do with photography:

"Above all, I craved to size, in the confines of one single photograph, the whole essence of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes."

Obviously Cartier-Bresson was fascinated and marveled by life in general. He would see these amazing situations unfold before his very eyes-- and would want to capture the "essence of some situation" with his camera. He wanted to make these moments eternal.

Personally I have a fear of forgetting-- and photography is a way for me to record and document my everyday life through those around me. Photography helps me capture the happy moments of my life, and also some of the more depressing and lonely times. Photography is a vehicle for me to better capture, understand, and experience the world around me.

### **Takeaway point:**

Cartier-Bresson's start into photography was separated in these phases:

- a) Curiosity (discovering the art of photography)
- b) Pursuit and adventure (going to Africa)
- c) Frustration (discovering all his photos from Africa were ruined)
- d) Increased passion (buying a Leica and pursuing moments on the streets)
- e) Realization of the great potential of photography (self-actualization of his passion for life, for capturing fleeting moments)

Think about your own personal life journey in photography. How did you discover photography? How did you discover "street photography"? What about street photography first appealed to you? What made street photography unique from other types of photography out there? What are some of the personal challenges you had when you started street photography? What are some challenges you still face today?

Ultimately-- what does street photography ultimately do for you? What joy or pleasure does it bring to your life?

How has street photography helped you discover how you see and experience the world, and life in general?

Meditate upon these questions-- and it will help you find more focus and direction in your photography (and perhaps life).

## 7. On being an amateur

Often when you hear the phrase "amateur" -- you think of a newbie. Someone who is obviously clueless, an idiot, and unskilled.

When we hear someone is an "amateur" in photography-- we presume that they are unskilled with a camera, don't know the difference between aperture and shutter speed, that they don't know the difference between a good and a bad photograph, and that they are totally clueless.

However I think this line of thinking is wrong: an amateur is merely someone who does something for the love of it. In-fact, the root word for "amateur" is love.

Cartier-Bresson says how after 25+ years of photography, he still sees himself as an amateur:

"25 years have passed since I started to look through my view-finder. But I regard myself still as an amateur, though I am still no longer a dilettante."

So what is the difference between an "amateur" and a "dilettante"?

An amateur is someone who does something for the love of it, whereas a "dilettante" is a person who is interested in something "...without real commitment or knowledge" (according to Google).

So therefore Cartier-Bresson said in other words: I am still passionate and shoot photography because I love it, but I am not like other "amateurs" in the sense that I am truly committed to it and I now knowledgeable about photography.

### **Takeaway point:**

I think we should be like Cartier-Bresson: we should be amateurs (without being dilettantes).

We should shoot for the pure joy and love of it, but at the same time--dedicate ourselves to truly committing ourselves to photography and learning more knowledge about photography:

1. Shooting as an amateur is to shoot without any incentive of profit or money. It is self-mediated and intrinsic motivation (not extrinsic). And furthermore, we shoot for the sake of shooting.
2. Furthermore, we commit ourselves to photography. We spend lots of time to shoot, we think about it, we immerse ourselves in it, we make photography a way of life.
3. Lastly, we try to gain knowledge about photography and take it seriously. We educate ourselves by studying the work of the masters, buying books (and not gear), investing in photography classes and workshops, traveling and getting outside of our comfort zones, and surrounding ourselves with other photographers we admire and respect who give us con-



structive criticism to push our photography to the next level.

## 8. On creating a "picture story" or "photo essay"

I think one of the weaknesses of "street photography" is that it often too focused on the single image. We don't focus as much on narrative and storytelling (as reportage or documentary photographers do).

Cartier-Bresson talks about "photographic reportage" or a "picture story" below (note this is when magazines like "LIFE magazine" were the few and only ways a photographer could get published and have his/her work widely seen by the public).

He first starts off by saying that sometimes a single image can be so powerful-- that a single image can be "a whole story in itself":

"What actually is a photographic reportage, a picture story? Sometimes there is one unique picture whose composition possesses such vigor and richness, and whose content so radiates out-

ward from it, that this single picture is a whole story in itself."

However Cartier-Bresson makes the point that it is very rare that a single image can capture an entire story-- and sometimes you need to build upon it and make a "picture story":

"But this rarely happens. The elements which, together, can strike sparks from a subject, are often scattered-- either in terms of space or time-- and bringing them together by force is "stage management," and, I feel, contrived. But if it is possible to make pictures of the "core" as well as the struck-off sparks of the subject, this is a picture-story. The page serves to reunite the complementary elements which are dispersed throughout several photographs."

So Cartier-Bresson shares how a picture story can be told with several images-- in terms of how you tell the core of a story with complementary images, and a lot of this is how images are laid out and sequenced.

He continues when you make a "picture story" -- you must depict the con-

tent (in terms of what is actually happening in the photographs), but also making it emotional:

"The picture-story involves a joint operation of the brain, the eye, and the heart. The objective of this joint operation is to depict the content of some event which is in the process of unfolding, and to communicate impressions."

Cartier-Bresson also shares the challenges of documenting a certain story or event-- and how there are no "rules" or pre-established patterns you must follow:

"Sometimes a single event can be so rich in itself and its facets that it is necessary to move all around it in your search for the solution to the problems it poses-- for the world is movement, and you cannot be stationary in your attitude toward something that is moving. Sometimes you light upon the picture in seconds; it might also require hours or days. But there is no standard plan, no pattern from which to work. You must be on the alert with the brain, the eye,

the heart, and have a suppleness of body."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think as photographers in the 21st century-- many of us started off with digital cameras and social media. We assume that photography is just about making strong single images and uploading them to Flickr, Instagram, or Facebook and getting lots of "likes", "favorites" and comments (and gaining more followers).

However more sophisticated photographers aim to create bodies of work-- they aim to create books, series, and projects (to learn more about how to work on a photography book or project, I recommend reading my article on "Photographer's Sketchbooks" and "The Photo-book: A History Volume III").

So in short, aim to create "picture stories" -- narratives, and series.

I have found one of the best ways to see how you can put together a "picture story" is look at the old LIFE magazines-- and see how photographers were able to tell a story in 5-7 images. Look at how the images were laid out, se-

quenced, and how they complemented the text. See if there are any captions which add context to the images.

Furthermore, look at photographic books. See how many images there are in the book. See how the images are sequenced. Try to analyze the images (if they are paired together, side-by-side). Why did a photographer choose to create a certain sequence, and why did he decide to leave certain pages blank, while other pages pair together with other photographs?

Also watch films: they are probably the best way to understand opening shots, close-up shots, how to build up action in the film, what the climax is, and how to end a story. Or read books, literature, or fiction.

Some also find great inspiration in music-- in terms of finding a cadence, flow, and rhythm.

## 9. Eliminate and subtract

One of the philosophies that Cartier-Bresson encourages is minimalism: to be able to eliminate and subtract

from life. He explains his advice for photographers:

"Things-As-They-Are offer such an abundance of material that a photographer must guard against the temptation of trying to do everything. It is essential to cut from the raw material of life-- to cut and cut, but to cut with discrimination."

When I first started shooting street photography, I was also tempted in terms of "trying to do everything". I tried to shoot weddings, children, landscapes, macros, etc. But it was when I finally discovered "street photography" and decided to focus, is when I started to really find purpose and meaning in my photography.

I also love how Cartier-Bresson shares the importance of "cutting from the raw material of life" (but cutting with discrimination).

It makes me think of the quote from Albert Einstein in which he says we should aim to make things as simple as possible (but not too simple).

After all, photography is more about subtraction (than addition).

Furthermore, he encourages us to "work the scene" if we smell the possible scent that it might be a great photograph. But we need to balance between being like a machine-gunner, and being discerning:

"While working, a photographer must reach a precise awareness of what he is trying to do. Sometimes you have the feeling that you have already taken the strongest possible picture of a particular situation or scene; nevertheless, you find yourself compulsively shooting, because you cannot be sure in advance exactly how the situation, the scene, is going to unfold. You must stay with the scene, just in case the elements of the situation shoot off from the core again. At the same time, it's essential to avoid shooting like a machine-gunner and burdening yourself with useless recordings which clutter your memory and spoil the exactness of the reportage as a whole."

Cartier-Bresson also shares the importance of elimination and subtraction

when it comes to the editing phase (selecting your best work):

"For photographers, there are two kinds of selection to be made, and either of them can lead to eventual regrets. There is the selection we make when we look through the view-finder at the subject; and there is the one we make after the films have been developed and printed. After developing and printing, you must go about separating the pictures which, though they are all right, aren't the strongest."

Cartier-Bresson also shares the importance of learning from our failures in our photographs. Did our photos fail because we hesitated while we were shooting? Or did we not see that we had a cluttered background? Or did we not see that we missed out some other information that was happening in the scene (that we should have included)? Or perhaps we got sloppy at some point when constructing the image? He elaborates below:

"When it's too late, then you know with a terrible clarity exactly where you



failed; and at this point you often recall the telltale feeling you had while you were actually making the pictures. Was it a feeling of hesitation due to uncertainty? Was it because of some physical gulf between yourself and the unfolding event? Was it simply that you did not take into account a certain detail in relation to the whole setup? Or was it (and this is more frequent) that your glance became vague, your eye wandered off?"

### **Takeaway point:**

As photographers, there are two main ways we need to subtract:

1. Shooting phase: we need to subtract clutter and unnecessary elements while shooting.
2. Editing phase: we need to subtract the weak photos during the editing phase.

Both are absolutely crucial.

### **Shooting phase:**

So when we are in the shooting phase, we should try to be discerning while we are shooting. We should try to "work the scene" by taking multiple im-

ages, from the side, by crouching, or sometimes by standing on our tippy-toes. We should wait for other interesting gestures to happen, and decide to click at those moments. We shouldn't also leave the scene too early and stop shooting-- but at the same time, not add too much clutter by wasting frames by shooting too much.

We should also try to subtract clutter from the background. Try to avoid random cars, trees, white bags, or other distractions that might take away from the scene.

Try to also eliminate subject-matter that might distract from the scene (other subjects in the frame that aren't as important).

### **Editing phase:**

The editing phase is one of the most difficult times to subtract. We become emotionally attached to our photographs, as we often have vivid memories of having taken certain shots, and the interesting backstories we have.

But just because your photo might have an interesting backstory doesn't

mean that it will make an interesting photograph. Often backstories (or having really long and detailed captions) are just a blanket for the fact that the photograph itself isn't strong (and it needs a backstory or a caption to "explain" it). I think a strong image should stand on its own and require no additional support.

We also need to be better at learning how to "kill our babies" when it comes to working on a body of work or a project. For example, if you are working on a series and you have a certain image that doesn't fit the narrative (but might be a strong single-image), you might have to edit it out (to benefit the story). For example, in Trent Parke's "Minutes to midnight" apparently he had to edit out 3 of his favorite images, because they didn't fit the narrative of his book.

I think in photography, you are only as good as your weakest image. Take out the weak links in your work, and let the strong work speak.

## 10. On vanishing things

One of the biggest gifts of street photography (and also the biggest curses) is

that things are constantly vanishing. Once a moment has come and gone, it is lost forever.

The upside is that when you shoot street photography, nobody will be able to shoot that certain photograph (like how you shot it). But the downside is that if you're not quick enough to capture "the decisive moment" -- you will never be able to capture it again.

Cartier-Bresson explains this below-- how we as photographers constantly deal with the transient and vanishing:

"Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes forever the precise and transitory instant. We photographers deal in things that are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth that can make them come back again."

Furthermore, Cartier-Bresson brings up the idea of memories-- how we cannot develop and print them (simply from our own heads). The upside of being a writer or a painter is that they have the

time to sit, meditate, and create (from their own minds) what they want to.

However as photographers, we can only deal with the transient-- the things that we see before our very own eyes (that will disappear quickly):

"We cannot develop and print a memory. The writer has time to reflect. He can accept and reject, accept again; and before committing his thought to paper he is able to tie the several relevant elements together. There is also a period when his brain "forgets," and his subconscious works on classifying his thoughts. But for photographers, what has gone is gone forever."

Cartier-Bresson also brings up the anxieties (and also strengths) this can bring to our work:

"From that fact stem the anxieties and strengths of our profession. We cannot do our story over again once we've got back to the hotel. Our task is to perceive reality, almost simultaneously recording it in the sketchbook which is our camera."

Furthermore, Cartier-Bresson is tied to the idea that we should try to capture reality (as we see it) rather than trying to manipulate or misconstrue it:

"We must neither try to manipulate reality while we are shooting, nor manipulate the results in a darkroom. These tricks are patently discernible to those who have eyes to see."

The difficult thing though is that when we are photographing, we are essentially interpreting reality in one way or another. There is no "objective truth" or "objective reality" when we are photographing. But essentially what I think Cartier-Bresson is trying to tell us to be authentic-- to present our own authentic version of reality through our images.

### **Takeaway point:**

Realize that while fleeting moments can be a downside to photography (especially street photography)-- it is also our strength.

I personally don't think street photography would be as rewarding if it was too easy. It is the challenge which is the reward.

Also realize that you want to live life without regrets. I have regretted so many times not having taken a photograph out of hesitation or fear (worrying if someone might get angry at me, or worrying that the shot I take is boring and of no interest to others).

But ultimately you want to follow your gut. If you have even a minuscule feeling that a photograph might be a good one-- just shoot it. You can always edit it out later.

Shoot without regrets, and live without regrets. Life is quickly vanishing before our very eyes-- and if we don't experience and capture it, it will be gone forever.

## 11. On interacting with people

Although Cartier-Bresson was more of a "stealth street photographer" (he didn't like being noticed when shooting) -- he interacted a lot of his subjects, especially when he shot formal portraits. But at the same time, he was very conscientious and aware of how he interacted

with strangers (especially in foreign countries).

Cartier-Bresson writes about the importance of a photographer having a certain relationship with a subject:

"The profession depends so much upon the relations the photographer establishes with the people he's photographing, that is a false relationship, a wrong word or attitude, can ruin everything. When the subject is in any way uneasy, the personality goes away where the camera can't reach it."

But how does a photographer make strong images, without being obtrusive or disrespectful towards his subjects? Cartier-Bresson admits there are no fool-proof systems-- and that we must treat each individual subject and situation differently-- to be as unobtrusive as we can:

"There are no systems, for each case is individual and demands that we be unobtrusive, though we must be at close range. Reactions of people differ much from country to country, and from one social group to another. Throughout the whole of the Orient, for example, an im-



patient photographer-- or one who is simply pressed for time-- is subject to ridicule. If you have made yourself obvious, even just by getting your light-meter out, the only thing to do is to forget about photography for the moment, and accomodatingly allow the children who come rushing at you to cling to your knees like burrs."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think the best advice I have heard in street photography is from Bruce Gilden, "Shoot who you are."

To expand on that-- I think it is also important to shoot in a way that reflects your personality.

For example, if you find yourself more introverted and not liking to interact with strangers and "disturbing the scene" -- stick to your guts and instinct, and shoot that way. Cartier-Bresson would like to shoot this way, as does Constantine Manos, Jeff Mermelstein, Alex Webb and many other more "candid behind-the-scenes" photographers.

However if you find yourself a type of street photographer who likes to inter-

act with your subjects -- follow that instinct. Be social, influence the scene, embed yourself into the scene. Be like Bruce Gilden, Garry Winogrand, William Klein-- and show your personality through your work.

But at the end of the day-- you want to be empathetic and loving towards your subjects. Treat your subjects how you would like to be treated.

If you generally like to be left alone and have your personal space, perhaps shoot street photography more from a distance (and more candidly). If you like interaction, perhaps you can ask your subjects for permission-- or just shoot from a close and intimate distance.

Follow your heart, and do what feels right for you.

## **12. On knowing what to photograph**

One of the challenges we have as photographers is knowing what to photograph. After all, the world is a big place-- and subject matter out there is infinite.

Cartier-Bresson gives us some thoughts:

### **Photographing what we feel:**

First of all, Cartier-Bresson encourages us to photograph what we feel:

"There is subject in all that takes place in the world, as well as in our personal universe. We cannot negate subject. It is everywhere. So we must be lucid toward what is going on in the world, and honest about what we feel."

We should focus on our own "personal universe" -- and photograph subject matter which is personal and honest -- in terms of what we feel and perceive reality.

### **Communicate reality:**

Cartier-Bresson also says that when you are photographing, you aren't just documenting facts and "things as they are". Rather, you are making an interpretation of your own world and reality:

"Subject does not consist of a collection of facts, for facts in themselves offer little interest. Through facts, however, we can reach an understanding of the

laws that govern them, and be better able to select the essential ones which communicate reality."

Therefore through the act of photography, you also better understand the world around you-- and you want to select the "essential truths" which communicate reality from your perspective.

### **Great subjects often lie in the smallest things:**

Know that when you are selecting subjects to shoot in street photography, it is often the small details or the small events that make the best photographs:

"In photography, the smallest thing can be a great subject. The little, human detail can become a leitmotiv. We see and show the world around us, but it is an event itself which provokes the organic rhythm of forms."

So realize that the best photography is often in your own backyard. I know-- it is hard to make interesting photographs in our own neighborhood. It all seems so boring. We become conditioned and normalized to our environments.

But strive to break out of that self-imposed barrier. Imagine yourself to be a tourist in your own neighborhood or city. What would you find interesting? What would you find fascinating? What would seem weird or out-of-place? See things from an outside perspective, and make beautiful art.

### **Takeaway point:**

Photograph what is personal, meaningful, and local to you.

You don't need to venture off to Tokyo, Hong Kong, Kyoto, New York, or Paris to make interesting photographs.

Personally I have found whenever I photograph in foreign countries-- I end up taking more touristy snapshots than meaningful and personal photographs.

I am currently doing a project in which I'm just shooting urban landscapes around my neighborhood. It is a personal project-- and it is forcing me to see my own environment with fresh eyes. It is a bit frustrating and difficult at times-- but ultimately rewarding.

## 13. On shooting portraits

In "The Mind's Eye", Cartier-Bresson also gave tons of great advice in terms of shooting portraits:

### **Capturing the environment around the subject:**

One of the big take-aways I gained from Cartier-Bresson is the importance of photographing the environment of your subject.

I often photograph people against blank walls-- but I am starting to realize the importance of capturing "environmental portraits"-- in which the background shows the personality of your subject (as much as the subject him/herself):

"If the photographer is to have a chance of achieving a true reflection of a person's world-- which is as much outside him as inside him-- it is necessary that the subject of the portrait should be in a situation normal to him. We must respect the atmosphere which surrounds the human being, and integrate into the portrait the individual's habitat-- for man, no less than animals, has his habitat."

## **Make the subject forget the camera:**

Another great tip from Cartier-Bresson: photograph long enough and be unobtrusive enough that your subject forgets that the camera is there. He suggests us to not use fancy equipment, which can be intimidating to your subject:

"Above all, the sitter must be made to forget about the camera and the photographer who is handling it. Complicated equipment and light reflectors and various other items of hardware are enough, to my mind, to prevent the birdie from coming out."

So leave the tripod, lights, and reflectors at home (if you want to capture the "true essence" of your subject).

## **Capturing the expression of a human face:**

One of the biggest things that Cartier-Bresson is fascinated about (when it comes to shooting portraits) is the expression of the human face. But how do we capture good expressions of the human face?

Cartier-Bresson gives us advice: the first expression a person gives you is often the best one, and sometimes you should try to spend time and "live" with your subject-- to figure out what the best expression of them is:

"What is there more fugitive and transitory than the expression on a human face? The first impression given by a particular face is often the right one; but the photographer should try always to substantiate the first impression by "living" with the person concerned."

Also realize when you are shooting a portrait-- there is a struggle: often subjects want to display themselves in the best light, but that isn't often what the photographer wants:

"The decisive moment and psychology, no less than camera position, are the principal factors in the making of a good portrait. It seems to me it would be pretty difficult to be a portrait photographer for customers who order and pay since, apart from a Maecenas or two, they want to be flattered, and the result is no longer real. The sitter is suspicious



of the objectivity of the camera, while the photographer is after an acute psychological study of the sitter."

So realize when you are shooting portraits, your subject often has a vision of how he/she wants to be portrayed (usually in a flattering light). But you as a photographer need to make an acute psychological study of your subject-- and try your best to convey who you think they are.

Of course at the end of the day, this will be very subjective-- the way you interpret or view your subject isn't the "objective" reality. But as a photographer, you are trying to create your own reality of the world-- so stay true to your initial impressions and gut intuitions.

**Every portrait you shoot is a self-portrait:**

Realize also when you are shooting portraits, the photo you take are also a reflection of yourself. Cartier-Bresson explains:

"It is true, too, that a certain identity is manifest in all the portraits taken by one photographer. The photographer is

searching for identity of his sitter, and also trying to fulfill an expression of himself. The true portrait emphasizes neither the suave nor the grotesque, but reflects the personality."

So generally when you look at the portraits of Cartier-Bresson, there is a feeling that they are natural, unforced, and quite calm and peaceful. It shows that when Cartier-Bresson is shooting portraits, he does it very respectfully and unobtrusively. I suppose this is how Cartier-Bresson would also have liked to have his own portrait taken.

**Vulnerability in portraits:**

When shooting portraits, you also make your subjects open and vulnerable to you. And you yourself should make yourself vulnerable to your subject:

"If, in making a portrait, you hope to grasp the interior silence of a willing victim, it's very difficult, but you must somehow position the camera between his shirt and his skin. Whereas with pencil drawing, it is up to the artist to have an interior silence." - 1996

**Takeaway point:**

To shoot a portrait of someone which captures someone's "essence" is one of the most difficult things in photography.

As we are mostly street photographers, we will probably be most drawn to "street portraits" -- in which we stop a stranger in the street, and ask permission to take a portrait of them. These "street portraits" often require you interact with your subjects-- and sometimes have them pose for you in a certain way.

I don't necessarily think that because a photo is with permission or posed makes it a worse photograph. If anything, it makes it much more open and loving-- as you have to interact with your subject. To make your subject open up, you need to make yourself vulnerable to your subject as well.

Ultimately know when you are shooting a portrait of someone on the streets (or anybody)-- there is no "objectivity" to the image. Your vision is your own-- and realize your subject might not always like the photo you make of them.

So generally what I do is this: if I'm shooting digitally, I'll show them on the LCD screen of the photo I made of them. I will ask them how they like the image (they generally do)-- and I offer to email it to them. When I'm shooting film, I ask my subject if they have a smartphone (they usually do)-- and I'll use their iPhone to take a flattering portrait of them (which they can later use as their Facebook profile picture or something).

If you are interested in portraiture, I highly recommend you to read my article on Richard Avedon.

## 14. On composition

Now we have encountered a nice juicy section: on composition. Cartier-Bresson was famous for being absolutely passionate and fanatical about his compositions in his photography (as he started off initially interested in painting, and later moved onto photography).

So what does the big man have to say about composition? Let's continue on in our journey and discover more from the master:

## Communicating the subject via composition:

So what does composition and form mean to Henri Cartier-Bresson?

First of all, one of Cartier-Bresson's intent in composition is to "communicate the intensity" of the subject. Meaning, the purpose of composition is to best highlight the subject of a photograph:

"If a photograph is to communicate its subject in all its intensity, the relationship of form must be rigorously established. Photography implies the recognition of a rhythm in the world of real things. What the eye does is to find and focus on the particular subject within the mass of reality; what the camera does is simply to register upon film the decision made by the eye.

Furthermore, what composition should do is guide the eye to focus on a particular subject in a photograph. This means eliminating distractions -- don't photograph what might distract the viewer from your intended subject.

Cartier-Bresson continues in sharing the importance of composition: that composition should be done intentionally while you make an image-- and that you cannot separate composition from the subject, and the photograph itself:

"We look at and perceive a photograph, as we do a painting, in its entirety and all in one glance. In a photograph, composition is the result of a simultaneous coalition, the organic coordination of elements seen by the eye. One does not add composition as though it were an afterthought superimposed on the basic subject material, since it is impossible to separate content from form. Composition must have its own inevitability about it."

So when you are out shooting on the streets, don't just shoot blindly and hope your compositions are good. Often I think beginner street photographers just look for interesting subjects and photograph them without any regard for the background or composition.

It is difficult, but try to incorporate composition and form while you are

shooting. A great tip: look at the edges of the frame and the background while you are shooting. Don't focus too much on the subject-- this will help you make better compositions and improve your framing.

### **On capturing the right moment:**

Cartier-Bresson talks in photography, our subjects and the world is constantly moving. Life unfolds fluidly before our very eyes as he explains:

"In photography there is a new kind of plasticity, the product of instantaneous lines made by movements of the subject. We work in unison with movement as though it were a presentiment of the way in which life itself unfolds."

But while the world around us is moving, there is one moment in which all of the elements come to balance and equilibrium. This is another reference to capturing a "decisive moment" (where everything comes together):

"But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must

seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it."

When capturing a "decisive moment" -- realize that your subject and the world is in a constant flow of flux.

When you are out shooting on the streets, imagine slowing down every movement-- frame-by-frame. Imagine the world as a stop-action film, and you can slow down the frame rate. Then within each frame, imagine a single photograph.

Then try to dissect the frames, try to identify what might be the most interesting frames, and click the shutter when you think all the elements of composition are in perfect unison.

### **On evaluating scenes and modifying perspectives:**

When it comes to composition-- changing your perspective is key.

You must constantly analyze your scene, and as Cartier-Bresson says, "perpetually evaluate".

Sometimes even changing your head "a fraction of a millimeter" can change



your perspective-- and draw out certain details. He explains:

"The photographer's eye is perpetually evaluating. A photographer can bring coincidence of line simply by moving his head a fraction of a millimeter. He can modify perspectives by a slight bending of the knees. By placing the camera closer to or farther from the subject, he draws a detail-- and it can be subordinated, or he can be tyrannized by it. But he composes a picture in very nearly the same amount of time it takes to click the shutter, at the speed of a reflex action."

So when you are out shooting in the streets, don't just shoot everything from the same perspective and angle. Try moving your head a little to the left, right, up, or down. Move your knees and your feet as well-- crouch down low, or sometimes step on top of things. Know that getting closer and further from your subject or scene will also change the perspective and the composition.

Lastly, remember that you have to make your reflexes quite quick and tight

when you're shooting-- to compose as quickly as you click the shutter.

### **On stalling before shooting:**

Cartier-Bresson also talks the importance of delay while you're shooting and composing. Sometimes you setup your scene, you have the right composition-- but your gut tells you that something is missing.

In those cases, Cartier-Bresson urges us to "wait for something to happen". Then only when you feel that you see something interesting happen is when you click the shutter (either you see an interesting hand gesture, someone walks into the frame, your subject looks into the lens, or someone's facial expression changes). He explains:

"Sometimes it happens that you stall, delay, wait for something to happen. Sometimes you have the feeling that here are all the makings of a picture-- except for just one thing that seems to be missing. But what one thing? Perhaps someone suddenly walks into your range of view. You follow his progress through the viewfinder. You

wait and wait, and then finally you press the button-- and you depart with the feeling (though you don't know why) that you've really got something.

Cartier-Bresson also shares that he traces his photographs, to analyze the compositions of his images-- and he uses this as a way to confirm his gut intuitions about the geometry of the images he captured:

"Later, to substantiate this, you can take a print of this picture, trace it on the geometric figures which come up under analysis, and you'll observe that, if the shutter was released at the decisive moment, you have instinctively fixed a geometric pattern without which the photograph would have been both formless and lifeless."

Cartier-Bresson makes an important point: that a photograph is often "formless and lifeless" without having a strong geometric composition.

### **On intuition and composition:**

But how conscious can we be of composition while we are shooting? Cartier-Bresson says that we should always

think about composition, but at the same time-- compose intuitively:

"Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations, but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move."

What compositional tools does Cartier-Bresson use? He applies the "Golden Rule" and strictly analyzes his images after he shoots them (to continue to improve his vision and compositions):

"In applying the Golden Rule, the only pair of compasses at the photographer's disposal is his own pair of eyes. Any geometrical analysis, any reducing of the picture to a schema, can be done only (because of its very nature) after the photograph has been taken, developed, and printed-- and then it can be used only for a post-mortem examination of the picture. I hope we will never see the day when photo shops sell little schema grills to clamp onto our viewfind-

ers; and the Golden Rule will never be found etched on our ground glass."

So what is the "Golden Rule"? A quick Wikipedia search will show you that it is a compositional tool that painters and artists have used for thousands of years-- having a precise balance and frame in images. To learn more about the "Golden Rule" within photography-- I highly recommend checking out the blog of Adam Marelli (the best online resource when it comes to composition and photography).

While you're out shooting on the streets, always have composition in the back of your mind. But know that you can't be too analytical when you're shooting on the streets-- you won't just see red lines of the "Golden Rule" in your viewfinder.

Rather, my suggestion is this: look at lots of great photography (with great compositions) like the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, and with enough viewing-- your composition will become intuitive.

### **On cropping:**

Henri Cartier-Bresson is famous for being "anti-cropping" (although ironically enough, one of his most famous images of the guy jumping over the puddle is cropped).

Regardless, I think following Cartier-Bresson's rule of not cropping is a good one. I personally haven't cropped any of my images the last 3 years, and I have found that it has forced me to be more anal and stringent of composing my images.

When I used to crop a lot, I would be sloppy when it came to framing-- because I always told myself, "Eh-- I don't need to get the framing right, I can always crop it later."

However this is what HCB has to say about cropping:

"If you start cutting or cropping a good photograph, it means death to the geometrically correct interplay of proportions. Besides, it very rarely happens that a photograph which was feebly composed can be saved by reconstruction of its composition under the darkroom's enlarger; the integrity of vision is no longer

there. There is a lot of talk about camera angles; but the only valid angles in existence are the angles of the geometry of composition and not the ones fabricated by the photographer who falls falt on his stomach or performs other antics to procure his effects."

Cartier-Bresson is also right in saying that often times as photographer, we try to "rescue" poorly composed photos by hoping that cropping it aggressively might save the image. But rarely this is the case. It is kind of like adding "HDR" or selective color (or even switching a color photo into black and white) to mask or hide the imperfections.

So if you want to improve your composition and framing: self-impose a rule of not cropping. I can guarantee you that this will improve your compositions.

Of course I don't want to be too much of a stickler-- I think cropping with moderation (around 5-10% of the edges) is fine. But if you find yourself a "crop-a-holic", consider trying to go a while without cropping-- and see if it helps you.

## 15. On color

Cartier-Bresson has shot all of his "serious" work in his lifetime in black and white. He preferred black and white for many different reasons, but towards the end of his life-- he did agree that color photography did have its merits.

So what does Cartier-Bresson think of color? Let us continue to explore:

### **On black and white photography:**

This is what Cartier-Bresson says about black and white photography-- he says that black and white makes the world a "deformation" and abstracts the world:

"In talking about composition we have been so far thinking only in terms of that symbolic color called black. Black-and-white photography is a deformation, that is to say, an abstraction. In it, all the values are transposed; and this leaves the possibility of choice."

He also says in black and white photography "all the values are transposed" -- which I think means that the brightness/contrast "values" of black and



white are already pre-established (there are only so many shades of black, grey, and white) which leaves more options for a photographer to be creative with his/her images (instead of worrying about colors).

Cartier-Bresson thought that color was often a distraction in photographs-- that photographers would worry more about the colors of an image rather than capturing human emotion and moments. In another interview I read with Cartier-Bresson he said something along the lines of, "The world is complicated enough-- why shoot in color to make it even more complicated?"

When it comes to black and white-- we do make the world an abstraction. Nobody sees the world in black and white. Therefore whenever you shoot in black and white (or convert it afterwards), you already make it surreal (which is a novelty-- this is why people think black and white photography is more "artistic").

The benefit of black and white photography is also that it essentializes the

world and the forms around us. Monochrome simplifies the world around us. By not having color-- there are fewer variables to play with in photography.

I also often find that black and white is better in capturing moods and emotions (especially more dark, moody, or depressing/somber ones). Not to say you can't do that with color photography-- but it is often more challenging and difficult in color photography. Cartier-Bresson introduces more problems of color photography in the next section:

### **Problems of color photography:**

Cartier-Bresson wrote when color photography was still in its infancy-- where film speeds were very slow (under ISO 50) which made it very difficult for photographers to capture any sort of "decisive moment" or fast-moving action or gestures. Black and white film was still superior in this regard-- as you could shoot at a higher film speed (ASA/ISO) that helped you capture these moments.

HCB expands on the difficulties of color photography:

"Color photography brings with it a number of problems that are hard to resolve today, and some of which are difficult even to foresee, owing to its complexity and its relative immaturity. At present [1952], color film emulsions are still very slow. Consequently, photographers using color have had a tendency to confine themselves to static subjects; or else to use ferociously strong artificial lights. The slow speed of color film reduces the depth of focus in the field of vision in relatively close shots; and this cramping often makes for dull composition. On top of that, blurred backgrounds in color photographs are distinctly displeasing."

So to sum up the problems that Cartier-Bresson saw of color photography (which isn't necessarily an issue nowadays are the following):

a) Slow color film speeds prevent photographers from capturing "decisive moments" (not an issue anymore, as our digital cameras can shoot color at ISO 6400+ with little to no noise).

b) Slow color film means that photographers have to shoot wide-open, which reduces the depth-of-field, which causes dull compositions (nowadays with digital cameras with high-ISO capabilities, we can still shoot at f8-f16 with fast shutter speeds, meaning everything in the background is in focus).

c) Blurred backgrounds in color are displeasing (Once again, a non-issue because digital cameras allow with deep depth-of-field).

But I think the key point is this: Cartier-Bresson doesn't like bokeh (out-of-focus photos shot wide-open) in photography. I think it is ironic that nowadays a lot of photographers purposefully buy fast lenses (1.4, 1.2, .95) to get a lot of "bokeh" -- whereas Cartier-Bresson thought that they made dull compositions (which I agree).

I think bokeh is nice for studio portraits and Facebook profile pictures, but it makes for boring street photography.

Cartier-Bresson does admit that he finds the look of color to be pleasing sometimes (especially with

transparency/slide film) -- but sees issues when it comes to printing (the colors aren't always faithful, and don't look as good printed):

"Color photographs in the form of transparencies seem quite pleasing sometimes. But then the engraver takes over; and a complete understanding with the engraver would appear to be as desirable in this business as it is in lithography. Finally, there are the inks and the paper, both of which are capable of acting capriciously. A color photograph reproduced in a magazine or a semi-luxury edition sometimes gives the impression of an anatomical dissection which has been badly bungled."

I would also argue that this is a non-issue with printing in color, as the technology of printing color has become very accurate. Furthermore with digital RAW files, we can play with the colors of our images to look pleasing and however we want.

Cartier-Bresson concludes on his thoughts in color by saying that there is

still a lot of great possibility for color film:

"It is true that color reproduction of pictures and documents have already achieved a certain fidelity to the original; but when the color proceeds to take on real life, it's another matter. We are only in the infancy of color photography. But all this is not to say we should take no further interest in the question, or sit by waiting for the perfect color film-- packaged with the talent necessary to use it-- to drop into our laps. We must continue to try to feel our way."

Furthermore, Cartier-Bresson does admit that if a photographer is going to shoot in color-- they are going to have to approach a new "attitude of mind" and a different approach:

"Thought it is difficult to foresee exactly how color photography is going to grow in photo-reporting, it seems certain that it requires a new attitude of mind, an approach different that it requires a new attitude of mind, an approach different than that which is appropriate for black-and-white."

But what is Cartier-Bresson afraid of when it comes to color photography? He is afraid that color photographers will prejudice and favor making nice colorful and pretty photos (instead of focusing on capturing life and moments):

"Personally, I am half afraid that this complex new element may tend to prejudice the achievement of the life and moment which is often caught by black-and-white."

Not to say that we can't capture life and moments in color-- but I do admit, color can sometimes be a distraction (whereas it isn't an issue in black and white).

### **Advice on shooting color:**

Cartier-Bresson (although very cautious about color photography) is still pretty open-minded-- and gives us some practical advice in terms of shooting color.

To start off, Cartier-Bresson talks about applying "simultaneous contrast" to our color work-- the concept that colors influence one another greatly (in

terms of which colors are next to one another). He explains:

"To really be able to create in the field of color photography, we should transform and modulate colors, and thus achieve liberty of expression within the framework of the laws which were codified by the Impressionists and form which even a photographer cannot shy away. (The law, for instance, of simultaneous contrast: the law that every color tends to tinge the space next to it with its complementary color; that if two tones contain a color which is common to them both, that common color is attenuated by placing the two tones side by side; that the two complementary colors placed side by side emphasize both, but mixed together they annihilate each other; and so on.)"

So to sum up in normal English-- when it comes to colors, we perceive colors in relationship to the colors around it. So if you have the color red against a white background-- it will look very different from the color red against an orange background. Similarly the color red will look very different if it were against



a blue background. And a red color against a red background of course-- will be invisible.

So remember when it comes to "simultaneous contrast" in colors-- realize that color is subjective (depending on what other colors surround it). So develop your palette for color by not just looking at color photography, but look at painting and fine art in general.

For great color photographers, I recommend looking at the work of William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, Steve McCurry, and Alex Webb.

Cartier-Bresson also brings some more problems and other nuances of color to the table:

"The operation of bringing the color of nature in space to a printed surface poses a series of extremely complex problems. To the eye, certain colors advance, others recede. So we would have to be able to adjust the relations of the color one to the other, for colors, which in nature place themselves in the depth of space, claim a different placing on a

plane surface-- whether it is the flat surface of a painting or a photograph."

So once again, colors are relative to one another.

Also when we are out on the streets and shooting-- we don't have much control of the colors. If our subject is wearing a red shirt and there just happens to be a red background we are out of luck (as the subject will simply disappear into the background). We can't control the color of clothes which our subjects wear:

"The difficulties involved in snapshotting are precisely that we cannot control the movement of the subject; and in color-photography reporting, the real difficulty is that we are unable to control the interrelation of colors within the subject. It wouldn't be hard to add to the list of difficulties involved, but it is quite certain that the development of photography is tied up with the development of its technique."

However being a street photographer who is mostly interested in shooting color at the moment-- I find the challenge of shooting color to be the reward.

It is true you often have very little control of colors in street photography-- in terms of the relationship of the color that the subject is wearing and the background (as well as the color of other subjects in the background).

Therefore I think a lot of this is controlled by editing-- if the colors of your street photos don't work, you just have to ditch the shot and edit it out.

Also when you are shooting on the streets-- you want to be conscious of the colors. Perhaps if you find a subject with a red shirt and it is a nice blue day, you can crouch down and superimpose your red-shirt wearing subject against the nice blue sky (good color contrast). Or if you purposefully want a subject wearing a red shirt to blend in with the background-- purposefully try to position your feet to photograph your subject against a red wall. Or perhaps if you see a red background, you can wait until you see someone wearing a green shirt to enter the scene (green and red are great complementary colors, just think about Christmas and Heineken beer).

## 16. On photographic technique

As photographers, many of us tend to be nerds. I know I am-- I used to obsess over cameras, settings, lenses, post-processing, flashes, and all of these "gimmicks" (rather than focusing on making emotional and meaningful photographs).

What does Cartier-Bresson think about "photographic technique?" To sum up, he thinks it is overrated-- he encourages us to capture life and moments (not worry so much about aperture, shutter speed, film, printing, post-processing, etc):

### **On fetishes of technique:**

Cartier-Bresson does acknowledge that we should embrace advancements in technology, chemistry, and optics when it comes to photography. But not to the point that we fetishize technique (over the images themselves):

"Constant new discoveries in chemistry and optics are widening our field of action considerably. It is up to us to apply them to our technique, to improve

ourselves, but there is a whole group of fetishes which have developed on the subject of technique."

How important does HCB think technique is? He states it simply we just need enough technique in order to communicate what we see-- and encourages us to develop our own techniques to show our personal vision (rather than just copying the technique of other photographers):

"Technique is important only insofar as you must master it in order to communicate what you see. Your own personal technique has to be created and adapted solely in order to make your vision effective on film."

So how important is the final result versus the process? To HCB, he is mostly interested in the final image:

"Only the results count, and the conclusive evidence is the finished photographic print; otherwise there would be no end to the number of tales photographers would tell about pictures which they ever-so-nearly got-- but which are

merely a memory in the eye of nostalgia."

I chuckled when I read this from HCB, as it is still true today. A lot of street photographers will share images and tell an elaborate backstory of what happened-- but then lament on how they weren't able to capture a certain moment (or how close they were).

Ultimately in photography, there are no "buts" and "ifs" -- what happened happened, and what you captured is all that remains as "proof." So let us not get too swept up with nostalgia and judge a photograph for what it is -- and just what exists inside the frame.

**The camera as a tool (not a pretty toy):**

I have to admit-- I am a sucker for "pretty cameras" -- and fall victim to "camera porn" as much as the next guy. I have to admit there are some pretty sexy and aesthetically beautiful cameras out there (Leicas being one of them).

However Cartier-Bresson reminds us: the camera is ultimately a tool-- and the most important thing is for us to

have a strong vision. No amount of fancy cameras, lenses, or techniques will help us see the world in a more interesting way:

"Our trade of photo-reporting has been in existence only about 30 years. It came to maturity due to the development of easily handled cameras, faster lenses, and fast fine-grain films produced for the movie industry. The camera is for us a tool, not a pretty mechanical toy. In the precise functioning of the mechanical object perhaps there is an unconscious compensation for the anxieties and uncertainties of daily endeavor. In any case, people think far too much about techniques and not enough about seeing."

So as a practice, don't worry too much about the aesthetics of your camera. In-fact, I think it is beat-up older cameras that have more charm and character than super-pristine and pretty cameras.

Try not to upload too many photos of your camera next to a cappuccino to Instagram (I have to admit, I am guilty of

this as well). I think it is good fun to show off your camera every now and then-- but don't let camera porn become your obsession.

When you start talking more about cameras than photography-- and once you spend more money on cameras and lenses than photography books, education, and workshops -- you have a problem.

Ultimately the best photographers are the ones that have the best eyes. Some of the best street photographers I know shoot with nothing but an iPhone (Koci, Oggsie, Misho Baranovic, Aikbeng Chia) and take incredible images.

Never let the camera be an excuse for not making good photos.

**On using your camera without thinking:**

I don't think it really matters what camera you shoot with in street photography-- the most important thing is to use a camera which fits your style and approach, and a camera that you can use intuitively, automatically, and without thinking.



Cartier-Bresson also tells us that the way we use a camera should be as automatic as changing gears in a car while we are driving (if you know how to drive a manual car):

"It is enough if a photographer feels at ease with his camera, and if it is appropriate to the job he wants it to do. The actual handling of the camera, its stops, its exposure-speeds and the rest of it are things which should be as automatic as the changing of gears in an automobile. It is no part of my business to go into the details or refinements of any of these operations, even the most complicated ones, for they are all set forth with military precision in the manuals which the manufacturers provide along with the camera and the nice orange calf-skin case. If the camera is a beautiful gadget, we should progress beyond that stage at least in conversation. The same applies to the hows and whys in making pretty prints in the darkroom."

I also feel this is the benefit of following the "one camera and one lens" philosophy-- it takes a long time to really become comfortable with a camera (until

the point you can use it in the dark without looking at your dials and settings).

Furthermore, it takes a long time for you to get used to a single focal length. I for example, have only shot with a 35mm lens the last 5 years-- which allows me to frame my scene before even bringing the camera up to my eye. But I still don't know it 100%-- which means I need to keep shooting to keep my eyes sharp.

Also I don't think you necessarily have to shoot your camera fully-manual. With my film Leica MP, I shoot it fully-manual (there are no automatic settings). But when shooting digitally (lets say on my Ricoh GR or my Fujifilm X100T) I just shoot it in "P" mode at ISO 1600-- and just use center-point autofocus and focus on making images. In fact, there are many Magnum photographers out there who shoot digital who use "P" mode and "Auto ISO" for their photography. Apparently even Steve McCurry shoots in "P" mode as well.

Ultimately nobody gives a damn what camera settings you use to make a

certain image. Nobody is going to look at your image in a gallery, exhibition, or book, and ask what shutter speed or aperture you used. If they do, slap them-- they are missing the point.

### **In printing/post-processing:**

In the time of Cartier-Bresson there was no digital and post-processing, so what he talks about is mostly printing.

But to use this analogy in the modern digital world-- don't over-process your photos. Just try to process your photos enough to re-create the mood and scene as you saw it. HCB explains:

"During the process of enlarging, it is essential to re-create the values and mood of the time the picture was taken; or even to modify the print so as to bring it into lien with the intentions of the photographer at the moment he shot it."

Furthermore HCB hints at dodging and burning (making certain parts of the frame brighter and darker selectively) certain parts of the photo in post-processing to "re-establish the balances" between light and shadow:

"It is necessary also to re-establish the balance which the eye is continually establishing between light and shadow. And it is for these reasons that the final act of creating in photography takes place in the darkroom."

Post-processing your photos is not "cheating" at all. For 100+ years photographers have been using certain techniques in the darkroom to achieve their vision of the world.

So when it comes to post-processing your photos, do the minimum necessary to achieve your vision of the world. Don't use post-processing as masking the imperfections of your photo. Don't think that post-processing a bad photo will make it better. Taking a bad photo and turning it black-and-white won't make it a better photograph either.

Also adding gimmicky tricks like HDR and selective-color won't make an uninteresting photograph more interesting (trust me, I used to do this a lot when I started off). Similarly, just because you shoot film doesn't mean that your photos are inherently better than

digital photos (and vice versa). Don't let hipsters who shoot large-format and tin-types tell you any differently.

Ultimately what matters is your vision as a photographer, and use your tools (the camera and lens) and your "printing" or post-processing as a way to achieve what you want to communicate visually to your viewer.

And at the end of the day-- if HDR and selective color is what really turns you on, go for it. At the end of the day, the most important person to make happy is yourself.

### **Sharpness is overrated:**

Lastly (I am glad that HCB said this) -- he thinks that sharpness is overrated. I agree-- what importance does sharpness have in terms of rendering reality?

Our photos should be "sharp enough". I do agree that overly blurry photos can be distracting.

But what purpose do taking photos of brick walls and looking at corner-to-corner sharpness matter in the context

of street photography? Cartier-Bresson shares his thoughts:

"I am constantly amused by the notion that some people have about photographic technique-- a notion which reveals itself in an insatiable craving for sharpness of images. Is this the passion of an obsession? Or do these people hope, by this trompe l'oeil technique, to get to closer grips with reality? In either case, they are just as far away from the real problem as those of that other generation which used to endow all its photographic anecdotes with an intentional unsharpness such as it was deemed to be "artistic."

At the end of HCB's statement-- he also pokes fun at older photographers who would intentionally make their photos really blurry to be more "artistic".

### **Takeaway point:**

So ultimately when it comes to photographic technique-- don't worry too much about your camera, lenses, apertures, shutter speeds, post-processing, printing, sharpness, etc.

Ultimately you want to be focused on what you want to render to your viewer. What kind of reality do you want to show your viewer? What kind of statement do you have about society or your subjects in your photos? Small details like how sharp your photos are or what camera you use aren't very important.

And know that photographic technique is tied into your personal vision. But copying another photographer's technique is to copy their personal vision as well.

By creating your own personal vision of the world-- you will soon adopt a certain technique, use a certain camera, and a certain lens to render it.

But if you are more of a beginner, I think it is good to start off by imitating the masters (even imitating Cartier-Bresson, as I did). It is a good reference and starting point.

But as you become a more competent and advanced photographer-- imitating can only take you so far. There is a point where you will need to take off

your training wheels and find your own vision.

So how do you find your own vision in photography? Just ask yourself-- what interests you in the world and what do you have to say? What makes you unique as a photographer? What makes your certain worldview different from others?

Start with these "why" questions of what you are trying to communicate through your photos. And then from there-- you can decide what kind of images you want to make, and what kind of technique you would like to use.

## 17. On defining photography (for ourselves)

I think at the end of the day-- photography should be something personal and meaningful to yourself. Ultimately I think you should shoot to first please yourself. Then if others happen to like it-- so be it.

So what does photography mean to Cartier-Bresson? He starts off by saying he doesn't attempt to define photogra-



phy for everyone-- he just defines it for himself:

"I have talked at some length, but of only one kind of photography. There are many kinds. Certainly the fading snapshot carried in the back of a wallet, the glossy advertising catalog, and the great range of things in between are photography. I don't attempt to define it for everyone. I only attempt to define it to myself"

So how does HCB define photography for himself? He explains:

"To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that even its proper expression."

So to sum up, photography for HCB is: acknowledging the significance and importance of an event, and being able to express it through strong composition.

Furthermore, Cartier-Bresson believes that through living we discover ourselves and the world around us. And through this, the world influences and

affect us (and similarly, we influence and affect the world around us as well). He thinks that is what we should try to communicate through our photography:

"I believe that, through the act of living, the discovery of one-self is made concurrently with the discovery of the world around us, which can mold us, but which can also be affected by us. A balance must be established between these two worlds-- the one inside us and the one outside us. As the result of a constant reciprocal process, both these worlds come to form a single one. And it is this world that we must communicate."

In addition-- Cartier-Bresson also emphasizes the importance of composition for him in photography:

"But this takes care only of the content of the picture. For me, content cannot be separated from form. By form, I mean a rigorous organization of the interplay of surfaces, lines, and values. It is in this organization alone that our conceptions and emotions become concrete and communicable. In photography, visual or-

ganization can stem only from a developed instinct."

### **Takeaway point:**

Ultimately photography is a choice you make (in terms of what it means to you). Make your photography personal. Don't make your photography for anyone else but yourself.

Also define photography (and street photography) in terms of what it means to you.

I see countless debates on the internet about the "definition of street photography". The problem of this is that everyone will define street photography differently-- as everyone has different life experiences, opinions, backgrounds, shooting styles, and philosophies. It isn't that anybody is "wrong" -- we are all "right" in our own regard.

For a long time (even so now) -- I strived to become a "popular" photographer-- to get a lot of followers, likes, and to make a living from photography. Now that I have reached some sort of "success" -- I have started to ask myself a lot of questions in photography. I dedicated

so much of my effort into pleasing others with my photography-- that I never asked myself, "Is my photography making me happy?"

I get this dilemma about once a week: Who am I shooting for and why am I shooting street photography?

But I appreciate this self-questioning I have for myself-- because it forces me to once again re-evaluate why I shoot, and ultimately for who.

Whenever I think about it-- I always come to the conclusion: I shoot to please myself in the hope of making images that they will resonate with others. So if I cannot make images that impress or move myself emotionally-- I cannot expect them to resonate with others.

And of course, not everyone will appreciate my street photography. Not everyone will appreciate your street photography. But as long as you are able to please yourself, improve according to your own ruler, and get constructive feedback and support from others you respect and trust-- you are living a good life as a photographer.

So what does street photography mean to you? Make it personal.

## Conclusion

All-in-all, I learned a tremendous amount from reading Henri Cartier-Bresson's "The Mind's Eye" and highly recommend the book. It is a small compact book that can easily fit inside your camera bag, and it is always good to take out when you need some inspiration. I have learned much from the wisdom of Cartier-Bresson, and also through writing this article. I hope you enjoyed it.

I think if I could sum up what Henri Cartier-Bresson said in his writing is this: always be attentive to the world around you, shoot from the heart, capture emotions, always keep composition in mind, and interpret and express reality the way you see it.

Even simpler put-- to make better street photos: capture more emotion and have stronger compositions.

Although it may seem that a lot of what Henri Cartier-Bresson said is antiquated and dated, his opinion and

thoughts carry a lot of strength and power. He was one of the revolutionizing forces in photography (and of course, "street photography") and his legacy has inspired millions of photographers worldwide.

I think we should have a healthy amount of respect for the past, and masters like Cartier-Bresson. But at the same time, we should embrace today's world and technology-- and use it to push ourselves creatively and to pave new ground.

Ultimately what I want you to take from this article are just little nuggets of inspiration. I don't want you to agree with everyone I think-- in-fact, I want you to disagree with me. Take the pieces which resonate with you, and disregard the rest. There are no "rules" in photography, merely "guidelines" and "pieces of advice".





24

IRVING PENN



Lately I've been studying a lot of fashion photographers. Why? I love how many of them started off as painters—having a concept in their mind, and being able to execute them in real life.

Not only that, but Irving Penn is certainly one of the masters — who isn't as well-known in contemporary photography circles (at least not on the internet).

When I first heard of Irving Penn (Helmut Newton was greatly inspired by him), I first was amazed by the stark simplicity of Penn's work. Penn's portraits were powerful, intimate, yet quiet. They had compositional mastery. The angles, shapes, forms and design of his images clearly showed his knowledge of painting and art.

As I delved into his work, the more I was blown away by his body of work, the variety of his work, as well as his personal philosophies.

## 1. Inspire yourself through painting

Irving Penn was born in New Jersey, and studied with the designer and art di-

rector Alexey Brodovitch in Philadelphia, and after working there for a while, he went off to Mexico to become a painter.

However Penn soon realized that he wasn't a great painter. When he realized that he wasn't fit for painting — he washed off all the paint of his canvases, and eventually started to work at Vogue.

At Vogue, Penn started off producing cover designs, and then he soon ended up picking photography.

You could see early on in his work how he was inspired by stark minimalism — as he would pose his models against blank white spaces (eventually many other photographers would take on this technique, including Richard Avedon). Penn would often have his models stand in a corner of a white V-shaped wall, and in his work ended up fusing artistic and commercial photography.

Upon studying a lot of master photographers, I am quite surprised to see how many of them were inspired by painting. If you look at Irving Penn's work — in terms of how graphical it is, you can see how he etched out his im-

ages. Penn's passion for painting and graphical art shows in his photographs.

Which makes me realize, if you want to improve your photographic compositions, don't study photography. Rather, look at the other arts. Study graphic design, painting, drawing, or perhaps sculpture, or architecture.

Cross-pollinate your artistic interests, and you will create work that is genuinely yours.

## 2. Stimulate your viewer

"Many photographers feel their client is the subject. My client is a woman in Kansas who reads Vogue. I'm trying to intrigue, stimulate, feed her. My responsibility is to the reader. The severe portrait that is not the greatest joy in the world to the subject may be enormously interesting to the reader." - Irving Penn

The worst thing you can do as a photographer is to bore your viewer. You want to create images that excite, interest, and stimulate your viewer.

You want to present images to your viewer which intrigue them. You want to

create an open-ended story with your photos, and allow the viewer to come up with his/her own story (in his/her own mind).

If you're a social photographer who uploads photos online or publishes to the mass-audience, you have a responsibility to the viewer. If you wanted to create photos truly for yourself, then you wouldn't publish them online. You would keep them for yourself.

But at the same time, you don't want to betray your own photographic vision. You want to stay true to what you find interesting and exciting. And the more your own photos interest you, the more likely they are to interest the viewer as well.

## 3. Elicit a reaction from your subjects

Irving Penn wasn't known to direct his subjects, but he was known to say things like:

"What does it feel like to realize that this eye looking at you is the eye of 1,200,000 people?"

Saying things like that would elicit a reaction from his subjects— which would often be interesting, and shocking.

When you are making portraits of other people, see how you can elicit a reaction from them. You can do this by telling a joke, telling a story, or saying something shocking or unexpected.

There are lots of ways to shoot a portrait. Some photographers don't speak at all to their subjects, while other photographers try to engage their models.

Try to experiment and see what works for you. If anything, try to balance both; experiment both not talking to your subject, and talking a lot. Then find a middle-ground which helps you create the images that bring you joy.

## 4. “Prune away the inconsequential”

Irving Penn's work is famous for isolating his subjects from their context. He does this by employing simple white or grey backdrops, which allows the viewer to put all the focus on the subject.

Why did he start by doing this? It allowed him to achieve the graphical perfection he craved, and also to:

”Make things manageable enough to record them, to prune away anything inconsequential. (Pause). Because less is more.” - Irving Penn

The fewer distractions you have in the background, the more focus you will have for your subject.

I personally am greatly influenced by Japanese Zen and minimalist aesthetics. There is some sort of harmony that occurs when you are able to take all the chaos of a scene, and simplify it. By “pruning away the inconsequential” — you focus on what you truly find important in the scene.

## 5. Feed on art

”I feed on art more than I ever do on photographs. I can admire photography, but I wouldn't go to it out of hunger.”- Irving Penn

You need to feed on the art which gives you energy, excitement, and vigor.

For Irving Penn, that meant consuming art outside of photography. While he said he admired photography, it isn't where he drew most of his inspiration.

Once again, eat the art which inspires you. That can be consuming only the work of the master photographers who inspire you, or other forms of art. Dance, painting, theater, music — these are all “fair game.”

## 6. Don't be a specialist

“The greatest privilege I've had in photography is a change of diet.” - Irving Penn

When you look at the body of work of Irving Penn, he didn't just shoot fashion and portraits in the studio. He photographed trash he found on the ground, native populations, common workers, food, and also self-portraits.

Even for a while he photographed butchers. Irving Penn shares how by switching up his subject-matter, he would be able to stay inspired:

“The butchers in between invigorated the fashions. To me it was like a balanced meal.”

To be a specialist as a photographer your whole life can be boring. We all crave challenge. We all crave variety.

Imagine if you ate the same meal for the rest of your life. No matter how delicious or expensive, it would bore you. You would begin to resent it.

So vary up your diet. Switch up your meals. Don't always shoot whatever you normally shoot. Try out other forms of photography.

For example, while street photography is my primary passion, I have experimented with fashion photography, with landscapes, and now personal photography. I find that sometimes by trying some other form of photography, my street photography is re-inspired.

Experiment with different genres of photography — the ones that interest you. Then see how it can feed your passions in other forms of art, and vice-versa.



## 7. Find truth in the faces of your subjects

Irving Penn was infamous for making his models repeat the same gesture or movement for an entire morning. When his models would become tired of posing, then he would start to take photos seriously.

Penn would take insane amounts of photographs— sometimes over 200 contact sheets of images.

He did this because he said that the more he made his subjects tired, the more they would show “truth” on their face:

”I am going to find what is permanent in this face. Truth comes with fatigue. He displays himself just as he is, just as he did not want to look.” - Irving Penn

I feel that shooting portraits of someone (especially professional models) is one of the most challenging tasks. Why? Because people always want to show a staged version of themselves. Especially

professional models— they have a certain “look” mastered.

But what you’re trying to find is truth in your subject. Truth in their face. You want to unravel and peel them, just like layers of an onion.

I think this is why many of us are drawn to street photography. We crave reality. We crave truth — especially in this modern photoshopped world.

So when you shoot a model, be persistent. Keep “working the scene”, and try to capture a certain look which you find genuine. The same is on the streets — be persistent with your work, and keep shooting until you get a shot you are satisfied with.

Don’t give up too quickly, and never give up your search for truth.

## 8. The camera is amazing

“I myself have always stood in awe of the camera. I recognize it for the instrument it is, part Stradivarius, part scalpel.” – Irving Penn

I feel that personally, I forget about the majestic quality of a camera. The abil-

ity to capture the moment and make it eternal is amazing.

Imagine people from a few centuries ago — to make an image was a painstaking process. You had to either paint or draw a scene or person — either which would take a very long time, and never would render a scene as accurately as a photograph.

Irving Penn calls the camera a thing of beauty — elegant like a Stradivarius in the music that it plays, but part a scalpel in its ability to carve into the subject you photograph.

Never forget how fortunate you are to be a photographer, and the magic of modern photography.

## 9. Find beauty in anything

“I can get obsessed by anything if I look at it long enough. That's the curse of being a photographer.”- Irving Penn

I think obsession is a good thing. Obsession is what drives our interests and passion.

The thing I am most inspired by Irving Penn is how he realizes that the

longer you look at something, the more interesting or beautiful you will find it.

This is immediately apparent through his experimental photos of his “still life” shots of ordinary trash, food, and things that people often overlook.

As photographers, we are always searching for beauty, novelty, and things of interest. But everything is interesting, if you look closely enough. It is a matter of mindset, of perspective, and of being appreciate of all the beauty in the world.



25

## JACOB AUE SOBOL

"The most difficult thing for me is to take pictures from far away."

- Jacob Aue Sobol

Jacob Aue Sobol is one of my favorite contemporary photographers. Not only are his images visually powerful and stirring-- but they exude a sense of emotion that pours from the seams. His emotions have depth and soul to them-- something that we all as street photographers can learn from him.



While Sobol wouldn't call himself a "street photographer"--his way of wandering the streets and photographing strangers is something street photographers can all relate to.

I recently received a copy of "Veins" -- a book he co-authored by Anders Petersen and have been thinking more about Sobol's work. Therefore I wanted to write this article to better get inside the mind of Sobol -- and share his inspirational images and thoughts about photography to you.

## 1. Channel your own emotions

I know many artists and photographers who use negative experiences in their life -- and channel it to create beautiful work. With the death of Sobol's own father, he channeled this painful experience to express himself through his photography:

Interviewer: "When did your father die and how did this impact on your work and what you decided to do with your life?"

Sobol: "My father was killed in a car accident in 1996. At the time I was in my last year of high school and was about to take my final exams and decide on my further education. Of course it was a shock to my mother, brother, sister and I. It was a traumatized period which was filled with darkness and fear. I think it added another layer to my life which I had to do something about. Not only as something painful but more as a place with a certain depth that was different from that of normal life.

The year after I started at the European Film College, I started writing short stories and, later, taking pictures. Once I realized that I was able to isolate my emotions and communicate them through my pictures, I felt like I had found an ability which was unique and which I wanted to explore further. Now, a lot of experiences in life and the people I have shared my time with have added to my memories, my fear and my love, and through this they have inspired me to continue photographing."

**Takeaway point:**



Very few of us experience something as traumatic as losing a parent at a young age. However I think what we can learn from Sobol is how we could channel our emotions (positive and negative)-- and show them through our work.

So if you find yourself in a dark and negative space in your life-- channel that energy to express yourself through your photography. Explore your emotions and feelings through picture taking-- and see where it leads you.

## 2. Make your photography a social gesture

"Though I am a shy and inhibited person among strangers, I do not wish to be an outsider. I am a social human being and my photography is a social gesture; I am reaching my hand out to the surrounding world and the people I meet. So I started bringing my pocket cameras with me so that I could meet the people, get involved in the city and make Tokyo mine. I don't know if I succeeded in breaking the isolation but I started to communicate. I started meet-

ing people on a one-to-one basis, which, I feel, gave me a better understanding of what it means to be part of a city like Tokyo." - Jacob Aue Sobol

When Sobol first went to Tokyo and started to shoot for his "I, Tokyo" book, he was overwhelmed by the city and the inhabitants. It was a city where he was constantly surrounded by people, yet nobody even made eye contact with him. It was overwhelming but isolating at the same time.

Surprisingly, even though Sobol considers himself a shy and inhibited person-- he uses photography as a way to get out of his shell and connect with the outside world. His photography is a "social gesture" and a way for him to reach out to others.

### Takeaway point:

I feel one of the problems in street photography is how disconnected it could be. While I do believe you can create beautiful candid images without asking for permission-- we can also create much more meaningful connections with strangers when we interact with them.

I don't think you should always feel obliged to only take candid photographs in the streets. Reach out to others, and make your street photography a "social gesture" as well.

### 3. Photograph a place you are personally connected to

When it comes to photography, all of us want to be "inspired" by a place. Sobol has done two of his most prominent bodies of work in two totally opposite places: Greenland and Tokyo. However what brought him to those places (and helped him create incredible bodies of work) was how he was emotionally connected to both places through women and love:

Interviewer: "It appears that your work is inextricably linked to your love life and relationships. You stay in East Greenland because of falling in love with Sabine and live in Tokyo because of your current girlfriend Sara getting a job there. Is your personal work always an exploration of your personal life?"

Sobol: "I do find it difficult to work in places I am not connected to in some way. I simply lose interest in the place, because I don't have a close relation, which allows me to approach the place in a more personal way. In Greenland, I started photographing Sabine because I was in love with her, but in Tokyo the situation was different because Sara worked long hours and I was left on my own to explore the city. In this way, my love for Sara and the emotions we shared in our relationship mostly appeared in my images from the streets and in my meetings with strangers."

#### **Takeaway point:**

It is easy to get bored and uninspired when it comes to photographing. Therefore I think it is important to photograph a place that you have a personal affinity towards. It doesn't need to be somewhere exotic or overseas. It could even be in your own neighborhood-- or even photographs of your family.

So if you plan on pursuing a photographic project, make sure it is a place that you are passionate about-- and have

a deeper personal connection to (not just photographically).

## 4. Marry images and text together

Generally most of us photographers aren't as articulate in words and text as we are in images. However Sobol shares that he still finds it important to share a personal text in his book to accompany his images:

Interviewer: "In both Sabine and I, Tokyo you have written personal texts. How important is it to have your 'voice' in the texts and why?"

Sobol: "It is important for me to write text when I feel I have something to say that the pictures do not show. I started writing text for the Sabine book because I felt the pictures could not say everything. My pictures are very emotional and never deal with something tangible. Writing the text was a way for me to pay more attention to the details of everyday life, those small things that illustrate the huge impact Sabine and Tiniteqilaaq had on me.

Also, I wanted people to feel that Sabine was not just an object in front of the camera but that we also shared many things, apart from our emotional life. It was a tribute to her. When she first read the text she cried because there were too many memories. I wanted to tell her how much all these experiences had meant to me, therefore I also made sure that the book was published in Greenlandic (also known as Kalaallisut). With the Tokyo work I felt different. I did not feel the daily stories of me wandering around the streets and meeting people were interesting. The pictures appeared stronger and told how I felt that day – my experience of the city. So I decided to only write a short text about my motivations in photography and the way I work."

### Takeaway point:

Two photographers whose work I admire is Josh White and Sean Lotman, both who create beautiful images and marry text with their images. Josh White has a very expressive type of photography, which he writes short and often emotional text which expresses his feel-

ings and experiences in life. Sean Lotman writes haikus and other poems, and creates a fusion with his images.

I think we should all use our personal life experiences and combine it with our photography (it doesn't just have to be writing). For example, at the end of the day-- I am more interested in sociology and studying people and society than photography. I feel that street photography is just "applied sociology" -- where I can be a sociologist using the camera as my research tool. I feel it helps me create more tangible "evidence" of how I see the world.

So think about your own personal interests -- and combine that with your photography. And also know that sometimes photography can't say everything by itself-- and sometimes using text can help better communicate your message. After all, isn't photography all about communication?

## 5. On shooting in black and white

Jacob Aue Sobol is most famous for his gritty high-contrast, black and white aesthetic. When asked about shooting in black and white versus color-- he shared in an interview:

Interviewer: "Both projects are shot in black and white. Do you produce any work in colour or do you have any plans to work in colour?"

Sobol: "Every time I start a new project, I use colour film because I think it is time to renew myself but I always end up returning to black and white. My colour pictures can be beautiful, ugly and interesting, perhaps, but I can't feel them. I can't find myself, and they become completely meaningless to me. They are like decorations. In the end, I don't really think there is any choice for me."

### Takeaway point:

Sobol brings up an interesting point of color being like "decorations." Personally I have been shooting color film more or less exclusively the last 2 years, and sometimes shooting color can be a distraction. Color photography could just



be about "pretty colors" -- rather than the meaning behind the photographs.

However what I have been trying to do with my work is thinking of how color can add value -- and an extra dimension to my images. I constantly ask myself when shooting and editing: how does color better try to portray what I want to say, and how I feel?

I think at the end of the day whether you shoot black and white or color (or perhaps both) is a personal choice. But at the end of the day, your work should be meaningful to you. If it isn't meaningful to you -- who cares what other people think or feel?

## 6. Be curious

One of the best characteristics a street photographer can have is curiosity. Curiosity is one of the best characteristics of children as well-- as it makes them fearless and open to the rest of the outside world.

Curiosity in photography will drive us to explore new grounds, and create great work-- rather than just feeling

forced to do so. Sobol share shares how curiosity helps him in his work:

Interviewer: "Is photography cathartic for you as it offers a way of working through your emotions and experiences? Has it always?"

Sobol: "Yes, every image I create is a picture of how I feel that day - my experience of a place. It has become my ability to isolate my emotions and communicate them through the camera and into the mind of the viewer. I think the way my documentary project in Greenland turned into an autobiography has had a lot of influence on how I work today. From the beginning, I got used to this close connection between my emotional life and my pictures. In this way, my aim has always been to reach layers in people, which are not immediately visible, but nonetheless shape who we are and add substance to our lives.

I also photograph because I am curious. I am curious about what the person on the other side of the street is thinking, how he or she lives, and how he or

she feels. I am always looking for someone to share a moment with."

### **Takeaway point:**

In photography, we communicate a certain emotion, message, or feeling with our viewers. This is one of the big points that Sobol hits on in this excerpt.

Furthermore, photography is a way for us to connect with our subjects-- to better understand their own motivations, their feelings, and their thoughts. If we are curious about other human beings-- our images can be much more intimate and connect on a deeper level with our viewers.

## **7. On "snapshot" photography**

One thing I also am intrigued by Sobol's work is how he embraces the "snapshot" aesthetic. For a lot of his work, he used a simple point-and-shoot film camera, and still was able to create powerful images. I think sometimes we are suckered into thinking by camera manufacturer companies that we need expensive bodies and exotic lenses to create unique

images. We can see through Sobol that is not the case.

Sobol shares more about the idea of "snapshot photography" -- soothing that Daido Moriyama and Anders Petersen shares:

Sobol: "The line I discovered between my inner life and the images I created fascinated me - I was able to isolate an emotion and communicate this emotion to other people. I found it much more instinctual than making films, especially 'snapshot photography' which is a form of expression that is closely related to our emotions - pictures we take of people we care about and moments we want to keep. That's why I try to use my pocket cameras as much as possible; they support the feeling of something unpredictable and playful."

### **Takeaway point:**

As a street photographer, don't feel only constrained to photographing strangers in public places. Know that photography is a great form of self-expression and self-exploration. Photograph your daily life-- the people you

know-- your significant other, your family, or things you experience in your everyday life. Channel your creativity into capturing moments of your everyday life-- which can be very emotional and powerful.

I also am a huge advocate for small and compact cameras -- as they are easy to carry around with you on a daily basis. For those of you who have big cameras that are bulky-- you know how much of a pain in the ass it can be to carry them around. And of course, the more you carry around your camera, the more photos you will end up taking.

And it doesn't even have to be a fancy compact camera either-- simply using your smartphone can be one of the best solutions.

## 8. Make yourself vulnerable to others

One of the most difficult things in street photography is to connect with strangers-- people we don't know. But how can we get other people to open up to us-- and make themselves vulnerable?

Sobol shares the idea that we need to first make ourselves vulnerable and open to others:

Interviewer: "Does one need to put in effort and have a certain attitude in order to get people to open up and allow themselves to be photographed?"

Sobol: "You have to be completely open and demonstrate that you are also vulnerable. You can't be just a photographer – you have to discover who you are yourself. If you don't, people won't open up to you. That means that you mustn't avoid being vulnerable. For me, it's a kind of exchange. Even though I'm the one taking the pictures, my ambition is to achieve an equal exchange between myself and the person I'm photographing."

### Takeaway point:

In photography there is generally a power dynamic between the photographer and the subject. The photographer is the one generally in power, as he/she controls the camera-- and the act of photo-taking. The subject is simply there to be photographed -- or are they?

Sobol brings forth the idea of making the act of photography an "equal exchange" between the photographer and the subject. This is a beautiful way of seeing photography-- because photography shouldn't be just about you "taking" something away from the subject. It should also be about a contribution you can make with your subject as well.

Generally when it comes to my photography, I take about 60% of my shots candidly and around 40% of my photos with permission. While I think it is important to do both -- I generally prefer to communicate and interact with my subjects. This way I can interact with them, get to know who they are as human beings, and tell them why I want to take a photo of them. I make them involved, which actually brings a lot of joy and excitement to their day.

I am not saying you have to take all of your photos with permission and you don't always have to communicate with your subjects. However I think it is still important for us to be conscious about the power-dynamic at work-- and try to be humanistic when photographing.

## 9. On creating new work

I think one of the worst pieces of advice a more experienced photographer can give an aspiring photographer is: "don't do that project-- it has already been done before."

But then again, what hasn't been done before? I think in photography (and art) there is so much of an emphasis on doing what hasn't been done before-- than doing work that is personally enriching and fulfilling.

One of my favorite points brought forth by Sobol is how he doesn't really care to create original work-- but how he wants to simply create experience the world in an intimate way:

Sobol: "It is not my ambition to come up with something that hasn't already been thought of. That doesn't concern me. Yes, of course I come from some direction of photography, and maybe it is from the 70s and 80s. I don't know. In any sense, when I look at my work and that of many others, I see very contemporary photography. And, of course, one can always hear these sorts



of comparisons to history, but that really doesn't concern me. My ambition is not to invent something new, but to live and experience the world and the people I love, and to tell this story by using photography as a diary.

[...]

"I think it would be hard to find a photographer today who has come up with something that hasn't been seen before. Can you name anyone? I, personally, don't know of any. Yes, you can find superficial similarities – you can compare contemporary, contrasting black and white photography with post-war photography – for example, with Japanese or 1970s photography – but I think that contemporary photography is much more personal and subjective."

### **Takeaway point:**

Everything has been done before-- don't let that deter you in your photographic ambitions and projects. Remind yourself: you haven't done it before.

But at the same time, educate yourself in terms of the work that has been done before-- which will also help in-

spire you and push you to create work that is personally fulfilling.

For example, I am currently working a long-term project on "Suits" -- based on my feelings of disillusionment and cynicism of the corporate world. The project has been done to death-- but I haven't let that deter me. After all, I haven't done it before.

Yet I still educated myself by looking at all the great projects which involve "Suits" that has come before me. So this gives me a benchmark in terms of what has been done before-- so I am trying to add some variety to what has already been done before. Work that has been done before is also great inspiration, for me to hunt out similar looking scenes (yet being different at the same time).

So pursue your photographic projects with full zest, knowing that you probably won't innovate and pave any truly radical ground. But work on your projects because they are personally fulfilling-- and set your own standards and bar to what makes you happy.

## 10. On traveling

I think that traveling is a great way for us to experience new cultures and become inspired in our photography. I still think that we can create amazing work in our own backyard-- but traveling does help us break up the monotony of everyday life, and see the world in a fresh and new way.

Sobol shares what he gets from traveling:

Sobol: "I must be truthful and admit that I do it because I find traveling exciting. I'd never be able to spend my whole life in one neighborhood or one country. I'm inspired by people from other cultures. Meeting people from other cultures is a part of life, in my opinion. For example, I just completed a photo-project for which I took the trans-Siberian train from Moscow to Beijing. That was a project that I wanted to do ever since I was a teenager; and of course, discovering a land that you've never seen before is an adventure. But you are right – it certainly is possible to go on an adventure in your own country,

in your own neighborhood, or in your own yard. And I do that, too – I go on adventures with my girlfriend and my mother.

### **Takeaway point:**

Not all of us have the luxury, finances, or the time to travel. But know, that traveling doesn't mean you have to buy a \$1000+ ticket to fly somewhere half-way across the world. To travel can simply involve jumping in a car, a train, or a subway to somewhere a little bit further from where you generally are, to explore something new. Just taking a trip just an hour away from your home can be refreshing and new.

But if you do have the resources to travel-- I highly recommend you to do so. One of the greatest regrets of the dying is that most people wish they traveled more when they were still alive. I can personally say that every time I travel and come back home, I do feel like a transformed person in many ways. By experiencing other cultures -- I bring back the things I like to my home. Not

only that, but it also makes me appreciate more what I have home.

I write about this a lot-- the idea that happiness can only be bought with experiences, not material possessions. So rather than buying gear, buy experiences. Buy travel. Instead of using that \$1500 for a new camera, lens, laptop, whatever-- use it to travel. Go somewhere you have always wished, and that experience will live with you forever and transform you. Having a new camera or lens won't. It will just get outdated in 2 years (like any smartphone out there).

## 11. Work hard

The last point that Sobol brings forth which is crucial is the idea of working hard. I know a lot of photographers who talk about how long they have been shooting. Rarely do photographers talk about how hard they work when shooting. I know some phenomenal photographers who have only been shooting for 3 years -- who work incredibly hard. Other photographers I have met who shot "20 years" -- but photographing once a month in the mountains doesn't count.

So realize that at the end of the day, the amount of hard work you put into your photography will show. Sobol shares his work ethic:

Sobol: "I work a lot, so every day I spend in the street from early morning to late evening. I don't know exactly when the image is there. There is a snapshot I took of a young woman's leg walking up a stairway, and I don't know where that picture will work until I start editing. It's just a feeling I have, but working like this, in a very intimate situation, is always very difficult. They are inviting you inside; they are trusting you. To me, it's a very volatile situation that I have to be careful in, but I can immediately feel both the subject's limit and my own limit, informing what I want to photograph or not photograph. I always listen to that."

### Takeaway point:

I don't think there is such thing as "talent" in street photography. And if there was such thing as "talent" in photography or any sort of art-- it is certainly overrated.

At the end of the day, all great work is determined by the hard work you put in. There are really no shortcuts around this. By having a burning passion, dedication, and one-minded pursuit of your goal is the most important thing.

So when it comes to your street photography-- figure out what drives you. Then put in the hard work and hustle to create beautiful art.

## Conclusion

I think we could learn a ton from Sobol. Not only is he an extremely intimate photographer with his subjects, but his images have to deal with society and connecting with others. He doesn't care so much what work has already been done before-- he just goes out and does it. He puts in the hard work necessary for his work, and channels his emotions to create powerful images.

Let us all gain inspiration from him to create images that are more meaningful, emotional, and personal.





26

## JEFF MERMELSTEIN

I love the street photography of Jeff Mermelstein. Hailing from New York City, he is one of the most prolific street photographers and photojournalists out there. Besides his personal street photography work, he has done major assignment work for Life Magazine, The New Yorker, and The New York Times Magazine.

When I first saw Jeff's images, I was blown away by the simplicity but depth of emotions in his photographs. His photographs are very quirky, and intensely powerful as well.

I wanted to dedicate this article to Jeff-- in terms of how he has inspired me in street photography. I also hope to share some of his philosophies, images, and experiences with you.

## Jeff Mermelstein's History & Background

### **How he got started in photography:**

Jeff Mermelstein explains in an interview below how he got started in photography:

"As a biology student in college I was very unhappy. I had been taking photographs since the age of 13 after I was given a camera from my older brother for my Bar Mitzvah. I am one of those lucky ones who never struggled to find what to do with their life. I was born a photographer. My mother would rather I had been a dentist but that is another story."

### **The turning point in his career:**

Mermelstein also shares the turning point in his career, in which he was given his first big break:

"In 1983 GEO Magazine gave me my first big break in magazine photography at the age of 25. I proposed doing a feature story on Animal Actors such as Morris the Cat, Benji, Lassie, The Exxon Tiger etc., and I was given the assignment which ended up as a cover story. Another huge turning point for me was winning The European Publishers Award for Photography in 1999 which enabled my first book Sidewalk to be published."

### **The biggest influence on his work:**

Jeff Mermelstein shares his biggest influence on his work:

"Ultimately it is the people around you that influence you the most. For me it was and is my family. I am the son of Holocaust survivors who immigrated to America in 1947. I know that the Yiddish speaking family that surrounded me has fed my drive and help to define my curiosity, humor and way of dealing with life. All artists are also influenced by other artists and I am no different. Arbus, Winogrand, Friedlander, Eggleston,

Lartigue, Weegee, Faurer. There are so many and they keep changing."

**What excites him about photography:**

One thing that is exciting about Mermelstein is his outpouring of enthusiasm and energy for street photography:

"I remain as excited as ever making pictures mostly in New York. I never tire of it and maintain a constant passion, love and obsession for my next New York image. New York is attractive to me because it has an edge. A grey grit even in color. There is an energy unlike any other city. It never bores me."

Below are some specific lessons Jeff Mermelstein has taught me about street photography:

## 1. Be excited about the editing process

When it comes to street photography, shooting is exciting. However what can sometimes be more exciting is the viewing and editing process. Mermelstein explains:

"Of course going out and making the pictures is exciting. But what is even more exciting is the feeling that I get in viewing pictures I made for the first time. Sometimes it is more than a month or two before I first view pictures I have taken. There is a perpetual thrill of catching up."

Mermelstein explains his editing process more in another interview:

I feel that I never know if I get a good picture. I know a lot of photographers who say I got it—I got it. But I don't know. For me its almost the same experience or even more intense when I'm looking at the real film in a lightbox. Its like taking a picture for the first time again. its like when I bring 15-20 rolls of film to look at, it is like a goody bag of possibilities. I'm looking at pictures, and it has been my way of enticing a courtship with a picture."

### **Takeaway point:**

Sometimes we focus too much on the shooting aspect of street photography-- and not enough on the viewing and editing of images.



Mermelstein also has a habit in his film street photography to wait more than a month or two before seeing his images. I believe this helps him emotionally distance himself from his shots, and forget some of the photos that he's taken. This probably helps him be more objective while he's editing and choosing his best images. Not only that, but it allows him the joy of re-experiencing his images.

When it comes to your street photography, shoot prolifically- but also sit on your images and let them marinate before looking at them.

If you shoot digitally, I think it is a good idea to immediately import your images to Lightroom or your computer. However before taking a really close look, let them sit for a week, two weeks, a month, or even longer. The longer you let your shots "marinate" -- the more emotional disconnection you will have from them. This will help you better judge your strong images from your weaker ones. It will also allow you to joy to re-live your images.

## 2. Don't have a theme while shooting

One part I find fascinating about Mermelstein's work is that he often doesn't have a theme in his mind when he's out shooting. Rather, he finds reoccurring patterns in human behavior on the streets, such as his hair-twirlers and runners project in New York. When it comes to working on themes, he discovers them after he photographs, when his work starts to pile up:

"My obsession is with making photographs. I generally do not have a theme when in the act of photographing. Themes emerge after the photographs begin to accumulate. This happened in a clear way with my new book and exhibition Twirl / Run. For me picture taking is pure instinct. Gut. That is why I love doing it. I'm not thinking when I am working."

### **Takeaway point:**

Personally I prefer having a theme in mind when shooting on the streets. But that isn't for everybody. For street pho-



tographers like Jeff Mermelstein, he shoots first-- then edits later.

You can apply the same approach in your street photography. Just go out and photograph whatever fascinates you. Then go back to the catalogue of your work and try to find the reoccurring themes in your work. Identify certain subject matter you are constantly drawn to-- whether it be urban landscapes, portraits, elderly people, children, etc. Then you can start focusing on that theme-- and creating a body of work.

### 3. Stay true to your personal vision

When asked in an interview what advice he would give to photographers-- he shared the importance of staying true to yourself and your personal vision:

"In my opinion what is most important is to stay true to your personal vision and create a body of work that expresses that. I never believed in making pictures with the goal of showing those to obtain commercial work. Do what you

do best and love the most and you will be doing all that you can to be happy."

#### **Takeaway point:**

When it comes to street photography, you should do it because you love it. You shouldn't feel pressured to create images for others-- and to get lots of likes or favorites on social media. You want to photograph to please yourself-- and satisfy your hunger for creating images.

It is very important to be inspired by other photographers. Let them influence your work. But at the same time, stay true to what you feel is your personal vision. Work on projects that you find personally meaningful, interesting, and fun. Don't worry about fame and recognition -- just focus on pleasing yourself.

### 4. Don't ask for permission

When you see videos of Jeff Mermelstein in action, he is quite bold. He gets close to his subjects, yet blends in with the crowd. He is also a pretty huge guy-- but he photographs quickly, and just moves on. Mermelstein shares his working style:

"I'm a voyeur – I'm not asking people if I can take their picture, even if they are on a public stage. I'm in a sense, stealing something from them without asking. I don't get releases on the streets, can you imagine that? You can't do the type of photography I do by talking to people before taking their picture."

Mermelstein doesn't feel bad for taking photos of people on the streets without permission, and explains:

"I myself feel no guilt from that. I feel some people new to the notion to what street photography is about might be turned off from it. I'm interested in making an interesting photograph. A lot of people aren't gonna bite that, but I'm totally comfortable and cozy because I know I'm not trying to hurt anybody with a camera. It's just what I do, and it's my way of responding to people."

### **Takeaway point:**

Even though Jeff is quite aggressive when shooting on the streets, he has no problems doing it. His purpose is to make interesting photographs, and he isn't trying to hurt anybody in the proc-

ess. Taking photos is simply the way he interacts with the world and other people.

Don't feel guilty shooting street photography. You aren't doing anything wrong. You're not hurting anybody. You're simply documenting everyday life for a greater social cause. You will get people who are angry or upset at you. But stay strong and focused on your purpose as a photographer-- to make interesting and meaningful photographs.

## **5. Get in the groove**

One of the most difficult things is to get comfortable shooting in the streets. Jeff Mermelstein shares how he gets in the groove when shooting-- and the importance of being quick:

"When you're out in the street, it is a matter of getting in a certain type of groove. You don't even think about it, you see it and you do it. It's gotta be quick, because if you don't do it quick, then it's gone. Then you're really pissed. That's the worst. At least have a try at it. So what you usually find is that at least for me, you don't really think too much.

You don't have to think about it. You just want to take pictures. It's just like this quick thing, like boom boom boom. If there's a boom, that's it. It's instinct, you just do it."

### **Takeaway point:**

When you're out shooting on the streets, you don't want to think. You want to fall into a "stream of consciousness" type of shooting-- when you totally lose a sense of yourself, and just shoot instinctively on the streets.

Personally I get in the groove shooting in the streets by warming up by just taking a few bad photos. I give myself permission to take a few bad snapshots to get my trigger-finger warmed up. Then the more I click, the more confidence builds up inside me. Then I soon start feeling the energy of the people around me, which helps me lose a sense of myself. This gives me energy-- and the ability to be bold.

Mermelstein also shares the importance of being quick. If you hesitate when you're out shooting on the streets, you will miss the moment.

Jeff also shares the importance of not thinking. The more you think when you're shooting on the streets, the more you will hesitate and miss precious "decisive moments."

## **6. Embrace the banal and ordinary**

One of the things that Mermelstein loves most about street photography is the ability to make something extraordinary from the ordinary:

"I think it's exciting to make something extraordinary out of the banal. I'm not the kind of photographer that needs to travel to take pictures. I am not saying that there aren't extraordinary images being made in Gaza and sometimes I wonder I should go to Gaza. But I'd probably get sick and be scared. I don't want it. I'm comfortable, I'm not drawn to bullets. I'm not drawn to danger."

### **Takeaway point:**

The best place to shoot street photography is in your own neighborhood. Mermelstein has shot for several decades in New York City and hasn't grown tired

of it. He doesn't feel he needs to travel anywhere else to shoot street photography.

Of course you might be thinking: "Of course Jeff Mermelstein never gets bored shooting in NYC, it is New York-- the most interesting place to shoot street photography in the world!"

I know a lot of street photographers in NYC, and they actually do have issues staying inspired shooting there. They too, can get accustomed to a place and have a hard time finding more extraordinary moments out of ordinary moments.

So regardless of where you live, know that there are always extraordinary photos to be made-- no matter how boring the place you live in. The more boring the place you live-- the more opportunity you have to make unique and interesting images.

## Conclusion

Jeff Mermelstein is a prolific street photographer who truly loves shooting on the streets. He does it for himself, and has never grown tired of his passion.

His bold, quick, and sometimes aggressive approach has helped him create some incredible images.

Remember what he said-- you're not hurting anybody in street photography. Make your aim and focus to make powerful images for yourself and the rest of the world.





27

## JOEL MEYEROWITZ

Joel Meyerowitz is one of the living legends and masters in street photography. He shot in the streets with other legends such as Garry Winogrand, Tony Ray-Jones, and even has apparently bumped into Cartier-Bresson on the streets.

What is so influential about Joel Meyerowitz is how he was one of the revolutionizing forces in street photography and color. When he first started to shoot on the streets of NYC with Winogrand, he bobbed and weaved the streets like a boxer-- with his Leica and black & white film pushed to ISO 1200-- allowing him to shoot at 1/1000th of a second and capture life (the maximum shutter speed of a Leica).

However he was curious about color, and would often shoot with two Leica's on the street-- one with black and white and the other with color.

He soon discovered that he enjoyed the thrill of shooting in color, with the relatively slow ISO 25 film at the time. It forced him to be slower and more meditative with his work-- making him also take a step back and trying to combine more elements and action into his frames.

Meyerowitz (who has been a photographer for over 50 years) has also experimented not only with 35mm, but also with 8x10 large-format view cameras. His work in Cape Cod was what first helped him gain the public's attention-- in which he focused on colors and light.

Meyerowitz is one of the most eloquent people when it comes to talking about street photography-- and his enthusiasm and passion just exudes from his body. I have personally learned a lot from his photography and life philosophy-- and his multi-layered images are always a treat to look at.

## 1. Experiment with different formats

Meyerowitz shot with a 35mm Leica for a long time, and soon decided to experiment with different formats as he was drawn to color film. He found the ISO 25 film on 35mm to be too slow, so he decided to try to experiment with medium-format. He also found it to be quite a slow process-- so he thought to himself: Why not just go all the way to 8x10 large-format and take things really slow? (For those of you who don't know, an 8x10 is an old-school camera you might have seen Ansel Adams use, that requires you to lug it around on a huge tripod. The benefit of a large-format camera is that the negatives are huge, and have insane amounts of detail).

When he is interviewed about the difference of working with an 8x10 versus a Leica-- Meyerowitz shares his thoughts:

"It transforms your way of looking at the world. First of all it is upside down, which is a whole other way of relating to things. And a wonderful way too because

it sort of takes the content out of the context so now you are looking at it for something about the weights and the feelings. It's not composition; it's about how you know the push/pull of it.

Whereas with the Leica on the street the immediacy, the sense that something is actually happening and you are in the moment with it so that when you reach out with the camera, you are part of it and it disappears instantly. It's the only instrument that stops things from disappearing. You can save them in that way. I learned, I think everything I know about being an artist, using a Leica on the streets. It taught me to understand human nature and to predict even the kinds of little things that might be happening. It has engaged my curiosity with the world and the meaning that comes out of the world. It's really been an instrument of my education and development as an artist. That's a mighty tool."

Therefore when Meyerowitz would shoot with an 8x10, it literally changed the way he saw the world. If you look through an 8x10 view camera, every-

thing is literally upside down. Of course it is also much slower than the Leica-- which is all about capturing quickly fleeting moments.

Meyerowitz also expands on how shooting with an 8x10 taught him to slow down and become more meditative when shooting:

"The 8 x 10 taught me reverence, patience, and meditation. It added another dimension to the scene, and the pictures are a product of two conditions, awareness and time. I had to modify my early discipline. Every artist's growing process involves giving up something to get something else. You're giving up your prejudices and preconceptions, and if you refuse to give those up then you don't grow. You stay where you are.

In another interview Meyerowitz expands on this concept a bit more:

"I think [shooting with the 8x10] has changed me, for the better. I've noticed over the years (I've been shooting the view camera now for thirty-one years) and I've had many people say to me, in response to the view camera



work, how Buddhist it is, how meditative it is, and often, if I've given a public lecture, someone will come to me afterwards and say, "are you a practicing Buddhist?" and I realize, in some ways, whatever has happened to me through using that camera, and its slowness, and the studied, reflective quality of it, has quieted me down."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think it is important to experiment with different formats, films, and cameras. Most photographers in Meyerowitz's day started off shooting with black and white film on small 35mm Leica's when working on the streets. Then many of them started to transition into trying a new medium--color, and with that shooting with larger and slower cameras (like the 8x10).

In today's age I think most of us start with digital cameras (mostly DSLR's). I personally started with a DSLR (Canon Rebel XT, then Canon 5D) in primarily black and white, then started to shift into shooting black and white film, and now color film. I would

say that experimenting with digital, film, black and white film, and color film-- has really opened up my world and ways of shooting.

I think experimentation is one of the most exciting things and ways for us to discover ourselves. If you find that shooting with a DSLR doesn't suit you-- try experimenting with a Micro 4/3rds, a point-and-shoot, iPhone, or even a rangefinder. If digital doesn't suit you, try experimenting using film. If you don't like small cameras, try going larger-- and using a medium-format or even a large-format camera.

I think it is very important to experiment-- but don't spend too much of your time experimenting that you never stick with one thing. Although Meyerowitz experimented with 35mm black and white film, 35mm color film, and then large-format color-- he generally stuck to one format and medium for a long period of time-- to create bodies of work.

## **2. Focus on taking pictures**

I think one of the most difficult things in street photography is how



many things are often going in the streets-- and how difficult it is to capture a good frame. Often the streets are cluttered, and we can fall victim to "paralysis by analysis"-- that we think too much we forget to just take the photograph.

Meyerowitz shares when he first started to shoot in the streets in 1962, the first question he asked himself was: "How do I choose what to photograph?" He also shares how intense it was to be on the streets:

"I was overwhelmed. The streets, the intense flow of people, the light changing, the camera that I couldn't quite get to work quickly enough. It just paralysed me. I had to learn to identify what it was exactly I was responding to, and if my response was any good. The only way to do that is to take pictures, print them, look hard at them and discuss them with other people."

But what Meyerowitz learned was that although there was so much action and commotion on the streets-- he just had to take photos and think about the consequences later.

I agree with this mentality-- when you see something in the streets, don't think too much about it. Just try your best to click and capture the moment. Then when you go home and take a look at your shots, then you can critique yourself, edit your bad photos, and ask for feedback from your colleagues and other street photographers you trust.

In another interview, Meyerowitz shares how shooting in the streets isn't always perfect:

"One of the very first things I learned working on the street is when the moment arrives—you need to take a picture of the moment and often the frame itself isn't a perfect frame. It isn't a Cartier-Bresson classically organized frame. It has a different kind of energy in it—it is clumsier, bolder, it is more about the first strength of the connection of whatever is going on and your strength as an artist."

Meyerowitz shares his thoughts on what he thinks an interesting moment is on the streets:

"I was struggling to how to be in the moment, how close to get to someone—how do I understand that there is significance? Sometimes the tip-off is that it is a joke, witty observation, or sometimes even philosophy."

At the end of the day, Meyerowitz sees himself less as an artist-- and more of an observer and documenter of experiences:

"I don't think of my photos as works of art—I see them as a fraction of a second in which my understanding and the worlds offering are unified in some way. That allows us to have some sort of open experience to share with whoever happens to look at the photo. So it isn't formal, it is more experiential."

#### **Takeaway point:**

When you are shooting in the streets-- especially when it is crowded and bustling, it can be quite overwhelming. Your job of a street photographer is to not be overwhelmed by this-- but try to make some sense of the chaos you experience.

Some of the practical tips that Meyerowitz offers is for us to not worry about making perfect frames-- but to simply capture the moments and experiences we see on the streets. Then afterwards, we can critique and edit out our bad shots.

One quote that has stuck with me is from my friend Charlie Kirk who says: "When in doubt, click." There are many moments that I often hesitate to take a photograph, because I am not certain if it will be an interesting photograph, or I get worried about how my subject might respond to me.

Therefore the moment I have any sort of doubts or hesitation, I just take the photograph. The worst that will happen is that it will be a boring photo or the person might get upset at me. But the best thing that might happen is that it will be a great photograph.

### **3. Document history**

Although Meyerowitz was mostly known for his street photography and his large-format work in Cape Cod, he was quite stirred by the terrorist attacks

of September 11th-- and had a sense of duty to capture the aftermath at ground-zero.

During the aftermath of 9/11, no photographer was able to get directly onto ground zero to photograph. However Meyerowitz was so passionate about documenting this moment of history for the rest of society that he was able to persevere into gaining a worker's pass by the NYC parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe. He was also able to build the right connections that allowed him to receive an official NYPD badge by the detectives he had befriended on the site. Meyerowitz shares: "They got what I was doing. Not one of the art galleries or government officials I contacted for help in gaining access to the site got it, but the cops understood it completely."

The amount of work that Meyerowitz put in photographing the aftermath was incredible. When he started shooting on September 23rd, 2001-- the heat from the ground was so hot that it would melt the soles of his boots. Meyerowitz shares his experiences:

"I photographed everything 14 hours a day: the demolition crews, the construction crews, the first-aid crews, the debris removal crews, the intelligence squad, even the security guys who initially tried to keep me off the site." The archive is a work of testimony that will enter not just the history of photography, but history itself."

### **Takeaway point:**

Although Meyerowitz is mostly known as a street photographer and a fine art photographer-- I think his 9/11 aftermath photographs are his most meaningful. His photographs are now a permanent installation at the 9/11 memorial in NYC-- and the images he was able to capture recorded that moment in history-- for future generations to remember and reflect upon.

Although most of us as street photographers don't have the same sort of opportunity that Meyerowitz did in photographing 9/11 after the terrorist attacks, we must remind ourselves of our duty to society -- and how our photo-

graphs are historical documents of our time.

Many of us tend to romanticize the past. I remember I have thought to myself: "Man, I wish I was a photographer like Henri Cartier-Bresson in the 1920's, everything just looked so much more interesting back then."

But honestly, the people in the 1920's probably didn't think that their world or lives were that interesting. The people from the 1920's probably romanticized the 1800's, and those people the 1600's.

Any photograph we take today will intrinsically be interesting 50 years from now. Even though taking photos of people on their iPhones may seem cliché and boring, people 50 years from now might say: "Oh man, they had iPhones back then?"

I know lots of street photographers who just took photographs in their own neighborhoods a few decades ago as fun-- as hobbyists. But now when I look at their work, they captured so many im-

portant scenes, buildings, people, and moments that are now gone.

So don't romanticize the past-- realize that you live in the most interesting moment. Create history by preserving what is in the present moment-- for future generations to look at and admire.

## 4. Constantly question yourself

Many of us as photographers often self-question ourselves. I don't know any photographer (no matter how great he/she is) who has never had self-doubt. We might wonder to ourselves why we photograph, if they have any meaning, or if we are any good at all?

Even the greats and masters (like Meyerowitz) have questioned themselves in their photography. But I think it is in this critical self-examination and asking of questions which leads us to some direction and truth. Meyerowitz shares the questions he has had for himself the last 50 years of photographing (that he has been trying to answer):



"It's me asking myself: 'How interesting is this medium? And how interesting can I make it for me? And, by the way, who the fuck am I?'"

Even Meyerowitz said he hasn't found a definitive answer for himself: "No, not yet [smiling], and time is running out. But I'm getting there."

### **Takeaway point:**

If you have self-doubts about your photography, don't fret. I think it is a good sign that you are challenging yourself, your work, and why you do what you do.

Socrates once famously said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." I think the same goes for our photography (and life).

Many of us just go out on the streets because it compels us-- but we never ask ourselves "why?"

Of course I cannot answer the question for you. Only you know why you go out on the streets to photograph.

Personally I photograph on the streets because I am trying to make so-

cial statements and critiques about our society. This stems from my background and passion in Sociology-- wanting to understand the world around me. But even my personal reasons for shooting constantly changes and evolves over time.

Even Joel Meyerowitz has been asking him the question "why" for the last 50 years. And he is still trying to figure out things-- so let us not be so hard on ourselves. Who knows, we may never figure out why we shoot. But as Steve Jobs once said, "The journey is the reward."

## **5. On shooting in color**

Meyerowitz shot shoulder-to-shoulder with Garry Winogrand on the streets of NYC in black and white, pushing his film to ISO 1200 -- allowing him to capture life at 1/1000th of a second.

So why would he switch to shooting color, in which the ISO was only rated at a measly 25?

Meyerowitz shares his reasons shooting in color-- one of the main reasons being the emotions and sensations he got from the description of color:

Interviewer: Why are you using color?

Meyerowitz: Because it describes more things.

Interviewer: What do you mean by description?

Meyerowitz: When I say description, I don't only mean mere fact and the cold accounting of things in the frame. I really mean the sensation I get from things—their surface and color—my memory of them in other conditions as well as their connotative qualities. Color plays itself out along a richer band of feelings—more wavelengths, more radiance, more sensation. I wanted to see more and experience more feelings from a photograph, and I wanted bigger images that would describe things more fully, more cohesively. Slow-speed color film provided that.

Meyerowitz expands on the ability of color film to capture a wider sense of experiences in "real life":

"The fact is that color film appears to be responsive to the full spectrum of visible light while black and white re-

duces the spectrum to a very narrow wavelength. This stimulates in the user of each material a different set of responses. A color photograph gives you a chance to study and remember how things look and feel in color. It enables you to have feelings along the full wavelength of the spectrum, to retrieve emotions that were perhaps bred in you from infancy—from the warmth and pinkness of your mother's breast, the loving brown of your puppy's face, and the friendly yellow of your pudding. Color is always part of experience. Grass is green, not gray; flesh is color, not gray. Black and white is a very cultivated response.

### **Takeaway point:**

We see the world in color-- it is what is natural to us. Black and white is more of an abstraction-- nobody literally sees the world in black and white.

Also when you shoot in black and white, there is less description in a photograph. Color often has meanings prescribed to it-- and when you shoot in black and white, you strip away some of that meaning.

Meyerowitz was able to articulate his reasons of shooting in color quite poetically. He shares also that seeing things in color often has a wider spectrum of emotions. Color often brings out warmth and memories from our past-- something that black and white doesn't.

Personally I used to shoot exclusively in black and white-- and it caused me to see the world in a different way. I saw the world around me as abstractions-- in black and white. I was more drawn to shapes, forms, lines, reflections, and the contrast of light.

However when I transitioned into shooting in color, I was first frustrated with the complications color brought (more variables to deal with) -- but I loved the challenge and the extra meaning that color brought out.

For example, if you photograph a beautiful woman in a red dress (in black and white) -- you only see a beautiful woman in a dress. But if you shoot her in color, you have the extra meaning of the red: red is often the color of lust, danger, passion-- which makes the photo-

graph have more depth, meaning, and emotion.

Shooting in color doesn't make you a "better" photographer than shooting in black and white. Both have their strengths and weaknesses. But I encourage you if you do shoot in color, don't just shoot color for the sake of it. Think about the extra meaning and layers that color brings out in your images. See the world in color.

## 6. Capture your feelings

Photography is a visual art form-- in which we are capturing elements from the real world and putting it inside a frame. I think nowadays the trend in street photography is to try to focus on complex compositions and layers-- but sometimes these images are devoid of emotions and feelings. Even the critique I have of Henri Cartier-Bresson is that although his photographs are perfectly composed and geometrically well-balanced, many of them are more about composition (and less about emotion).

Meyerowitz discovered this through his work-- that one of his primary fo-

cuses was to capture more emotion and feelings in his images:

"What are we all trying to get to in the making of anything? We're trying to get to ourselves. What I want is more of my feelings and less of my thoughts. I want to be clear. I see the photograph as a chip of experience itself. It exists in the world. It is not a comment on the world. In a photograph you don't look for, you look at! It's close to the thing itself. It's like an excitation. I want the experience that I am sensitive to to pass back into the world, fixed by chemistry and light to be reexamined. That's what all photographs are about—looking at things hard. I want to find an instrument with the fidelity of its own technology to carry my feelings in a true, clear, and simple way. That's how I want to think about less is more.

### **Takeaway point:**

I think what makes a meaningful and memorable photograph is one that has a sense of emotion, feeling-- that we can relate with. The best street photographs to me aren't the ones that have

fancy compositions or framing-- but images that touch us in the heart. And of course emotions aren't always pretty-- they often touch on the darker parts of life as well.

Nowadays when I look through my images and edit them-- I don't just judge them in terms of what is going on in the photograph (content) and how well composed it is (form). Rather, I am trying to focus on the emotion that my images bring out.

One photographer I highly admire is Brian Soko, a street photographer based in Chicago. His photographs burst with emotion -- and it is something I can connect with on a deeper level. Most of his photographs don't have fancy compositions and are quite straight-forward. But they work, as they hit me straight in the heart and burn themselves into my mind.

If you find your photographs not to be as interesting or engaging-- try to focus on capturing emotions. The rest will take care of itself.



## 7. Embrace ordinary things

I think one of the things that draws us all to street photography is how ordinary it is. Street photography is one of the most democratic forms of photography-- as anyone with any camera can do it in his/her backyard. And it is often the ordinary moments that have the most charm.

Meyerowitz is a champion of the ordinary circumstances of street photography:

"Why is it that the best poetry comes out of the most ordinary circumstances? You don't have to have extreme beauty to write beautifully. You don't have to have grand subject matter. I don't need the Parthenon. This little dinky bungalow is my Parthenon. It has scale; it has color; it has presence; it is real: I'm not trying to work with grandeur. I'm trying to work with ordinariness. I'm trying to find what spirits me away. Ordinary things. --- What did I say when I drove by those bungalows—something about the lives lived in them?

**Takeaway point:**

I think one of the frustrations that most of us have is that not all of us live in "interesting" places (such as New York, Tokyo, Paris, or London). However funny enough, all the people I know who live in those cities don't find their cities that interesting either (my friends from New York would rather be in London, my London friends would rather be in Paris, and my Paris friends would rather be in New York).

The grass is always greener on the other side. And know that no matter how ordinary the place you live (even if you live in a boring suburb-- you can still make great images).

Take Lee Friedlander for example. He took tons of great photos in pretty boring and suburban-looking places. William Eggleston has lived his entire life in his town (which I heard is quite boring)-- and still captured beautiful colors, light, and moments.

So embrace the ordinariness of the world around you-- and try to make it extraordinary.

A tip I have is imagine if an alien visited your neighborhood, town, or city. What would they find interesting and odd? Then try to photograph that-- and see where you live from an outsider's perspective.

## 8. Always have your camera with you (no matter how big)

Many of us bemoan how heavy, burdensome, and annoying it is to carry our cameras. I remember when I shot with a DSLR and how much I told myself the day I got a Leica how much more I would carry it with me. But even nowadays the Leica is starting to feel a bit heavy, and I prefer carrying around a compact camera (Contax T3) for most of my daily excursions.

But regardless of how much of a pain it might be to carry around our cameras with ourselves everywhere we go-- realize it isn't as annoying as carrying around an 8x10 camera with you everywhere you go. And that is exactly that Meyerowitz did:

Interviewer: Do you carry the 8 x 10 camera around with you?

" I carry it with me as I would carry a 35mm camera. In the very beginning, if I went for a drive or to the A&P, the camera was in the back seat of the car; if I went for a walk down the street to visit a neighbor, or if I went to the beach, the camera was on my shoulder. No matter where I went, that camera was ever-present: parties, walks, shopping. It came from the discipline of carrying a 35mm at all times—in the early years you never saw me without a camera. I didn't want to be in that position of saying, "Oh I saw a great shot, if only I had my camera." At that time no photographer was without a camera. We got that from Henri Cartier-Bresson's being ready for "the decisive moment," and from Robert Frank's traveling everywhere in America and making pictures of the Americans that seemed to occur in the most unexpected moments. Since my discipline was always to carry a camera, it didn't matter that when the size changed it became big and awkward; I still wanted to have it at all times. So I

provided myself with the opportunity of making large-scale, highly detailed photographs of unusual moments.

**Takeaway point:**

We never know when a great photography opportunity moment will arise. Have you ever had an instance when you saw a great photo opportunity but you didn't have your camera with you? Yeah, it is a pretty crappy feeling-- it has happened to all of us (myself included).

So regardless of what camera you have-- put yourself in the habit of always carrying your camera with you. To the grocery store, gas station, school, work, to the library-- whatever. Because it is often in the most ordinary moments that the most extraordinary things happen. Some of my best photographs have happened in the least expected places (eating at fast food restaurants, at the grocery store, or on the way to pick up my girlfriend Cindy from school).

So always be prepared -- you never know when "the decisive moment" will appear.

## 9. Be socially conscious

I think that as street photographers-- it is important for us to have a sense of obligation or duty to be socially conscious. After all, we are documenting people and society through our lens. If humanity and social consideration isn't part of the equation in our work-- I don't think we can really call ourselves street photographers.

Meyerowitz expands his thoughts on being socially conscious in his photography. He first started off being more concerned with the aesthetics of photography (than the social or the moral aspects):

"I have been thinking about what a photographer's responsibility is—his social responsibility, the responsibility to the craft, to the telling of the message, to the print. Although I started with what I thought was a moral imperative, that America was this crazy place that needed to be described and I had a social responsibility to tell it as it is—the Great American Novel in photographs—somehow over time, during my middle years,

the aesthetics of photography played a greater role, and I became less concerned with serving moral issues.

However as time went on, he shifted to being more interested in the social and moral considerations in his photography:

And as I got a little older, it has become more important to me again to be morally conscious—not to vacate that responsibility, but to say, “These are my feelings about it. This is what America looks like right now. These are things that are socially reprehensible. These are things that might be overturned.” If you don’t point them out, if you only glaze the surface, the beauty of light or the beauty of the subject, you don’t see what might need to be corrected, or what can be changed, or what’s really wrong. An artist’s responsibility is to not avert his gaze. Maybe you can’t correct it by pointing it out, but you can at least certify that you saw it at that time, and that it was painful to you.

Meyerowitz again expands on challenging himself and why he photographs

-- and realized how much he had to connect back with society and the community:

"For a period of ten years, in the middle, I was so engaged with the inner argument of photography: “Why photograph? What does a photograph look like? What makes it photographic?” This issues numb somehow. It’s not that I was dulled to photography, but to the world. Making photographs was all. I think I lost touch with the outside world. I’ve come back out in the last four or five years, with smaller works, and a deeper sense of real contact and community.

### **Takeaway point:**

To be a street photographer is to be socially conscious and socially engaged with the rest of the world. If we always put the aesthetic over the socially and morally important parts of photography-- we will only be stuck in making pretty photographs that are devoid of meaning.

So think about the moral and social responsibility you have as a photogra-



pher-- through the work that you create. Are the images you create saying something greater about society or the world around you? Or are they just visually aesthetically interesting photographs?

Granted we need both to make a powerful frame-- but as Meyerowitz challenged himself-- we should challenge ourselves in terms of being socially and morally conscious with our work.

## 10. On making a book

One thing I learned through Meyerowitz through his interviews is how he puts together his books. He gives some valuable insights.

Meyerowitz first shares how he prints out his photos small (like a deck of cards) and carries with him-- and lays them out on the ground and sequences and puts them together:

"Before I lay out a book, I read the pictures many many times, until I've absorbed the so-called meaning of each picture. My feeling about it - not intellectually, but my gut feeling about these pictures and how I relate to them, and then I just collect them all as miniatures, at

three inches across, and I carry them with me like a deck of cards, and I lay them out, everytime I have a few minutes, I lay them out - I'm doing it now, for this next book - I lay them out and look and look, and then I'll see something that looks like a starting point. So I'll put that picture first, and then I'll see what happens. What does it call, like magnetism, to itself? And what do these two call themselves, and what do these three call? Because it's not just about the next picture, it's the weight of the three of them in a row. Five of them in a row. Ten! I can set-up certain rhythms or cadences, so that when you get to the third or fourth picture, you begin to realize the first picture again, like, 'oh yeah, the first and fourth are linked!' And there are these links so that if you were to make a drawing of this book, if there were forty pictures - I could probably make a diagram that comes after the fact, not before the fact, that the first connects to the fourth and the tenth and on and on - and that there are these interconnections. It'd be a fun thing to do, actually!

Meyerowitz also challenges us to look at our favorite books in terms of getting inspiration to putting books together:

"You should take your favorite book and take it apart that way and see why it works that way. What is it about the rhythm of these pictures that make you see it as a book, rather than a collection of pictures. I think, too many photographers make books that are just collections of pictures. You could throw them together any way and they'd be alright. And there are other photographers that make books that are works of art, as a book."

### **Takeaway point:**

Meyerowitz shares a lot about the rhythm and the flow of images in a book. A photographic book isn't just a collection of images. We need to consider how the images connect with one another, and create another layer of meaning through these relationships.

Many of us who shoot digitally often don't have the chance to print out our work and look at them.

As a fun exercise, try to print out your favorite images as small 4x6 prints (can be done at any cheap drugstore or online)-- and carry them with you as a mobile portfolio. Look at them constantly, and even think about how you can pair them, sequence them-- and perhaps put a book of them together.

Also you can use that as an opportunity get more tactile, hands-on critique and feedback from other street photographers you admire and trust.

## 11. On the democracy of photography

One argument that goes on a lot is digital versus film. People who shoot digital don't understand why people shoot film. And sometimes film shooters can be snobby and say digital photography is too easy and isn't "art."

But let us remember-- street photography is the most democratic type of photography out there. When Meyerowitz was asked about the difference between film and digital-- he doesn't really care. He loves the democracy of photography:

" Photography's always been a very democratic medium. In the sense that the camera's the same. It used to be 35mm, and now it's digital. The camera's the same, though - people pick it up and use it, like a fountain pen. Everybody writes something with it; a check, a story, a prescription. It's writing. And photography's the same - it's democratic in that way. Everyone can use it, but not everyone makes art. I think what's happened digitally, is that there's been this huge explosion of access to imagery because you can print them at home. Or you can put them up on flickr and share pictures this way. So it both expands the market, and not necessarily makes it that much more interesting or better or artful, but it brings more and more people into it, so there's a greater possibility of someone discovering their voice.

### **Takeaway point:**

Personally I have shot both digital and film-- and intrinsically there is not one medium that is "better" than the other. At the end of the day, you are still making pictures.

Personally I prefer the slowness of film over digital, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it is like that for everybody. I know tons of street photographers who shoot digitally who create phenomenal images (even guys shooting with iPhones).

The great thing about digital cameras is how much it has opened the door to the rest of the world to capture. Whereas photography used to be quite elitist and difficult to start (having to know how to shoot fully manually) -- now anyone with an iPhone can just capture beautiful moments.

So don't worry so much about the medium of photography -- just focus on creating images that inspire and tell stories about the world.

## 12. On composition

Meyerowitz in a video interview also gives great philosophical tips when it comes to composition in street photography.

Meyerowitz first starts off about the philosophy of "the frame" in a camera:

"One of the first things that every photographer learns is that there is a frame. There is a fixed frame. And most people have a fixed frame, a 35mm for the most part.

So how do you make your work different from anybody else's? So it is what you put in the frame and its where you cut the rest of the 360 degrees in all axes we're looking at. A spinning web of 360 degree arches—and you're moving this frame around.

He especially shares the importance in photography is what to include (and what to exclude):

And early on I sensed the power of that in this regard: when you put your frame up to your eye, the world continues outside the frame. So what you put in and what you leave out are what determines the meaning or potential of your photograph. But you must continue to keep in mind that there are plenty of stuff off-stage. And what bearing might the rest of the off-stage have on this?

In this regard, he shares how a rangefinder has helped him shoot in the

streets-- as it helped him better see what happened outside of the frame (as a caveat, I personally find shooting with a rangefinder a bit overrated):

So one of the things about the Leica is special is that the Leica has the window here—so when you put your camera to your eye with an SLR you block the world. But when you put the rangefinder to your eye, you are seeing the world and the context at the same time. A rangefinder is the finer instrument than an SLR – than an SLR which makes you only one-eyed. So you are binocular—so understanding that the world continues outside of the frame, it leaves certain things ambiguous or unspoken. But impinging upon.

Meyerowitz says that street photography isn't just about capturing one single subject or moment-- but creating meaning through putting unrelated things together and creating a context:

I believe that recognition and the power of the frame to put disparate, unrelated things together—suddenly this guy who was going on his business do-



ing all this stuff and this woman with her poodle—they have no knowledge of each other. But in your frame, it is context.

I'm going to go on record here—when I think about my photographs, I understand that my interest all along has not been in identifying a singular thing. But in photographing the relationship between things. The unspoken relationships, the tacit relationship—all of these variables are there if you choose to see in this way. But if you choose to only make objects out of singular things you will end up shooting the arrow into the bull's-eye all the time, and you will get copies of objects in space."

Meyerowitz expands on the importance of relationships in his images:

"I didn't want copies of objects—I wanted the ephemeral connections between unrelated things to vibrate. And if my pictures work at all, at their best—they are suggesting these tenuous relationships. And that fragility is what is so human about them. And I think it's what is in the 'romantic tradition'—it is

a form of humanism that says we're all part of this together. I'm not just a selector of objects.

And there are plenty photographers who are great—but only work in the object-reality frame of reference. They collect things. And I don't see myself as a collector. That's how I'm different from others—it's not a judgment, but a sense of my own identity. For me the play is always in the potential. It's like magnetism."

### **Takeaway point:**

In photography you have a frame--and you decide what to include in the frame and what not to include in the frame. And this can be changed depending on how close you get to your subject, how much you crouch down, what angle you shoot from, and how you orient and frame your camera.

I think as a key thing, it is more important to know what to exclude from your frame (rather than what to include).

Meyerowitz also shares the importance of creating context and meaning

through photos by adding multiple elements. I think personally one of the weaknesses in my photography is that they are too focused on a single subject. My more interesting photos tend to be when I create some sort of comparison, juxtaposition, or contrast with multiple elements in the frame.

So when you are out on the streets, realize all your subjects don't know that they are in your same frame. But think about fun and novel ways you can put them together-- to create an extra layer of meaning through the relationships in your frame.

## Conclusion

In this one article alone I cannot possibly share all of the wisdom and philosophies of Joel Meyerowitz. There is a wealth of information of him online, in forms of interviews and videos. I have tried my best to share my personal favorite resources in the links below for you to continue your own personal self-directed learning.

However I think we can all learn from Joel's passion not only for photogra-

phy-- but for life, society, and humanity. He has photographed for over 50 years, and it is his passion for the streets and documenting life that keeps bringing him back.

Even though he has been shooting for that long-- even he doesn't have all the answers to photography. Even at age 75, Meyerowitz is still trying to discover why he photographs-- and it is a burning question that has persisted to this day. But he hasn't given up-- and like he said-- "I am getting there."





28

## JOEL STERNFELD

Joel Sternfeld is one of the most important and influential photographers of this generation. His large-format color work: "American Prospects" was one of the most revolutionary color works of the time-- when "serious" art photographers were only using black and white. Inspired by Robert Frank, Sternfeld hit the road in a small Volkswagon van for 3 years and traveled across America-- seeking to capture the American landscape. In his Guggenheim report he wrote that the urge was "of someone who grew up with a vision of classical regional America and the order it seemed to contain, to find beauty and harmony in an increasingly uniform, technological, and disturbing America."



While Sternfeld is best known for his large-format color landscape work, he started off as a bona-fide street photographer, using a Leica and a flash in the streets of Chicago and NYC-- where you can see his work in his "Early Work."

Personally I was quite fascinated by his transition from shooting 35mm work in the streets, similar to that of Garry Winogrand, William Klein, and Robert Frank-- and transitioning into a large 8x10 camera, along the lines of Walker Evans and Ansel Adams (except shooting in color).

I recently ordered the newest reprint of his seminal "American Prospects" book printed by Steidl in Germany, and was truly moved by the images -- and was inspired to write an article on him. I didn't find too many interviews with Joel Sternfeld in terms of his inspirations and philosophies-- but I was able to piece together some lessons that I have learned from him:

## 1. Leave your photos up to interpretation

When I started street photography, I would title all of my images with cheesy titles like: "Loneliness", "Isolation", or "Hope." Although I had a great deal of fun titling my photographs, I soon realized that having a title took away all of the fun from my images. It didn't let the viewer make up his or her own interpretation. It closed them out.

One interesting thing about Joel Sternfeld is that regardless of the format he is shooting in (35mm or 8x10 large-format), he always uses the same caption: the location and date. I feel this is enough information to give the viewer enough context, without giving away too much interpretation. This is a convention I have done to my images now too.

One of his most famous images is of a farm market in McLean, Virginia, in which you see a helmeted fireman shopping for pumpkins, while you see his fellow firefighters fighting a fire just down the road.

Upon first glance, the image seems surreal. When I first saw the image I



asked myself: "What the hell is going on?"

In reality what was happening was that the fire was a training exercise, and the firefighter buying the pumpkin was just taking a break.

However if Sternfeld wrote a long caption under the image that said: "Firefighter buying pumpkin during a firefighting training exercise" -- it would take away all the fun and suspense.

But one might see this as "deceptive." However if we see this photo as deceptive-- it is only because we are deceiving ourselves.

Sternfeld openly acknowledges what he is doing -- and how photographs have the power to manipulate the viewer. He explains:

"You take 35 degrees out of 360 degrees and call it a photo," he told the Guardian in a 2004 interview. No individual photo explains anything. That's what makes photography such a wonderful and problematic medium."

In another interview, Sternfeld explains how even framing a subject in a certain way is "manipulation" and changes the interpretation of a scene:

"Photography has always been capable of manipulation. Even more subtle and more invidious is the fact that any time you put a frame to the world, it's an interpretation. I could get my camera and point it at two people and not point it at the homeless third person to the right of the frame, or not include the murder that's going on to the left of the frame... There's an infinite number of ways you can do this: photographs have always been authored."

Sternfeld also challenges the issue of "authenticity" of images:

"And nor is anything that purports to be documentary to be completely trusted, anyway. The Hockney argument [the claim that war photography was "truthful"] is as simplistic as saying that any non-fiction book is truthful. You can never lose sight of the fact that it's authored. With a photograph, you are left with the same modes of interpreta-

tion as you are with a book. You ask: what do we know about the author and their background? What do I know about the subject?

Sternfeld moves forward, sharing how manipulation has always been a part of photography. Some of it being a little more "obvious" -- some of it less obvious:

"Some of the people who are now manipulating photos, such as Andreas Gursky, make the argument - rightly - that the 'straight' photographs of the 1940s and 50s were no such thing. Ansell Adams would slap a red filter on his lens, then spend three days burning and dodging in the dark room, making his prints. That's a manipulation. Even the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson, with all due respect to him, are notoriously burned and dodged.

Individual images don't have the power to tell a whole story, and Sternfeld shares how photographs have always been "convincing lies":

"No individual photo explains anything. That's what makes photography

such a wonderful and problematic medium. It is the photographer's job to get this medium to say what you need it to say. Because photography has a certain verisimilitude, it has gained a currency as truthful - but photographs have always been convincing lies."

### **Takeaway point:**

When I was researching interviews with Joel Sternfeld, I had a very difficult time finding any articles about Sternfeld explaining the philosophy behind his photography-- or the deeper meanings behind his projects.

I think the reason he doesn't talk too much about his personal philosophies in photography is because he wants to leave them open to interpretation. The same as his images-- he doesn't want to give away too much information, because images are generally more enjoyable when they leave up the interpretation to the viewer.

I think the mistake that a lot of photographers do in their images is to give away too much context or a background story in their captions. By telling too

much information of a photograph, you close off the image. You don't leave it up to interpretation. It becomes less interesting or puzzling to the viewer.

It is like a good movie. The best movies are the ones which are open-ended-- the ones you can't explain easily. This leads to there being multiple "theories" of the meaning of a film, countless forums discussing the director's intent, and sometimes cult followings. But if a director gave away all of his intentions-- it would be a lot less fun for the viewers.

Also realize that in photography, there is no ultimate "truth." All photographs are lies in the sense that you decide what to show-- and what to leave out. The photographs you take and share with the rest of the world are your personal interpretations of a scene.

I think the great thing about being a street photographer is that we don't have the same ethical duty as a war photographer or a photojournalist-- in the sense that we don't need to make "authenticity" our primary goal. Street photography is all about our personal experiences in

the world-- and however we decide to present our images is a self-portrait of ourselves.

## 2. Hit the road

There has always been something romantic about a road trip, especially in America. Countless photographers have done it-- most famously Robert Frank in his book: "The Americans."

Joel Sternfeld was also highly influenced by Robert Frank-- and he decided to go on his own road trip in his Volkswagen camper van. His trips ultimately lead to the publication of his book: "American Prospects" (1979-1983). Sometimes his trips took a few weeks to a month-- other times he went an entire year straight.

His travels took him all across America-- and by using an 8x10 view camera, he took a lot of precise care and attention to each photograph he took. Not only that, but 8x10 film is quite expensive (plus processing) -- which meant he didn't snap photos off as easily as if he had a 35mm camera.

Personally I went on a road trip across (a lot) America-- from Michigan all the way down to Los Angeles, then up to Berkeley.

The trip was a truly amazing experience. My girlfriend Cindy and I were able to meet some incredible people along the way who showed us around and let us stay with them. Not only that, but there is no better way to experience America than by car.

Of course there were many less romantic things about this road trip-- like driving for hours a day on the freeway (it can get quite tedious). But the stops in-between our trip were always memorable, and it was amazing to see how big and vast America was.

Takeaway point:

I highly recommend going on any photography road trip, whether it be for a weekend, an entire week, or perhaps an entire month (or even longer). It doesn't even have to be across America. If you are lucky enough to live in Europe, you can drive across most of Western Europe in just a few days!

During my road trip, I was able to take some interesting photographs along the way. But more than that, it was a great experience of self-discovery. I also loved the freedom and sense of adventure.

If you are interested in going on your own road trip-- I wrote some tips on how to go on a road trip.

### 3. On landscapes

Although Joel Sternfeld started off as a bonafide "street photographer" with a 35mm on the streets with a flash, you might be thinking to yourself: what do landscapes have to do anything with "street photography"?

Even though Sternfeld doesn't call himself a street photographer, the way he approaches landscapes is very similar to that of the soul of street photography:

"I've worked primarily with the American landscape-- my approach has to be look at the landscape to find a kind of beauty as it truly exists. Looking at landscape about what it reveals about the human moment, past, and the pre-



sent human moment. I mean this is the surface of the earth, and what we do with it tells us an awful lot about ourselves."

I think when we are out shooting street photography, we are trying to share something about the "human moment", other human beings, and something greater about society. Street photography is also a lot about self-exploration.

I don't think that street photography necessarily has to have people in it as well. You can describe a lot of Joel Sternfeld's work as "urban landscapes" -- which I feel falls into the umbrella of "street photography". He isn't just taking pretty landscapes-- his images are much deeper than that. They say something about humanity and American society at large.

#### **Takeaway point:**

I think that too many of us as street photographers tend to only shoot people. I used to be that way. I thought that if a photograph didn't have a person on it-- that it wasn't "street photography."

Now my opinions have changed. I personally shoot a lot of urban landscapes here in Berkeley, without people in it. I'm trying to explore how these urban landscapes have a connection to the human experience-- and what they say about society. I'm trying to show humanity through my images indirectly (without directly having people in them).

So I recommend you to try to go out and take your own hand at urban landscapes as well. Try to create images that aren't just pretty-- but have some sort of deeper social statement behind them.

#### **4. Print out your photos**

One of my favorite documentaries on photography is "How to make a book with Steidl." It documents the process of Joel Sternfeld putting together one his books: "iDubai" with Steidl (arguably the most famous printer in the entire world).

In one of the scenes that you can watch in this trailer below-- you see Sternfeld with thousands of photos printed out in little 4x6's -- laid out on the table and ground. You see him pair-

ing images together, trying to create certain meanings through the combinations:

### **Takeaway point:**

Most of us don't print out our photos anymore. We generally only see them on the computer monitor.

However if we are working on projects or series, there is nothing better than printing them out and putting them on the floor-- re-arranging them, pairing them, and sequencing them.

Overall I have had a good experience traveling with my iPad, and sequencing and editing my photos with photographers I trust in-person. However whenever I am at home, I prefer to print out 4x6's (I generally get mine done at Costco) and they are much more fun to re-arrange and edit.

So if you have never printed out your photos to edit, sequence, or arrange them-- I highly recommend doing so. It is a lot of fun, and many famous photographers do this when putting together their books and projects.

## **5. Choose your "look" wisely**

I think describing a photographer's "style" is generally two main things: 1) Their aesthetic "look" and 2) Their subject matter.

The body of work which first thrust Joel Sternfeld into the spotlight was his "American Prospects" book. And Sternfeld made a conscious choice to shoot it with an 8x10 large-format camera in color. It yielded a lot more descriptive power-- which added context and more meaning to the images.

Although Sternfeld was inspired by black & white photographers such as Robert Frank early on-- he has worked in color from the beginning of his career. He used Kodachromes for its sharpness and muted tones. Sternfeld shares the importance of choosing a "look" in their images:

"A photographer must choose a palette as painters choose theirs."

Of course part of the "look" that Sternfeld focused on was color. He was inspired by his contemporaries, such as

William Eggleston, Stephen Shores, and Helen Levitt. Sternfeld expands why he works in color (instead of black and white):

”Black and white is abstract; color is not. Looking at a black and white photograph, you are already looking at a strange world. Color is the real world. The job of the color photographer is to provide some level of abstraction that can take the image out of the daily.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I think that another common mistake that many street photographers do is to mix too much black and white and color in their work. I see some street photographers who use too many "looks" or palettes in their work: low-contrast black and white, high contrast black and white, sepia, muted color, highly saturated color, selective color, HDR, etc.

I don't think that one aesthetic or "look" is necessarily better than the others-- I just recommend consistency in your "look".

The good thing about being a photographer in the early days of film was

that you would generally choose one type of film and stick with it your entire career. It made it easy for viewers to quickly identify your work, as you generally had a certain film "look" -- and you had similar subject matter.

But I think the thing that plagues us now in digital is how there is too much flexibility in how we can post-process our images. I find when I'm working in digital-- I can spend too much time post-processing my images-- and a lot of my digital photographs look different.

This is one of the main reasons why I like to shoot in Kodak Portra 400 for my color work: they look consistent. I get all of my film developed and scanned at Costco-- and the CD's I get back all look the same. I also only shoot with a 35mm focal length, so all my photographs look more consistent.

If you do shoot in digital-- a good way to have a consistent look is to stick to presets. I am a huge fan of presets, because they save you time in post-processing, and they also tend to look consistent. I would say when you are

working on a certain project, book, or body of work-- try to stick to one preset, and just make small adjustments from there.

## 6. Pave your own path

One of the things I struggled with for a long time was to "find my own style." I was inspired by tons of other photographers-- but was always compared to them. I started off being an Henri Cartier-Bresson "copycat" -- then later on as a Bruce Gilden copycat. However as time went on-- I think I am discovering more of my own personal voice by spending less time on social media, focusing on projects, and letting my images marinate for a long time (often for around a year or longer). I think I am starting to find more of my own "style" in my photography -- but it is something I am still evolving with over time.

Sternfeld in his work was also highly influenced by other photographers. When he majored in art at Dartmouth, he was fascinated by color photography. When he first started shooting in the late 60s and early 70s, he was constantly

experimenting. He spent days walking around the streets of New York with his 35mm Leica and rolls of Kodachrome, trying to find his own style. Sternfeld was especially inspired by Eggleston-- but he knew that he had to pave his own path if he wanted to make a mark:

“I was enthralled by Eggleston, as everybody was. But I knew if I was ever to make a mark, I’d have to go to places he hadn’t headed. He owned the poetic snapshot, but I’d always had this leaning towards narrative, and so I began to lean a little harder.”

### Takeaway point:

I think finding your own style in photography is one of the most difficult things to do. One of the biggest mistakes many of us do is to simply copy another photographer and never push forward to innovate.

I think when you are starting off, it is good to imitate and copy other photographers whose work inspire you. This is what Renaissance painters and apprentices did-- they simply copied their mas-



ters for many years, then went out and started to do their own thing.

There is a nice theory called the "Helsinki Bus Theory" in which the path of a photographer is illustrated by different bus lines. The problem that many of us do is we switch buses too often. But by "staying on the fucking bus" -- we stick with a certain personal vision long enough-- we eventually find our own style and path.

So I would say that while it is great to draw inspiration from other photographers, don't simply try to copy them in the long-run. Use their work as a starting point-- a blueprint. I then recommend working on projects or long-term series-- staying consistent with a certain camera, film (or style of post-processing), focal length, and a concept. Then by getting honest and critical feedback-- you can eventually make a name for yourself.

## Conclusion

Even though Joel Sternfeld isn't your typical "street photographer" -- he started off as one. Although he was in-

spired by his contemporaries at the time and started off shooting with a 35mm Leica (like everyone else) -- he eventually branched out and found his own voice shooting large-format 8x10 color landscape photographs. His relentless passion and hard work lead his project "American Prospects" to change the course of color photography in the 21st century.

I think we all struggle with finding our own unique voice and style-- and we all have doubts about our own photography. But let us take the lead of Sternfeld by traveling, exploring ourselves, and our photography-- and by thinking what we are trying to say through our work. Eventually if we are persistent enough, we will find our destination. And remember, "the journey is its own reward."



29

## JOSEF KOUDELKA

Josef Koudelka is one of my favorite photographers of all-time. I love how he has been able to craft his life around photographing only what he wanted to photograph, how he is able to capture emotional and empathetic images (especially in his “Gypsies” project), his ability to continue to re-invent his photography (switching from 35mm to panoramic), and his absolute dedication to his craft.

I will share some personal lessons that Koudelka has taught me about photography and life below. If you want to learn more about Koudelka, I recommend you to

read my article on him: 10 Lessons Josef Koudelka Has Taught Me About Street Photography.

## 1. Create the conditions of your life

Koudelka is famous for being the ultimate nomad in terms of photography. He has been traveling the past 45 years, mostly homeless— and has pursued only photography projects which interest him.

There are lots of stories of him sleeping on the floor of the Gypsies (when he was photographing them, they actually felt bad for him), crashing at the offices of Magnum, and him borrowing equipment, film, and darkrooms from friends and colleagues.

He has lived his entire life on a shoestring budget— and has the ultimate freedom: freedom of time, and the freedom to photograph exactly what he wants (how he wants).

Many of us don't have this luxury—to just quit our lives and become nomadic, traveling photographers.

However Koudelka has made the conscious decision to dedicate his life to travel and photography— at the expense of having a steady family life, having a home, and a stable income.

In the excerpt below, he shares some of his personal philosophy when it comes to this:

Laura Hubber: You're famous for not taking assignments. How do you choose your subjects?

Koudelka: I know what I want to do and I do it. And I've created conditions so I can do it—I've been doing it for 45 years. People who do assignments are being paid and they are supposed to do something. I want to keep the freedom not to do anything, the freedom to change everything.

### **Takeaway point:**

You control your life. You control your destiny. I believe that “reality is negotiable” — there is no excuse for not pursuing what you love.

The only excuse we make is that we have to make sacrifices. Everything we decide to pursue in life has a cost.

So if your dream in life is to travel the world and make photographs for a living— you can do that. But the question is: “What am I willing to sacrifice in my life?” You will probably have to sacrifice a lot: like Koudelka. You probably won’t have a stable income, you won’t have enough money to buy a BMW or expensive cameras, you will have the stress of figuring out how to make ends meet, you won’t have a stable family life, and probably will be seen as a strange outsider by others.

But if you’re willing to make these sacrifices to live out your dream— go for it.

Similarly, I know a lot of people who make excuses that they don’t have time to make photos. But it isn’t that they don’t have time— it is because they are unwilling to sacrifice the time they spend doing other stuff.

For example, if you have a full-time job, you can always make time by leaving

your house an hour early, and taking photos on the way to work. You can take your 30minute-1 hour lunch break to make photographs around your office building. If your office building area is boring, go make photos right after you are done work. I know it is tiring and exhausting to make photos after a long and stressful day of work— but if you are truly, insanely passionate about photography— you will make this sacrifice.

Perhaps you can also decide to work a part-time job, or a job with flexible hours, in order to travel and shoot photography. I know some photographers who work on airlines, which gives them the freedom to travel and shoot. I know some friends who teach English in foreign countries, because it gives them the opportunity to live in a foreign country, travel, and also shoot.

Reality is negotiable— just think of how bad you want it.

Related article: Advice for Aspiring Full-Time Photographers

## 2. Follow your intuition



One of the questions that a lot of photographers ask me is: “How do I know what kind of project to work on?”

Koudelka gives the practical advice of following your intuition:

LH: What’s the main motivation for you to choose a subject?

Koudelka: I’m an intuitive person.

LH: If it speaks to you, you go.

Koudelka: You know, people ask all the time why I photographed gypsies. I’ve never known. I’m not particularly interested to know.

LH: Is it possible that you were drawn to the way Roma are free from the state?

No, not at all [pause]. You know, I didn’t grow up with American cinema like many photographers. I was from a little village. I was never fascinated by the United States. But I remember seeing photographs from the Farm Security Administration and they moved me very much. It wasn’t because of the style of the photography—it was because of the

subject. Maybe you’ll find something similar with Gypsies too.

Koudelka doesn’t give a super-compelling reason why he chooses to shoot what he shoots, or why he decided to follow the Roma people and create his “Gypsies” book.

He has rather followed his intuition and his curiosity.

### **Takeaway point:**

I think it is important to follow your nose in street photography. If you are out on the streets, you don’t always need a reason to make a certain photograph.

I have a rule: if I find a scene or a moment that I get a gut-feeling that it might be interesting to shoot, I take the photograph. You want to listen to your gut— and follow your intuition what might be a good shot, rather than letting the editor of your mind say, “No— don’t shoot that, it is a rubbish shot.”

For all the photography projects I have personally worked on, it was generally personal. For example, I started my “Suits” series after I got laid off my cor-

porate job when I was working as a “Suit”. I got so obsessed about money, power, and “trying to keep up with the Joneses” that I became a work-a-colic just to earn more money and prestige. But now when I see people wearing suits, I can empathize with them— and feel sorry for them.

For my “Only in America” series which I am pursuing at the moment, I came to realize that the best photos I take are in my own backyard (or country for this matter). I have done a lot of international travel the last few years, and I am starting to realize that I need to spend more time at home, and photograph my own home and culture. I have been deeply moved and inspired by “The Americans” by Robert Frank, as well as the other American photographers such as William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, Lee Friedlander — and many others. So through this project, I want to show my own version and viewpoint of “America” — it is a project that my gut and my heart is telling me to do.

So if you are trying to figure out what you want to shoot, go out and

shoot with an open mind. Have a blank slate. Don’t go out with too much of a pre-conceived notion. Photograph simply what interests you.

After a few months, start to look at your images more analytically. Start to label and tag your images, and see what kind of subject matter you are drawn to. Are you interested in photographing faces? Are you interested in capturing gestures and moments? Are you interested in urban landscapes?

Once you find what kind of subject matter interests you— follow your curiosity and intuition. Keep shooting it until your heart tells you it is time to stop.

I think our subconscious mind has great power. Give it respect, and listen to your gut.

### 3. On composition

Koudelka has some amazing compositions in his photography. You can see a lot of Triangles compositions (especially in his “Gypsies” book). He also has some great simple “Figure-to-ground”

compositions that you can also see in his “Exiles” book.

In the interview, they ask Koudelka his thoughts on composition:

LH: How important is composition in your photographs?

Koudelka: It’s not a good photograph without good composition. Originally I’m an aeronautical engineer. Why do airplanes fly? Because there is balance.

I find it fascinating how Koudelka’s background in engineering has informed his composition. One of the main purposes of composition is to add balance, shape, and form to the images.

Furthermore, when asked what makes a good photograph— Koudelka shares that it is very subjective at times. A photograph speaks to people differently— based on their life experiences or how they interpret the image:

Koudelka: A good photograph speaks to many different people for different reasons. It depends on what people have been through and how they react.

Also another good way to make a strong photograph is to ask yourself, “What am I going to remember?” It is to make a photograph that burns itself in your mind, and in your heart:

Koudelka: The other sign of good photography for me is to ask, “What am I going to remember?” It happens very, very rarely that you see something that you can’t forget, and this is the good photograph.

### **Takeaway point:**

If you want to learn more about composition, I recommend reading my series on composition and street photography.

Koudelka is one of the best photographers because he is able to marry both composition and content. His photographs are beautifully composed, but also have a deep sense of soul, mystery, and are enigmatic.

A great photograph needs both strong composition and content. You need a strong composition to add balance, harmony, and energy to an image. And you need interesting subject-matter (content) to captivate the viewer— and

to make them see something they won't forget.

When I am editing my shots (choosing my best images), I often ask myself: "Will people remember this photograph, or will it be meaningful 200 years from now?"

By thinking if a photograph will be memorable—it is a good way to filter through your "so-so" or "maybe" photographs.

Make photographs that will last at least 2-lifetimes. You can do this through strong compositions and strong emotions in your photos.

## 4. Photograph for yourself

What drives Koudelka to photograph? He is mostly lead by shooting just for himself. He explains below:

LH: Tell us about photographing the Soviet-led invasion of Prague.

Koudelka: I'd just gotten back from Romania, where for months I was photographing Gypsies, and my friend called me and said, "The Russians are here." I picked up the camera, went out on the

street, and I photographed just for myself. I'd never photographed events before. These pictures weren't meant to be published. Finally they were published one year later, which is interesting, because they weren't news anymore.

When Prague got invaded (Koudelka is Czech) he simply went out and made photographs. He shot them with no intention to get the images published in the news. He shot them for himself, to document the experience of what was going around him. In-fact, when the photos got published—they were first published anonymously.

### Takeaway point:

Often when it comes to photography, we want to please our audience. We make photos to share on social media—to get likes, favorites, comments, and to gain more followers.

But Koudelka was born in an era where social media didn't exist. To have your photos be featured was to have them in magazines, newspapers, or books. The process was a lot slower.



Even when he shot the Soviet invasion of Prague, the images didn't get published until a year later— where the news was no longer relevant.

Sometimes we feel like in such a rush to publish the photos we make. But what is the hurry? Take your time. Make your photos for yourself first, and then perhaps publish them later (it is always to take your time).

## 5. Remain interested in photography

One of the most inspirational things about Koudelka is his longevity as a photographer. He has been photographing and traveling for over 45 years. What keeps him inspired— and what keeps him going?

As mentioned in this interview, even Cartier-Bresson lost his passion to shoot after around 30 years of photography. What caused Cartier-Bresson to put down the camera (and retire to just drawing and painting), while Koudelka continued to photograph?

Koudelka shares his shift from 35mm to shooting panoramic:

AS: The exhibition includes several panoramas. What attracts you to this format?

Koudelka: I love landscape. But I was never happy photographing the landscape with a standard camera. In 1986 I was asked to participate in a government project in France. They invited me to the office and I saw a panoramic camera lying on the desk. I said, "Can I borrow this camera for one week?"

In this case, shooting with a panoramic camera opened up his vision — and allowed him to work in a creative way he was never able to with a standard 35mm camera. It helped him get to a new stage in his photography— and to remain interested in photography:

Koudelka: I ran around Paris; I had to photograph everything. I realized that with this camera I could do something I'd never done before. The panoramic camera helped me go to another stage in my career, in my work. It helped me to

remain interested in photography, to be fascinated with photography.

Koudelka: I'm going to be seventy-seven. When I met Cartier-Bresson, he was sixty-two. I'm 15 years older than Cartier-Bresson was then. And at that time Cartier-Bresson was stopping his work with photography.

Koudelka also shares the importance of love and passion for pursuing what you do:

Koudelka: It's not normal to feel that you have to do something, that you love to do something. If that's happening you have to pay attention so you don't lose it.

### **Takeaway point:**

I often say “buy books, not gear” on this blog— and generally am against “GAS” (gear acquisition syndrome).

However I do believe there is a difference between buying new cameras for the sake of getting the newest and greatest— and the concept of using different camera systems to open yourself up creatively.

For example, the difference between shooting with a Micro 4/3rds, a DSLR, a Fujifilm x100 camera, and a digital Leica is quite similar. But there is a difference between shooting with a digital camera and a 35mm film camera. And there is a difference between shooting with a 35mm film camera and a medium-format camera. And there is a difference between shooting with a rangefinder, a large-format camera you mount on a tripod, a TLR, a Hasselblad, or a panoramic camera.

So I guess my ultimate point is this: it is good to experiment with different gear, cameras, and formats. But let this experimentation liberate you creatively— don't let it become a stress or a burden in your life.

For example, I know a lot of photographers who keep buying new cameras, lenses, and camera systems— which only adds more stress and complication in their lives.

Find a balance between experimentation and consistency.

## 6. Empathize with your subjects

The photographs of Koudelka (especially in his “Gypsies” series) are so full of soul, emotion, and empathy for his subjects.

Koudelka shares more of his empathy and love in his photos below:

AS: In an interview at the Art Institute of Chicago you said you’ve “never met a bad person.” I see much empathy and love in your photographs.

Koudelka: That’s up to you [laughs].

AS: Are people fundamentally good?

Koudelka: I’ve been traveling 45 years without stopping, so of course things have happened to me that weren’t right. But even “bad” people behave a certain way because you don’t give them the opportunity to behave well. When you start to communicate with somebody, things go a different way.

AS: Can you give an example?

Koudelka: Have a look at the Russian soldiers [in my photographs of the

Soviet-led invasion of Prague]. Okay, they were invaders. But at the same time, they were guys like me. They were maybe five years younger. As much as it might sound strange, I didn’t feel any hatred toward them. I knew they didn’t want to be there. They behaved a certain way because their officers ordered them to. I become friendly with some of them. In a normal situation, I’d have invited these guys to have a drink with me.

Koudelka: I can’t say I met one bad person [while photographing] in Israel either. Once I was in East Jerusalem with a photographer friend who went with me. We were planning to eat sandwiches under the trees. Suddenly, soldiers ran over with guns. One of them hit and broke my camera. But when I looked in his face, he had the same fear as the Russian soldiers in ‘68. I’m sure if I’d had the opportunity to talk to this guy, he would never have done that.

LH: To be a wonderful photographer, you have to have empathy for the human condition.

Koudelka: We are all the same. And we are composed from the bad and the good.

**Takeaway point:**

I think to be a great street photographer, you need to be an empathetic people.

As street photographers, we are in the business of capturing the human condition and soul. We try to capture moments, and the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of others. Without a strong sense of empathy—how could we relate to our subjects?

I think empathy in street photography can be interpreted in many different ways. It could be photographing others how you would like to be photographed. It could be asking for permission before taking a photograph (if you are unsure how people will respond). It could be smiling at your subjects after taking their photograph, thanking them, and offering to email them a copy of the photo (or better yet, giving them a print).

Ultimately we all have a different sense of ethics, morals, and right-and-wrong.

You want to follow your own heart. Do what feels right to you. Follow your gut, and listen to what your soul tells you.

## 7. Separate yourself from your photos

One of the great points that Koudelka has taught me is the importance of separating yourself from your photographs.

A lot of photographers become emotionally attached to their photos—like their photographs are their children. And if you know any parents, you know that to call a parent's child ugly is a definite no-no (even if it is true). Even if a parent had an ugly baby, the baby would look beautiful in the parent's eyes.

I often use a phrase “kill your babies” when it comes to editing (choosing your best work). I fall victim to this all the time—I have such a vivid memory of



taking the photograph, that it confuses me whether the shot is any good or not.

Therefore I am always asking people to critique and criticize my photographs. I carry them on my phone and iPad, and ask people to tell me which of the shots are interesting to them— and which shots are weak. Generally the good shots rise to the top (like mixing oil and water).

Koudelka shares more of separating himself (his ego) and his photographs:

LH: May we ask you to comment on a few of your photographs?

Koudelka: I wouldn't talk about the photographs. No, I try to separate myself completely from what I do. I try to step back to look at them as somebody who has nothing to do with them.

Koudelka: When I travel, I show my pictures to everybody—to see what they like, what they don't like. A good photograph speaks to many different people for different sorts of reasons. And it depends what sort of lives these people have. What they've gone through. It happens very rarely that you see something

you can't forget. That is a good photograph.

### **Takeaway point:**

When you ask for feedback and critique on your photos, don't feel a need to defend your photographs.

During a lot of critique sessions I do in workshops (or when just meeting other photographers in-person)— a photographer will defend their photos by saying, "Oh I know the composition isn't so good— but there was nothing else I could do, my back was against the wall!"

However there is one thing you can ultimately control as a photographer: whether to keep or ditch the shot. Of course you can't go back and re-shoot the same scene, but you have ultimate control as an editor of your own work.

I recommend you to always carry your photos with you no matter where you go. Have your photos on your iPad, your phone, or as small 4x6 prints. Whenever you have the chance to meet other photographers, don't show off your photos to just have people pat you on the back. Share your photos with

them to get honest feedback and critique—to know which shots work, and which shots don't.

So now when I ask people to look at my photos, I ask them: "Please be brutally honest with me. Help me kill my babies." And when they give me feedback, I force myself to keep my mouth shut (instead of defending my shots). I let them speak their mind, take their opinion to heart (if I trust them and respect their feedback).

Serape yourself from your photos.  
Your photos aren't you.

## Conclusion

I think there is a lot we can learn from the life and photography of Koudelka. We can learn that it is important to live a life true to yourself, to follow our intuition and photograph what interests us, and to empathize emotionally with our subjects.



30

## JOSH WHITE

Hey Josh,

I just wanted to write you this letter wishing you a happy (belated) birthday, and the lessons in life you've taught me, and how much I appreciate your love and friendship.

Shit, I still kind of forget how we first met "virtually." Was it on your wordpress, Flickr, or somewhere else? Regardless, I remember when I first saw your "bokeh-licious" photos, I was drawn less to the bokeh, and more to the emotions in your photo.

As a Korean-American, I have always had this romantic view of Korea, especially Seoul. I have always felt like kind of an outsider-- that I was never fully accepted as being “Korean”, because my accent sucked (I sounded like an American), and culturally I was a lot more American. I remember whenever I visited Korea, I would always feel massive amounts of shame not feeling “Korean enough”, and the sense of alienation I felt as a 2nd-generation Korean-American “gyopo”.

Somehow your photos really spoke to me. I think you felt a similar way, as a Canadian outsider, living in Korea. You were probably enjoying a pretty comfortable living teaching English, getting a sweet free place to stay, but still-- you know, Korea is one of the most xenophobic and nationalistic countries in the world. Even though you made good friends, you were never fully “accepted”, nor integrated into Korean society. That must have given you a lot of pain, stress, anxiety, and frustration.

I also forget how we first met “IRL” (in real life). Was it in Seoul or Toronto?

Think it was Seoul, when we did the Leica workshop together. Anyways, when we first met, you were really like a “brother from another mother.” Your views on life correlated with mine spot-on, and the sense of “realness” and down-to-earthness made my soul sing. We’ve also had so much fun that other time we did the workshop together in Toronto, and we hung out with Neil and would just talk about random shit. Good time man.

But I wanted to let you know how many lessons you’ve personally taught me about photography, life, friendship, and more.

## 1. Photography is about friendships

First of all, you’ve taught me the most important thing in life is friendship, relationships, and connections-- not photography.

I remember how difficult it was when your father passed away, and how tragic it was. Regardless, it gave you a



huge revelation, which also gave me a huge revelation. You said something like:

“Why is it that we use these \$10,000 cameras to take photos of strangers, when we take photos of our loved ones with smartphones? It should be the other way around.”

As shitty as it was that your father passed away before he should have, know that this realization you have had truly changed my life (as well as thousands all around the world). It taught me to truly not take any of my friends or family for granted, and it made a huge shift in my photography. I no longer took shitty snapshots of Cindy or my mom, friends or family anymore-- but rather tried to take the best photos of them on my Leica. I learned to cherish every moment with them, knowing that sooner or later, death is going to take them all away from me.

## 2. Life isn't about being a great photographer

Secondly, you've also taught me that at the end of our lives, we're not going

to give a shit about the photos we've made, but the friendships we've made.

I remember us talking how we can both imagine one another being 80 years old, sitting at some cafe on the patio, drinking coffee, complaining and moaning about the world of photography and all the “new guns”, and throwing rocks at little kids outside, and reflecting on our life's journey together. We will reflect on all the difficulties we endured in life, the heartbreaks, the deaths of loved ones, but also the fun times we taught together, had beer and fried chicken together, and the great conversations we've had about life while loitering for hours with just one coffee in Seoul.

You've really taught me that the friends I've made through photography far outweighs any photos I will take in my life. After all, who gives a shit about photos? They are perishable, and after we die, nobody is going to care about them. But there is nothing more immortal than friendship. Love your post you wrote on it with shooting with Neil in Busan.

### 3. The camera doesn't matter

Thirdly, you taught me that at the end of the day, it doesn't matter if you shoot film or digital, as long as you shoot with heart, passion, soul, and that you enjoy the process.

I know we both are massively afflicted with GAS, and we always switch from film to digital, and back and forth. We have this strange love-hate relationship with our cameras, and the other physical possessions we own. We are both suckers to advertising and fancy shit, like our strange obsession with leather backpacks and other "artisanal" goods.

We know that material stuff doesn't make us happy, yet we are both afflicted. Yet, talking to you has always helped ease some of the mental suffering I have inside. We both jump from Ricoh, to Leica, from black and white to color, from digital to film, and even fucking around with medium-format. But at the end of the day, nobody even can tell whether our shots are film or digital, and

neither should we care. Regardless if your photos were shot on film or digital, they still have a signature "Josh White" look; they exude emotion, soul, and empathy for your subjects.

Honestly, we've never going to find the "perfect" camera, lens, or setup for our gear. But we're both going to continue to enjoy the process, and try to temper one another's "GASSINESS" as we grow older together.

### 4. Photograph who you love

Fourth, you taught me to photograph my "muse" (aka Cindy) with more intensity, love, and care. Seeing the photos you take of Areum really inspire me so much. You've taught me that I don't need to only shoot "street photography", but that the best subject to photograph is my own life-- and those closest to me. "Personal documentary" as Anders Petersen calls it (someone who we both love). After all, at the end of our lives, the photos we shoot of Areum and Cindy are much more close and personal than any photos we've taken of strangers. I think ultimately the photos we

take of Areum and Cindy will be the best “project” or “body of work” at the end of our lives.

## 5. Bleed on the page

Fifth, you’ve taught me and inspired me to bleed more onto the page when writing, and to make my writing (and photography) more personal.

Whenever I read your blog (the only photography blog, or blog in general I read), you really pour your emotion, heart, and soul into whatever you write. I feel like I’m having a conversation for you. It feels so real, so genuine-- so you. You really wear your heart on your sleeve, and your viewers feel like they are a part of your life. Through your blog, I have followed you through your ups-and-downs in your life; death, love, heartbreak, depression, joy, and self-seeking fulfillment.

Whenever I write an article for the blog, I try to think of you-- and treat it almost like a letter that will also help and benefit you. And recently I’ve been thinking of making the blog more personal, and it seems that others have

really responded well to this. So I will continue to follow in your footsteps, and to continue to bare my soul on this blog, and through my photography.

## 6. First, enjoy life

Sixth, you’ve taught me that I need to first enjoy my life, and then secondly be a photographer.

I remember that whenever I would go out with a camera, it would be like a hunt, and I had to go “take” photos. But you taught me that it is much better to just enjoy myself; to hang out at cafes, at bars, meet up with friends, eat Korean BBQ, and just take snapshots of my life. You’ve taught me the secret to making better photos is to just enjoy my life more, and to just document what I experience.

I remember you said something like, “I don’t ‘do’ taking photos anymore” -- and that really struck a bell with me.

Ironically enough, ever since I’ve followed your advice, I have been getting better shots. I no longer force myself to go out for hours at a time, and endlessly

wander trying to capture “the decisive moment.” I am much more relaxed now, and let the shots come to me, wherever I am. I just am diligent about carrying my camera on my neck, so I can take that shot if the moment arises.

## 7. Kill my babies

Seventh, you’ve taught me how to “kill my babies.” I love how we randomly chat with one another on Kakao-talk and message each other shots, and we can just be brutally honest with one another, without any concern of hurting one another’s feelings. I respect your opinions so much, and you have really helped shape my style and vision in my photography. I love it when you told me how you liked my color work, and how you think I should proceed shooting more color “street portraits”, as well as more portraits of Cindy. I respect you as a human being and a photographer, so getting advice from you in terms of what direction to take my photography gives me a lot of confidence, solace, and happiness.

I was going to write 10 things you have taught me about street photography and life, but I ran out of ideas, haha. But honestly, 7 is more than enough, in fact, I heard that it is easier to remember 7 digits than 10 (that is why in America phone numbers are only 7 digits long).

But anyways, this is a personal letter to you (that thousands of random people on the internet are also going to read haha). No but seriously, thank you for all the love, support, guidance, and friendship you’ve given to me the past few years.

Whenever I get a message from you, you always brighten up my day. It is so funny, I’ll be with Cindy and checking my phone and she will say, “Eric, why are you suddenly smiling so much?” I then feel embarrassed for a second, and will tell her that I got a message from you. She then goes, “Oh, you and Josh are so cute together!” She also was so happy to see how much fun we had together in Korea together. And also a nice memory (to boost your ego), remember when I told you that she looked at



your Flickr randomly and said, “Hmmm, Josh is actually really good!” And trust me, she doesn’t give false compliments at all, and she has a great eye.

## Thank you

So never doubt yourself and your photography. Remember to enjoy the process. Fuck whether you shoot film or digital. Just enjoy yourself and have fun. Who cares what others think of your photography, know that I’m always your biggest fan. And in terms of having an “audience” for our work, I honestly feel that as long as we are friends, we will be enough of an “audience” for one another. If I can make photos that please myself and please you, that is enough for me.

Farewell my friend, have a kickass day, hope you get more hits on your blog (haha) and more followers on your Flickr and Instagram (don’t know if you have notifications on your iPhone turned on, but hope it buzzes nonstop! haha).

This sounds totally douchey, but maybe you can do a similar post on your blog about what I’ve taught you about

street photography and life? Might be an interesting comparison.

Anyways, excited to collaborate more brother. Take care of Areum, your mom, and know that whenever you are feeling sad, lonely, or lost-- I’m always here to support you and share my heart with you.

Here are some fun snapshots and memories, haha-- good times:

Love always,

Eric



31

## LEE FRIEDLANDER

In my opinion, Lee Friedlander is one of the most under-appreciated (or simply unknown) street photographers when it comes to the internet/social-media sphere. Of course Friedlander is one of the pillars of photography and is known to every student who has gone to photography school. However when I started photography, I had no idea who he was or never even heard of him.

When I first looked at his photographs of the stark urban landscapes, I didn't really "get" them. However over time, I have begun to appreciate his vision and gen-

ius when it came to capturing what he first called in 1964, “The American social landscape.”

## 1. His love of jazz and photography

I have written about this quite a bit in the past, but I think the key to creativity and originality is linking two different fields that are dissimilar (but somewhat related).

Upon doing research for this article in the “Friedlander” book published by MoMA one of the things that struck me fascinating is his life-long interest in both photography and jazz. Friedlander actually says that after photography, jazz is his second largest passion in life.

So how did Friedlander get introduced to jazz? Well let’s start off how he got introduced to photography.

Friedlander first stumbled upon photography when he was around five years old. He went on an errand to pick up portraits of his father at the local photography studio, and randomly stumbled into the darkroom. He was wowed by the ex-

perience of seeing an image appear on a blank piece of paper in the darkroom, almost like an apparition.

In high school, he worked in a camera shop, and assisted a local portrait photographer, and picked up tips from Stan Spiegel (a local DJ and freelance photographer). At 16, Friedlander got an Omega D-2 enlarger and all the fixings so he could really focus on his own budding freelance career. He received many odd jobs forwarded by Spiegel that kick-started his start into freelance photography.

Spiegel loved jazz, and so did Friedlander. I assume that the two would talk a ton about both photography and jazz, deepening Friedlander’s interest in both arts. In Friedlander’s free time, he would often spend a lot of time listening to jazz on the radio and even hung out at the local record shops.

Friedlander shares a story of how he bumped into the famous Louis Armstrong:

“Once, I was listening to the music to start again, daydreaming, and I looked

up. Louis Armstrong was sitting right next to me, and I said, 'Whoa.' And he said, 'How are you doing, kid?'"

He also shares his experiences constantly chasing the jazz scene:

"Anytime we could smell music, we were there. I had a friend who knew about an afterhours club, where the musicians would go and jam after they'd played. The place didn't have a liquor license; I guess that's how we got in. Once there was a black group with an albino bass player, called the Cecil Young Quartet. It was quite modern for those times, in fact, very modern."

Friedlander also shares the deep emotional impact that jazz had on his life. He recalls a moment when he first listened to Charlie Parker and Nat King Cole on the piano in Seattle:

"I was dumbfounded. I somehow knew exactly where he was coming from. He made me understand that anything was possible."

As Friedlander matured over the years and started to shoot freelance photography full-time, he began to photo-

graph jazz musicians—and shot many covers for Atlantic records.

So how did he photograph the jazz musicians? Well, he often visited them at home, to make them feel comfortable. He wanted to capture the behind-the-scenes view of these musicians as people, not just performers on a stage.

There is a fascinating story in which Friedlander did a portrait session with Miles Davis (quite possibly one of the most famous jazz musicians of all-time). Funny enough, this "master of cool" was quite nervous. When Friedlander asked why he was nervous, Davis told him it was that he was anxious of how he would turn out in the photograph.

Friedlander, thinking on his toes, brought over a mirror to Davis so he could look at himself. This eased Davis, and is a great example of how Friedlander was able to make his subjects feel comfortable.

Joel Dorn, a producer at Atlantic records, said this about Friedlander's ability to capture the essence of his subjects: "Lee's pictures show who these people



were when they weren't being who they were."

### **Takeaway point:**

I often find that the best and most innovative photographers have multiple interests, not just photography.

I find Friedlander's interest in jazz fascinating. When you think of jazz, you think of improvisation, soul, and overflowing energy. It isn't as structured as classical music, and during the time –rebelled against a lot of the fundamentals of music.

I think Friedlander took these aspects of jazz with him when it came to his own photography. Friedlander has been shooting constantly for around 63 years from 1950 to the present (Friedlander is currently 79 years old and still going). And through that 6 decades of work, he has worked on a plethora of projects: ranging from self-portraits, to television sets, to even flowers.

He is a man who doesn't stick to convention, and has pursued lots of different types of photography. The same can be said about jazz, which borrows its

inspirations from the roots of African and European music. Through the mix, it creates something new and fresh.

Don't just be stuck in the photography ghetto when it comes to inspiration. Look outside of photography for inspiration– to music, art, movies, and more. Visit as many galleries and exhibitions as you can. Purchase anything that interests you creatively. Try to experiment drawing, painting. Play an instrument. Write a novel. Do anything to keep the creative juices flowing, and I can guarantee it will help you tremendously in finding your own photographic vision and voice.

## **2. Pursue a life-long journey of self-study**

Many of us have never gone to photography school. I personally haven't. I was fortunate enough to be born in the era of the internet in which I learned everything through the web. Now I am blessed enough to make enough money through my workshops, I can now purchase more photography books to con-

tinue my self-study in the world of photography.

I don't think you need to go to photography school to learn photography. I do admit photography schools can be great (networking, learning the fundamentals, masters, and feedback from professors on projects), but most of us don't have access to it (they are damn expensive).

Therefore if you don't have the cash to go to photography school (or don't want to take out massive loans), I think a better alternative is to pursue your own self-studies.

So how did Friedlander learn more about photography?

Well to start off, after graduating high school he went to Los Angeles for the Art Center School of Design to pursue his interest in photography. However he quickly got bored with the introduction to photography course, as he learned everything he needed through doing odd assignments while in high school.

What he started to do instead is to visit the advanced painting course by photographer and painter Edward Kaminski.

Understandably, the faculty of the school was upset that Friedlander wasn't attending his photography courses. Friedlander then decided to drop out of school. Fortunately enough, Kaminski (seeing potential in the young Friedlander) invited him to rent a room above his studio and to live with his family. Through these years, Friedlander got a great source of mentorship and advice from Kaminski on photography, painting, and other forms of art that Friedlander probably found more interesting.

As Friedlander got older, he continued his passion for self-knowledge and education. In the book *Friedlander*, Peter Galassi chronicles how Friedlander would visit libraries and analyze as many photography books as he could in his free time:

“By the time Szarkowski arrived at MoMA, Friedlander was already well advanced on his own improvised but

steady program of self-education. Tracking down the Evans and Atget books was the least of it. Whenever an assignment took him south, for example, he would try to work in a detour to Washington so as to spend a day exploring the massive photographic holdings of the Library of Congress, home to the archive of the farm security administration (FSA), to the great Civil War photographs, and to much else.

Visitors then were free to browse in the stacks, and Friedlander enjoyed the fact that the FSA pictures were classified by subject and geography, so that he never knew what surprise may await him: ‘I’d be going through south Carolina or some other state, and come across two hundred pictures by Ben Shahn. Wonderful work. Part of what made the Americans surprising was Frank’s use of a wide angle lens—35mm—lens. But Shahn had used a 35mm, too, so I was prepared.’”

### **Takeaway point:**

Many of us don’t have the money, time, or resources to pursue a formal

education when it comes to photography. However, the beauty of the internet is that almost everything is now at your fingertips.

I highly value paper-based photography books for education. They tend to be much more expensive, but hey— we spend hundreds of dollars on new cameras and lenses. Why not use the money better to actually improve our understanding and knowledge of photography? Some of my personal favorites:

### **Magnum Contact Sheets:**

If you are serious about taking your photography education to the next level, you would be stupid not to buy this book. Hell, I’d even go into debt with my credit card and buy it. It shows the contact sheets of some of the most famous images taken in history by Magnum photographers. Buy it.

### **Bystander: A History of Street Photography:**

The book is an excellent resource to learn more about the history of street photography. Very in-depth, a little

dense at times, but a must-have in your photographic library.

### 3. Insert yourself into your own photos

One of the first “rules” I learned when starting photography is that you should never have your own reflection or shadow in a photograph.

However one of the things I learned from Friedlander is how he actually used this to his advantage: he added his own self-portraits in many of his photographs. In-fact, he has enough of them that he even published his own book on it: Lee Friedlander: Self Portraits.

In Friedlander, this is what Galassi had to say about Friedlander and his self-portraits:

“Friedlander, though, in a manner that was fast becoming a hallmark of his work, went after the idea like a dog for a bone, encouraging his surrogate self to behave like a character with a mindlessness of his own. His shadow became the protagonist of mini dramas of the street; or sometimes it was just the dopey by-

stander, or the nosy jerk who can't resist poking his head into things.

Friedlander's reflection, too, offered a wealth of opportunities for comic self-deprecation. Many of these pictures are like in-jokes at a photographer's convention, send-ups of the trials and tribulations of the trade.”

#### Takeaway point:

Experiment with your photography, and insert yourself into your own photographs. I think the self-portrait is one of the most under-appreciated forms of photography. Not only is it difficult to do it effectively, but it says a lot about you as a photographer. I also find it personally fascinating to see photographers in their own images— it feels more personal, more real.

Take a look at his Friedlander's self-portrait series to get some inspiration. You can truly see how he adds his own dry, witty sense of humor and self-deprecation to his images. If a photographer is able to show his/her own “true” personality through their photos- it is a



huge accomplishment. I think Friedlander did it masterfully.

## 4. Incorporate more content into your photos

One of the things I loved most about Friedlander's work is how he was able to incorporate lots of content into his photographs without them becoming overly busy. Friedlander was very conscious of how he framed his scenes, and wanted to add more complexity to his shots through adding content of interest.

So how did Friedlander add more content to his shots? Well to start off, whenever possible- he would add foreground elements to his photographs. In an interview, he discusses how he welcomed foreground "obstructions" whereas other photographers would avoid it:

"Somebody else could walk two feet away to get those poles and tress and other stuff out of the way, I almost walk two feet to get into it, because it is a part of the game that I play. It isn't even conscious; I probably just drift into it... its

like a found pleasure. You've found something that you like and you play with it for the rest of your life."

Not only that, but Friedlander has always been a huge fan of wide-angle lenses. Much of Friedlander's personal work was done with a 35mm lens on his Leica, and some of his later work with an ultra-wide Hasselblad. He explains the importance of the wide-angle lens to add more content into his images:

"The wider the angle is, the more its possible to respond instinctively, because the more everything in the picture reads as if it were in focus, even if it might not be. In that picture we were discussing yesterday, not everything is really sharp; you cant really see what that little tree is. But in terms of the picture's literature, it says everything it needs to say, and its perfectly fine...

I think that is part of the trick of a wide-angle lens—that it allows you to have more stuff, maybe in the foreground or in the background, whichever way you want to think about it. Even if something is a little but out of focus, it

has a tendency to feel as if it was married to the other stuff.”

One reason he also enjoyed shooting with a Hasselblad later in his career is the fact that he was able to utilize the square-format to add more content into his images:

“It seemed to be the same rectangle with more sky on top...I always wanted more sky out of a horizontal picture. All of a sudden, the whole tree is in the picture.”

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the reasons why I think Friedlander’s photos are so interesting is that there is a lot of interesting things to see in his photos.

To add more content to your own photos, it can be quite simple.

To start off, when possible take a step back. Preferably you might want to use a wide-angle lens (about 35mm or wider), but you can probably do with a 50mm or something a bit longer. Just take a step back.

What else you can do is reorient the position of your camera. Certain scenes tend to look better in a horizontal or vertical format. This is because you can add more content (depending on what you find more interesting). For example, if you are shooting portraits of people you might want to use a vertical format to get a full-body shot of them (to see the interesting content of what they are wearing, how they are standing, and the background). However if you are photographing more of an urban landscape, a horizontal format may work better—so you can get more of the road, and the streets.

So if you want your photos to be more visually complex and interesting, add more content to your photographs.

## **5. Keep re-reading books**

A certain philosophy I believe in (in certain cases) is the idea of “depth over breadth.”

For example, at times it can be better to be really good in one field rather than being average in lots of different fields. In business, they always talk about finding a niche. When it comes to

music, the most successful players are masters of one instrument. The same can be applied to photography, the best photographers tend to focus on one field (you didn't see Henri Cartier-Bresson pursuing macro photography and taking photos of stars).

Last year I purchased over 50 photography books, and one of the biggest problems I had is that I chose breadth over depth. The problem of this is that I would only spend a few minutes looking through a photography book, without really spending enough time to understand the beauty and nuances of the photographs or the essays included inside.

When I visited Kaushal Parikh, one of the most talented street photographers I know in India, he told me how he probably read each of his photography books at least fifty times. I was quite ashamed to say that for the majority of my photography books, I only read them at a maximum of five times.

Friedlander also believes in this idea of “depth over breadth” when it comes

to looking at photography books in an interview he did in 1992:

“I like making books... I realise that the nature of photography is such that I can't see everything on first look, because photography has this ability to deal so well with information. There's so much information in a picture that often I don't see until the fifth reading or 30 years later.

I can pick up Walker's book *American Photographs* today and see something I never saw before – and I've owned that book for over 30 years. So I think that books are a great medium for photography. They seem to be the best. I can go back and re-read things – ‘Oh shit, I didn't see that before’.”

### **Takeaway point:**

It is great to invest your money into photography books, but once again don't do what I did and just go on a shopping spree to only read a certain book once or twice.

Rather, I would recommend buying fewer photography books, and getting to really know them well.

Like Friedlander said, when you re-visit books– you will often see small little details you might have overlooked the first time.

Not only that, but I have discovered one of the best ways to “read” a photography book is to ask yourself the following questions:

- Why did the photographer choose to include this photograph in the book? (especially if I don’t find the photograph personally interesting).
- Why did the photographer choose this image as the first image in the book? (same applies for the last photo in a book).
- Why did the photographer decide to include two of these photographs side-by-side in a book, whereas the other photographs are just on one page?
- Why did the photographer sequence the book the way he did?

By being much more of an active reader of photography books, you will better understand the photographer’s in-

tent– and gain a better appreciation of a photographer’s work.

## 6. Categorize your work

Lee Friedlander has worked on a diverse array of projects throughout his photographic lifetime. But a problem arises: how did he manage to categorize all of these projects, and work on multiple projects at once?

Through this interview with Maria in an edition from the “Smithsonian Series Photographers at Work” we gain a better understanding.

Maria: “Do you work on a series of pictures about a particular subject until you exhaust it, or do you simply photograph and allow each body of work to emerge?”

Friedlander: “I just work and I throw the pictures in a box that says “X” or whatever, and eventually if the box gets full it merits looking at. I often work on two or three or four of those things at once. People tell me that they all look like they’ve been well thought out, and



that's because I've worked on them for so long.

To sum up, Friedlander categorizes his photographs, and decides if a project is worth pursuing if he starts collecting a lot of that subject matter. Not only that, but the importance of working on a project for a long time.

The interview continues, and Maria asks Friedlander why he works that way. Friedlander responds:

“In a way it gets rid of infatuation—because I don't think of it as anything except that I'm doing this little bit all the time. And I don't even know what it's going to be like until several years later, when I start to look at them. The nudes, for instance, took twelve years or so, and I didn't really look at them closely during that time. They just went into boxes.”

### **Takeaway point:**

It is difficult to work on multiple projects at once, and to keep everything organized.

I am working on many projects at the moment myself (Suits, stuff on the ground, colorful random stuff, airports, kids with guns, etc) and it can be quite difficult to keep on top of everything.

Some advice:

- When you discover a project that might be interesting (or if you see common themes appearing in your work), make a folder in your pictures folder with the title of the project. It can be something simple like “animals”, “the color red”, or “bus stops.”
- I recommend using simple folders on your Mac or PC, because Lightroom catalogs and tagging can get overly complicated.
- Store full resolution images in each of these folders.
- Over time, continue to add photos of interest in each folder.
- Soon you will see certain folders become full. Other folders won't increase in size. You are probably best off pursuing the projects that you start discovering a lot of.

- Start to consciously focus on those projects and contribute to that folder.

I shoot with film, and I am sad to admit: my negatives are a mess. They are just all in a box sitting at home.

But to give me a peace of mind, I just made sure that I have high-quality scans of all of my photographs. Therefore I use the above technique even for my film shots, as it is easier to store digital files than film negatives.

## 7. Realize what you have no control over (and what you have control over)

As photographers, one thing we strive to have is more control. More control of the background, more control of our subject's gestures, more control over our cameras.

However at the end of the day (especially in street photography) we have little to no control over how our photos turn out. We can't change the light of the sun, you can't change how people

are going to react to you in the streets, and you can't control random happenings.

The only two things you can really control (as said by David Hurn in "On being a photographer") is where you stand, and when to click the shutter.

Friedlander expands on the idea that we have little to no control in the outcome of our photographs, and uses some interesting sports analogies:

"If you take somebody like Michael Jordan, and if you said to him, 'Michael, at a certain point when you are running down the field and the ball comes to you, what are you going to do?' he would look at you as if you were crazy. Because there are a thousand things he could do: he could move almost anywhere or he could pass off or he could shoot or he could dribble. He wouldn't even have a clue because he would have to see what was happening.

And I think that's very similar to photography, which I don't think is similar to painting or writing in most cases. That tiny little moment is a beginning

and an end and it has something to do with the same kind of mentality that an athlete has to use.

I was watching tennis, for example. The tricks that good tennis players use, especially what happens when the ball bounces and does odd things. You couldn't predict what you're going to do. He's going to serve to you; what are you going to do? Try to hit it back. Not only try to hit it back, try to hit it back in a weird way. Or in some articulate way.

And I think photography is stuck with those same kinds of moments, especially if you're not a studio photographer. You don't have much control."

So how do we gain some more control when it comes to street photography—if possible? Well, one of the most important things is to always keep your eyes open, and be ready. After all, some of the most unpredictable things happen on the streets that is even beyond our wildest dreams:

"Sometimes working with a camera, somebody does something that's just beyond belief. Garry Winogrand takes pic-

tures of things that in your wildest dreams you wouldn't think could exist in the world. There's a picture of a cow's tongue in a cowboy's hat that becomes a beautiful thing; it looks like a piece of architecture. In your wildest dreams you couldn't come up with that and that's just because he was aware that it might be possible. He was there when it happened and his head worked that way. Or look at that couple on fifth avenue with the monkey that looks like a family. Nutty pictures, but the most imaginative person in the world would not come up with that set of things."

Friedlander also expands on the importance of controlling where we stand to get a better photograph of a scene:

"The question of where to stand is interesting. What we're really talking about is a vantage point. If you look at amateurs or people taking pictures, they do funny things. Most people obviously don't know where to stand. They're standing too close, they're contorted.

You don't have to be a fancy photographer to learn where to stand. Basically

you're stuck with the frame and just like the person taking a picture of his family, who needs to go half a foot back – well, he doesn't step half a foot back—but on the other hand, he knows where to be if he hits it right.

Now when you watch tennis you not only have the commentators, you also have the best of the old pros. You know how they repeatedly say, “Look at the way his back was formed when he took that shot.” It really is important to them. They see that as a possibility of where the thing went. Probably the same thing is true of all of us.

### **Takeaway point:**

Know that in street photography we have little to no control of how a photograph turns out.

However there are a few things we can control: where to stand and when to click the shutter.

So be very conscious of where you stand when photographing a scene. Sometimes you want to take a step back, sometimes you want to take a step forward. Sometimes you want to crouch,

other times you might want to find a higher vantage point of a scene.

Also being prepared when to click the shutter is absolutely crucial. What I recommend is to always have your camera with you– and even more importantly, in your hand and turned on when shooting in the streets.

## **8. Shoot with others to discover a new perspective**

I love to shoot with my friends when out on the streets. However at the same time, I know a lot of people who hate it.

People who hate shooting with others are sometimes concerned that others may “steal their shot.”

However in my experience, regardless of the situation or a subject on the streets– every photographer tends to see a certain scene a bit differently (and photograph it a bit differently).

For example when out shooting with my friends, we might all take a photograph of the same guy but all of our photos are often vastly different. One of



us might have focused on the man's hat, the other might have focused on his hands, and the other might have focused more on integrating the background.

Even Friedlander enjoys shooting with others, for both fun and finding a new perspective:

“I don't think anyone is capable of doing the definitive Central Park. In some ways we all – Bob and Geoffery and myself—probably felt a relief, thinking, if I didn't get it somebody else did. Going out with those guys was fun because the ironies were just so hilarious. I could go out with them and you could almost have tied us so we were back to back, and one of us could be totally interested in one area and the other one of the complete opposite. It was really funny that could happen.

I don't think any of us who went out there together were ever interested in the same thing. Very rare. Maybe a monument or some major object: I know there was a monument [the Maryland Monument] in Prospect think we all photo-

graphed. That explains why I don't need to read about Olmsted too.

### **Takeaway point:**

I do believe in many merits of shooting alone (being able to focus, not get distracted, and to just wander without being restrained by others).

However, I still do believe in the importance of shooting with others at times— to get a fresh new perspective. I am always shocked to see what my friends see which I don't see. This helps me to better expand my own vision and develop as a photographer.

## **9. Be familiar with your equipment**

Not only is Lee Friedlander a very talented photographer, but he is also very knowledgeable about cameras and his equipment.

From the 1950's-1970's in NYC, he worked as a professional freelance photographer and he shot everything in hundreds of different jobs. He photographed rodeos, celebrities, parties, academics, and even children. He enjoyed the work,

as it often gave him the chance to try unfamiliar types of equipment and even the most boring assignments tested his skills. When asked about it, he said: “At least you were using your chops.”

This allowed him to become very technically competent with many types of equipment, but at the end of the day devoted the majority of his projects to his 35mm Leica. Galassi describes:

“In Aberdeen and Los Angeles Friedlander had mastered the full range of standard professional gear: Large format (4×5), medium format (2×1/4 square TLR Mamiyaflex), and small format (a 35mm SLR Pentax). In New York he continued to use a medium format camera for his album-cover portraits but otherwise settled exclusively on a 35mm Leica. At first in Europe, then in the United States, the handheld 35mm camera had become the common platform of professional and personal work. “

Due to the fact that he was technically proficient with all the cameras he used, it allowed him to worry less about

technical settings and more on the art of photography.

Not only that, but the majority of his career’s work was done on one camera: his 35mm Leica. Friedlander explains the importance of being familiar with just one piece of equipment, and the importance of using it for a very long time:

“They’re humorous to watch, people who photograph, especially people who aren’t in tune with their equipment, because they don’t know when they pick it up what it will do. If you work with the same equipment for a very long time, you will get more in tune to what is possible. But within that there are still surprises. But using a camera day after day after day, within a framework, will do the same thing. I’ll back up and will go forward with my body.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I think it is important to be technically proficient in photography. But at the same time, I think at the end of the day it isn’t about how technically proficient you are— but how well you know

your own camera. You don't need to master 100 different cameras, as long as you master one camera you will be fine.

I know many photographers (myself included) who have a problem sticking with one camera for a very long time. We always see a new model of a camera come out, and have the false impression that it will help us become more creative. This is rarely the case.

When I was constantly trying out different cameras, formats, and focal lengths my photography never got any better. I was focused more on the equipment, and less on developing my own personal vision.

Therefore I still recommend the idea of "one camera and one lens." The camera I use for the majority of my work is my film Leica MP and the only lens I own on it is a 35mm. Therefore I know the camera inside and out, in terms of how much I need to rotate my left finger to focus, how much to turn my right finger to change the shutter speeds, and the framing of my 35mm lens.

So if you are the type of person to always switch up the camera or lens you use: try the "one camera and one lens" challenge written by Christian Nilson.

You can also read another article I wrote on the subject here on the benefits of shooting one camera and one lens.

## 10. Don't only photograph people

Friedlander was interested in capturing "The American social landscape." This included photographs that included people and also photographs that didn't include people.

I think one of the biggest cruxes in my street photography career so far is the idea that all of my shots had to include people.

If you look at some of Friedlander's best work, many of them don't include people. Rather, he focuses on signage, interesting sculptures, numbers, words, letters, cars, and other intimate objects.

I think this is actually what makes Friedlander's work stand out from all of the street photographers from history;

the fact that his photos that don't include people still have so much humanity— and tell a lot about American society.

Takeaway point:

Realize that street photography doesn't have to include people. I still think the most interesting street photographs tend to have people in it (because we can connect more emotionally with a photograph that has a person in it). However this is not always the case.

For example, many of us complain about living in a place that doesn't have a lot of people walking around (suburbs, rural places, etc).

Experiment taking street photos without people in them, and see if you can inject a sense of humor, humanity, or surrealism to it— which will be interesting to the viewer (and yourself).

## Conclusion

Friedlander is a photographer's photographer. He has photographed nearly everyday for over 60 years, and continues to innovate and work on other inter-

esting projects. He has mastered all camera formats, yet he still knows the value of staying true to one camera and really understanding its ell. Not only that, but is a photographer who has a vast array of interests and has gotten inspiration from jazz, painting, and even sports.

He is also a photographer who knows how to have fun, enjoys his photography whole-heartedly, and even enjoys shooting with others. He values the importance of self-study, and never stops learning. I think it isn't just photography we can learn from Friedlander, but his philosophy of life.





32

## MARK COHEN

I think Mark Cohen is one of the greatest street photographers out there who isn't as well known as his contemporaries. I'm sure you might have seen some videos of him on YouTube shooting with a flash without using the viewfinder. I have to admit, even to me-- he seems a bit "creepy" when you see him working. However the reason he works the way he does is to create art-- he feels that the end justifies the means.

I have been deeply inspired by his book: "Grim Street"-- and I just pre-ordered a new book he has in the pipeline called "Dark Knees." His imagery has inspired the

way I shoot quite a bit (especially when it comes to photographing details and decapitating heads). Not only that, but it is quite inspirational to see him shoot in his small town for over 30 years.

## 1. Shoot in your own backyard

We tend to romanticize photographing foreign and exotic places. But Mark Cohen has spent the majority of his time shooting street photography in Wilkes-Barre (a small Pennsylvania mine-town) and another area called Scranton for over 30 years.

Mark Cohen shares how all of the photos in his book "Grim Street" are all from his backyard, and the advantage of knowing your own neighborhood very well:

"I'm in my backyard making these. The whole country is my studio. I used to go work under a certain bridge if it was pouring, because people used to hide there from the rain. If it was a cloudy day, I would go to a different place. So I used these neighborhoods

like a set. And I still use them like that. There are certain places I know that, if I go there in the evening-- I like to take pictures at dusk-- they will have a certain flavor even today."

Furthermore, Cohen explains how he didn't need to travel the world to take interesting photographs:

"I just made my photos in Wilkes-Barre and a few other places because I wasn't the kind of photographer who liked to, or needed to, travel around the world. That reminds me, I saw something you had said about how artistic range affects an artist's development over time. And I work on an extremely narrow range, in terms of my method and technical issues, too. It's what is in my head that has developed over time. So I've just kept taking pictures in the same two counties [Wilkes-Barre and Scranton]."

### Takeaway point:

There are many advantages to shoot in your own backyard and neighborhood. First of all, it is easily accessible-- which means you can go shoot more often. Sec-

ondly, you will probably know the area better-- and know which areas are more interesting to photograph, and when the light is good. Thirdly, you will probably create a more unique body of work that is different from photos you might see in New York City, Tokyo, or Paris.

So embrace your own backyard-- and go out and shoot. If Cohen was able to shoot his own neighborhood for over 30 years and make an incredible body of work (Grim Street) so can you.

## 2. Focus on details

Another unique aspect of Cohen's work is how he focuses on details in his images. His photos include close-ups of ankles, socks, teeth, zippers, elbows, and other small details we tend to overlook.

The great thing about him focusing on details is that formally it becomes more interesting. The images become more abstract. You focus on the geometry, angles, and lines of parts of the human body. It becomes more surreal.

Not only that, but another technique Mark Cohen often used in his

work is cutting off heads. Some of his most interesting photos don't include faces.

I feel this works for several ways: First of all, there is more of a sense of anonymity of the subjects. Secondly, this creates more surrealism in the shots. Thirdly, it makes the viewer more curious about the image, and makes it more open-ended.

### Takeaway point:

A common mistake I see a lot of street photographers who are starting off make is trying to get too much in the frame. Trying to tell the whole story. Trying to get the full body in the shot.

I would rather recommend, try to focus on the details. Just focus on a subject's face. Or his/her hands. Or feet. Or on interesting gestures. By showing less, you often show more.

Keep the images open-ended. And like a good movie, don't spoil the ending by trying to tell the full story.

## 3. On using a flash

One of the most important tools in Mark Cohen's arsenal is his small flash. He isn't using a flash to piss off people. Rather, he is using it to illuminate his subjects, and create a surrealist type of image. He is trying to create a certain "look" in his photography and art.

Cohen explains in-detail why he likes to use a flash, and how he got inspired to start using it:

"I got a small flash-unit because I really liked the phenomenological effect I would get shooting at twilight. Also, I had seen some of Arbus' flash-pictures at the MoMA show in '72. I like Friedlander's flash-pictures as well. So I started to just go and hook this little flash on my camera when I was walking around town. And then I became incredibly intrusive with it. When you take a flash-picture of somebody at night, you get a much more distinct and compact event."

However Cohen does explain how intrusive shooting with a flash can be, and how much attention it can draw to you:

"Once you use a flash, you're bringing a lot of attention to the event, especially in twilight, but even in the sunlight. A flash is an invasive, aggressive kind of assault."

Mark Cohen also struggled for a while shooting with a flash:

"My pictures are not like Cartier-Bresson, although he was a tremendous influence. It took me a while to think, "It's okay to take flash-pictures." Then I figured out a technique where I work inside this very short zone with a small flash.

Furthermore, he explains why he ended up being unapologetic about the way he shot (with a flash and at a close proximity with a wide-angle lens):

"Well, I was making art so I suppose I had license. That's how I felt. Nobody was getting assaulted really; nobody was getting hurt. The intrusion was to make something much more exciting and new than sneaking a picture on a subway, like those buttonhole Walker Evans pictures or the Helen Levitt pictures. This is a whole different level of observation."



Cohen expands on the type of energy that a flash adds to his images, and discusses the technical reasons why he likes to use a flash:

"It sets up a formal look, or what I think of a formal value in the picture where your subject is highlighted and the background is dark. But the main reason I used flash was that it gives you a zone from 2 to 8 feet and you don't have to focus, and you don't have to worry about the subject being blurred either, because the flash is a thousandth of a second. So, you get very sharp and clear pictures of your subject."

### **Takeaway point:**

When you are shooting street photography with a certain technique (with a flash, without a flash, far away with a telephoto, close with a wide-angle, etc) don't do it for the sake of it. Think about what you are trying to accomplish through your images. Don't shoot a technique for the sake of it. Rather, think about what you are trying to say with your photography with the technique.

For example, when I first started shooting with a flash after being inspired by Bruce Gilden-- I just shot with a flash for the novelty. Not only that, but as I became more popular for shooting with a flash-- I felt that I had to keep shooting with a flash to show people that I had "balls" and to keep up this persona of a street photographer who uses a flash.

But over time, I realized that this became quiet vacuous in itself. I then started to ask myself: why did I really shoot with a flash? Was it for the attention or for something deeper and more meaningful?

I started to think about it more deeply-- and I discovered the reason I really enjoyed using a flash was because of the surrealism it brought to my images. I'm quite interested in making my images seem other-worldly. Not only that, but using a flash when the light is flat really helps the subject pop out from the background-- bringing more attention and focus to the subject. Also now that I'm shooting color film, using a flash saturates the colors and makes them look lovely.

I would say if you have never shot with a flash-- don't feel that you have to in order to "prove" to others how courageous you are. It is a great technique when you are shooting in the shade or even mid-day, to get a proper exposure of your subject with a surreal look. Also if you are shooting film, it is very difficult to shoot at night without a flash (if you are using a slower film).

If you shoot with a digital camera, I can recommend just to use "P" mode and use the built-in flash on the camera (or a pop-up flash). If not, you can just use a simple on-camera flash and use TTL or any other automatic setting.

## 4. On having subjects pose for you

Even though a lot of Cohen's images seem obtrusive and that he employs a "hit and run" style-- he also has images where he gains consent from his subjects, and has them pose for him. He expands:

"Some of the pictures are not quite as hit-and-run as others. There is a pic-

ture of a kid holding a football. His head is cut off and it's just his bare chest and his thin arm holding this 1950s looking football. This is an incredibly strange, sociological picture. The kid is posing for me, but I don't make a picture with his head in it, just the bare chest and the football. I don't remember what I thought at the time, but this is how I went about making pictures. I would make thousands of pictures and print hundreds of them."

He shares another story of when he took a close-up of someone's teeth:

"Those are a woman's teeth. I knew this woman and she was laughing. I said, 'Let me take a picture of your teeth.' You can take the wide-angle lens at f16 and put it inches away from her mouth to take that picture. I don't think that there's a flash."

### Takeaway point:

Don't always feel that your images have to be candid. Almost all of the famous street photographers in history have at least one image in their portfolio which is posed or shot with consent.

Even Henri Cartier-Bresson (who is the master of shooting candidly) has photos take with consent from his subjects. Other notable examples of street photographers who interacted with their subjects and gained consent include William Klein, Diane Arbus, and even Bruce Gil- den.

## 5. On negative reactions

I think one of the biggest fears that many of us have in street photography is how people will react to you. If you have seen videos of Mark Cohen shooting without the viewfinder or Bruce Gil- den shooting in the streets with a flash you might think to yourself: he will probably get punched in the face sooner or later.

In an interview with Mark Cohen- the interviewer asks Cohen if people ever react violently to him photograph- ing them. Cohen responds:

"A lot of times I had trouble with the cops, because if you walk into some- body's yard and start taking pictures of a rope that's sitting there, they'll call the police. And if you photograph a young

child and his mother sees you through the window, they get really excited."

Cohen explains what happens when police come:

"Half of the time I could explain my- self. I had all these different stories. I was driven out of Scranton a couple of times when the cops picked me up tak- ing pictures there. They would follow me out of town. Other times someone would take down my license plate after I got in the car, and the police would show up at my house. Once a guy actually man- aged to track my plate number himself, and he showed up to my house. He was very belligerent because he felt like I had victimized his wife in some way when I took her picture. All kinds of things hap- pened."

But in terms of anything truly seri- ous happening (getting punched in the face, getting his camera smashed, etc) never happened. The interviewer asks: "Nothing serious ever came of any of them?" Cohen responds by saying: "Basi- cally not."

**Takeaway point:**

In street photography it is inevitable you will piss someone off sooner or later. Regardless of if you're shooting from a distance with a 50mm lens, or if you're shooting closely with a wide-angle lens and a flash. Granted, if you're shooting with a flash at a close proximity-- you will draw a lot of attention to yourself.

Cohen shares how he has gotten in trouble with the police or with people becoming upset. However at the end of the day, he is shooting not to piss people off-- but to create art, and to create sociologically powerful images.

Personally I shoot almost all of my photos of strangers with a flash-- and I have gotten many negative reactions. However the worst that ever happens is that people threaten to call the cops (or actually call the cops), yell at me, threaten to break my camera, etc. But nobody has ever physically assaulted me where I felt like my life was in danger. I probably have gotten more injuries playing tennis than shooting street photography.

My practical tip is when you're shooting on the streets, expect people to become upset. After all, it is a very strange thing to take photos of strangers without their permission. Not only that, but you will eventually piss somebody off.

If someone does get upset at you, be calm about it and explain that you're a street photographer and you didn't mean to upset them. It is also a good idea carrying around business cards, or a small portfolio of your work (in prints, iPad, or on your phone) to show people that you mean no harm. That you aren't a pedophile or some creep.

It isn't pleasant getting yelled at, ostracized, or threatened by strangers. But I think we need to accept that is a price we have to pay to create our art.

## 6. On discovering yourself through photography

I think one of the most beautiful things about street photography is the ability to explore ourselves through our work. Mark Cohen shares his personal



experiences shooting on the streets and putting together "Grim Street":

"[On the book] These are my favorites. They're selected carefully, but the book is not about anything. Except that if you keep photographing in the same place, you start to find out something about yourself."

Cohen also talks about taking photos while traveling as a means of self-exploration:

"Travel pictures are different. But I went to Mexico City ten times to take pictures, just to see how those picture would look compared to what I made in Wilkes-Barre. And they are the same. They're not quite like the pictures I made in Wilkes-Barre, but I could have made them in Binghamton or Rochester or Elmira.

But at the end of the day, the photos he makes of a place isn't of the place (or its inhabitants). Rather, it is about himself:

"My pictures are not about Wilkes-Barre. They're about an artist who is making pictures without a define emotive.

There is nevertheless something sociological. You see broken fences. You don't see any swimming pools and they don't have any L.A. glamour about them. We're on the underside of town. I was trying to do Grim Street without our saying "Wilkes-Barre" throughout the whole book if I could get away with that. This is about something else."

### **Takeaway point:**

When you are out shooting on the streets, know that you are creating images that reflect yourself-- and how you see the world. I know a lot of people who also see street photography as a sort of "therapy." Personally as well, there is nothing more comforting and soothing from walking the streets, exploring, talking to strangers, and taking photos.

Through your images-- really challenge yourself to discover who you are. Do you see the world in a positive light? A negative light? What do your photos show that you are naturally interested in? People? Signs? The street itself? Composition? Form? Who are you as a per-

son-- and how does your photography reflect that?

## 9. On shooting without a viewfinder

There is generally a stigma in the street photography against "shooting from the hip" or taking photos without using a viewfinder. Why is this?

To better explain, let me use myself as an example. When I started to shoot street photography, I shot from the hip (putting my camera at waist level, and pretending not to take a photo-- when I actually was) quite a bit. I did this for several reasons.

First of all, I didn't want to be noticed by others that I was taking photos. I didn't want people to catch me taking their photograph-- and perhaps getting upset, belligerent, or confronting me. I also didn't want to bother people, and I thought by shooting from the hip-- I would annoy fewer people.

Secondly, I didn't want to "disrupt the moment." I thought that by bringing my camera to my eye, people would no-

tice it too much-- which would change the characteristic of the scene I saw.

However after about half a year of shooting from the hip-- I discovered many problems.

First of all, almost all of my photos were skewed. They all had this weird diagonal tilt when shooting from the hip.

Secondly, my compositions were really loose and poorly framed. I would often chop off heads, and other body parts-- or have too much negative space.

Thirdly, it prevented me from building up my confidence in the streets. When I started to use the viewfinder more, it gave me more courage and confidence. I discovered shooting from the hip as a detriment and a barrier to building my confidence in street photography.

Now I never shoot from the hip, but occasionally I take photos without using my viewfinder if I need to put my camera on the ground and shoot from a super low angle, or when holding my camera high up to get a very high perspective.

Interestingly enough, when you see videos of Mark Cohen shooting in the streets-- he doesn't use his viewfinder. However this is different from "shooting from the hip." What is the difference?

Mark Cohen in action, shooting without the viewfinder at a very low angle.

I think when you're shooting from the hip-- you're trying to be sneaky and try not to have other people notice that you're taking a photo. However shooting without a viewfinder is a bit different. People can still notice you taking their photo if you don't use a viewfinder.

In Mark Cohen's case, he shot quite aggressively and used a flash-- so it was quite obvious that he shot without a viewfinder.

I think the reason he didn't use a viewfinder was it helped him get more edgy compositions by shooting from super low angles (like photos he takes of shoes, knees, and feet).

Not only that, but because he was shooting extremely wide (21-28mm) he probably couldn't have used the view-

finder anyways at close distances. This is because of parallax error.

For those of you unfamiliar with parallax error, when you are shooting with a rangefinder your framing becomes very inaccurate when you are closer than around 1 meter. And a lot of Cohen's shots were shot at minimum focusing distance (with a super wide lens). Meaning that using a viewfinder at that point would be pointless. He needed his camera to be level and head-on to his subjects to get a better frame.

Cohen explains a bit of how he shot without using a viewfinder:

"I wasn't looking through the viewfinder at this point anyway. In the early seventies I was making pictures with 21 and 28mm lenses that just enlarged the depth of field incredibly, and the little flash would carry out 3 to 5 feet. So in that small space, like in the knee picture of the bubble gum picture, I'm only a foot or two away from these people. And I learned to hold the camera very levels the pictures didn't look like wild wide-angle pictures."

Cohen shot without using the viewfinder so long that he was able to take photos while keeping his camera straight. And I think he shot without a viewfinder less of the fact that he didn't want to be noticed-- more for compositional and framing reasons. He probably shot so much with his 21mm and 28mm that he knew his framing relatively accurately.

### **Takeaway point:**

I generally discourage street photographers starting off to shoot from the hip. Why is that? Once again, your hands will never frame as accurately as your eye-- and I find shooting from the hip to be a barrier to building your confidence when shooting on the streets.

However of course there are exceptions. For example, if I were in North Korea and I didn't want to be noticed taking a photo I might shoot from the hip. If you live in a place any safer than North Korea-- I recommend not to shoot from the hip.

However shooting without a viewfinder is a totally different issue. A lot of

cameras out there now don't have viewfinders. Especially a lot of micro 4/3rd and compact cameras (or even smartphones). In those cases, the great thing about not using a viewfinder is the fact that you can get more edgy compositions by changing your perspective (shooting super low-angle, or super high-angle). Even if you're shooting with a DSLR in which you can't frame with the LCD screen, putting your camera on the ground or high in the air can help you create more interesting images.

But in the end of the day, shoot in a way that makes you the most comfortable. There is no one "right" way to shoot street photography in terms of technique. Mark Cohen shoots quite unorthodoxly and he made it work for him.

## **10. Harness spontaneity**

One of the most beautiful things about street photography is a sense of spontaneity. You never really know what will happen in your photo until you click the shutter. Some of Cohen's best photos have a great deal of spontaneity in them. He explains how he is able to harness



his subconscious when shooting on the streets:

"There's no complicity in my work. I don't know anybody. Look at that kid with the homemade tattoo on his arm. I try to just lift things like that off as I go by. Sometimes I stop to talk to people, but most of the time I keep on going. And since I often don't look through the viewfinder and I use this quick flash, I don't know what the pictures look like until I develop the film. Then I have these pictures that are made unconsciously and spontaneously. I'm able to make a good composition and keep a formal quality, but above all there is some other kind of mental operation going on that is not completely defined yet.

Sometimes when you're taking a photo-- you can't even expect the small random happenings which make the photo special. For example, in one of his most famous photos with a hand and bubble gum he explains:

"I didn't see that kid's hand up when I took the shot, and that makes the picture. The girl's blowing the bubble, and

I'm just holding the camera level in the right place in this little event that's happening in a very, very short span of time."

Cohen also explains how a lot of his street photography was mood-driven, in terms of where he would decide to shoot. Even when putting together his 30+ years body of work, he never really had a plan:

"[Grim Street] is about my hometown set of pictures. This is my home, so if it's a cloudy day, I know which alley to go down. If it's a sunny day, I know I want to go over where there's this kind of action and where I can find that kind of backyard. A lot of this is mood driven, but I don't exactly know where the motive and inspiration to take pictures comes from. So it's very spontaneous work; there's not a lot really to plan. The plan is just to print these hundred pictures. But this work is also how far I've gone with my limitations after thirty years or so."

**Takeaway point:**

I am a big advocate for working on projects-- and having some sort of goal or mission when you're shooting. However at the same time-- some of the best work you can create can be from this free-flowing style that Cohen adapts.

He lets his emotions lead him to where he wants to shoot, and he didn't really have a plan in terms of how to put together his book. He just shot the best photos he could during his 30+ years shooting in his hometown, and decided to put together his best images after that period.

Personally what I do when I'm out shooting is that I am in a project-mindset, but I allow spontaneity and randomness to add flexibility to my work and shooting. You can adopt the same approach, or just do it totally based on mood and your emotions. Do what makes you happy. Also realize nothing in street photography (really) ever goes according to plan.

## 11. On putting together "Grim Street"

One of the things that I am very interested as a photographer is how photographers put together their books. Mark Cohen shares a bit of his inspirations of putting together "Grim Street" and what mood he is trying to convey through his images:

"I'm making pictures in this one area. But there are these odd, eerie impulses, maybe from a lot of unconscious regions, influencing how I select people. And that's why the book is called Grim Street."

His guiding principles to organizing "Grim Street" is as follows:

"I've wanted to make a book for a long time. I made two hundred of the glossy reproduction prints and then eventually cut them in half. So, in this unconscious, uncurated way I put together what I basically think is my best work. They're going in the book chronologically, because they all have dates on them. I don't know exactly how it's going to come out, but I think it's going to be pretty good."

Takeaway point:

I think titles are important to books-- as they set the mood and how you interpret the images. Because Cohen titled the book: "Grim Street" it paints the picture of the other-wordliness of his images.

Interestingly enough, Cohen put together his photos in his book in a very unconventional way: chronologically. Most photographers I know generally sequence based on emotion, mood, and the flow. However Cohen embraced his unconscious when it came to choosing his best images-- and just sequenced his photos according to when he shot them. And strangely enough-- it works. The photos in the book have a lovely flow to them. Perhaps this is because as time goes on, his style of shooting changes-- which adds to the flow? I'm not sure-- but it just shows that there isn't ever one "right" way to put together a book.

So when you are putting together your own book or body of work-- no that there are no "rules." There are certainly guidelines and suggestions out there (like the ones I provide on this blog)-- but at the end of the day, do what makes

sense to you and what makes you happy. You can edit or sequence your work in a more logical, systematic way-- or you can embrace your unconscious. Or perhaps a combination of both?

## 12. On evolving as a photographer

Many photographers (Mark Cohen as well) evolve over time. Evolve in terms of how they shoot, what they shoot, and why they shoot.

Mark Cohen shares how his style of shooting street photography has changed and evolved over the years:

"[Over time] I got farther and father away. I started with a 21mm lens, then I moved to a 28mm and then a 35mm, and now I'm using a fifty; mainly because I would get into situations where I could be arrested, or the police would come. People would sometimes get very suspicious and agitated, and I had all kinds of trouble because I was never part of a newspaper so I couldn't say that I was on assignment. I'm just this guy doing this. And I fugue, well, I have a right to do

this. But, even in the media today, it is really not okay for some guy to get close to some little kid and take his picture in his backyard. You can't do that anymore because there's a sexual suspicion that develops. You can't just explain to some kid's mother that it's really this kid's beautiful ankle that I wanted to take a picture of by this puddle. So then I started using a 50mm lens, and now my work is much different than it was in the 70's."

### **Takeaway point:**

Unfortunately the reality is that a lot of people nowadays are more suspicious of street photographers than they were in the past. A few decades ago, nobody would care if you took photos of their kids. But now with the media and social media-- people are afraid that you might be a pedophile or something like that.

Cohen had to change and evolve his style in street photography because of how others changed. So he has changed from using a 21mm, to a 28mm, to a 35mm, and to a 50mm now. I haven't seen any of his newer work with a

50mm, but I am sure that he has made it work for him.

Personally I never have any issues taking photos of children-- as I try to do it in a non-sneaky (or creepy) way (I generally smile and wave at the kids, and interact with the parents when taking photos). Or I will ask permission from the parents if it is okay that I take photos of their kid.

But anyways, I think to change either your technique, subject matter, or style in street photography is totally normal over time. Your tastes in photography will probably change over the years. You might even grow out of "street photography" as Lee Friedlander did-- and might shoot flowers or trees (Friedlander made a book on trees).

I would say for every photographer in order to evolve and push forward to the next level-- you need to constantly reinvent yourself over time. For example, Andy Warhol started off as a successful commercial artist-- but it wasn't until he started making art out of Brillo boxes and Cambell's soup did he gain fame.



The same goes with Pablo Picasso-- he did lots of traditional art starting off, but he never achieved acclaim until he started to make his more abstract art.

I have personally gone through a lot of evolution in my street photography as well. I started off shooting black and white like Henri Cartier-Bresson (using a 50mm from a distance) by looking for interesting backgrounds, and waiting for the right person to enter the scene. Then I started to shoot street photography like Bruce Gilden-- using a 24mm lens and getting close to my subjects and using a flash. Nowadays I enjoy shooting more urban landscapes (in color)-- similarly to Lee Friedlander, Stephen Shore, William Eggleston, and Joel Sternfeld. I also made the shift from shooting in digital to film now.

So don't feel that you have to remain "faithful" to your own style and approach for a very long time. Try to stay consistent in terms of your process and aesthetic within a certain project, but as you work on new projects over time-- try to switch it up. Keep exploring, experi-

ment, and push your photography to the limits.

## 13. On seeing

In street photography the two most important things are your eyes and your feet. Especially your eyes. You need to see if you want to make great photos.

Mark Cohen explains the importance of seeing in street photography:

"Before you start with the camera, you have to see something. A lot of times I see things while I'm driving the car, and well, I'm going to miss that picture. But when I'm walking on the street, I see something and go after it. I pick up the camera, keep it level, get the flash out, and walk toward the subject. And this little girl is walking in the street and she has this white sock and she's with her mother... and I stopped the car and went after that subject and took a flash-picture of her sock and her leg. And in that background and that ambient light there's wonderful, abstract kind of Minor White picture. There are two layers of picture going on."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think it is important to always be looking for pictures. After all of these years of shooting-- I almost have a little black box that frames my world. I see almost everything as potential images. By having this frame constantly in my mind-- it changes how I see the world, but also gives me better vision to make photos.

So first of all, I always recommend you to have your camera with you at all times. Then of course, always be looking for potential images. And if you see a good potential image, don't hesitate. Go after it. Take a photograph, rather than regretting not having taken it.

## **14. On his drive**

Mark Cohen has taken photos in his small town for over 30 years. Very few photographers have that grit and tenacity. What drove him to keep shooting on the streets? Cohen says it is the thrill of trying to create new types of images:

"When you feel like you're making pictures-- the most important is to make

new pictures. The pictures you already took-- you already took those pictures. My main drive is to do something new-- to make some new kind of picture."

### **Takeaway point:**

This point goes well with the idea of evolving as a photographer. Don't just keep shooting the same images over and over again. Rather, try to push yourself to create new images. Images that are unique to yourself. Images that are unique to others.

We live in a society where we are bombarded by thousands of images from all around the web. Do you really want to continue to add to the glut of cliché images that we have already seen hundreds of times? Or do you want to create unique images that the world (or yourself) hasn't seen before?

So let your passion, ambition-- and love of street photography continue to push you to create beautiful (or not so beautiful) images of the world. But the most important thing is do it in your way. Your unique way of seeing the world-- that is different from others.

## Conclusion

Mark Cohen is living proof that you don't need to live in some super fancy city to make interesting photos. He shot street photography for over 30 years in his small town-- and it was his drive of making new photos and pushing his limits that drove him. He wasn't even quite sure what his goal was but street photography was something that he had to do. It was like an itch that needed to be scratched. So let us not make excuses in our own street photography (in terms of where we live or our circumstances). Let's just go out there and do it like Cohen.





33

## MARTIN PARR

As of late, Martin Parr is one of my idols in street photography. I love his never-ending passion for street/documentary photography (Alec Soth recently called him the “Jay-Z” of documentary photography)- and the thought-provoking images that his photos tell.

### 1. Focus on sets, not individual images

Recently someone asked Martin Parr in an interview about what his favorite photograph was. He simply responded by saying that it was a ridiculous question, as



thinks about his photographs in terms of sets and projects, rather than individual images.

I used to shoot street photography in the “Flickr-mindset” which was all about going out and hunting for those incredible “Flickr-worthy shots”. You know what I’m talking about- those shots which (you hope) will get you hundreds of comments and likes, and the approval of everyone on the internet.

More recently I have switched from working on a single-photograph approach to a more project-focused approach. I feel one of the strengths of working on projects is that it helps you stay focused, and also have more of a message and statement in your photographs.

## 2. Make statements about society through your photographs

One of the reasons why I love Martin Parr’s photography so much is that his photographs have strong statements about society – and always has a certain

viewpoint or critique. Many of his photographs are funny, interesting, or sometimes downright depressing- but they make statements on society. He interjects his own opinion and thought into his photographs and shows how he sees the world – and challenges us to see the world differently as well.

I have recently started to understand that it isn’t enough to take interesting photographs. Rather, we should strive to take meaningful photographs.

When I refer to “interesting” photographs- I mean photographs that make us say “wow” from a visual standpoint. Photos that have strong lines, shadows, a good composition and so-forth.

However photographs that are “meaningful” make us think more about the situation at hand in the photograph. What is the statement that the photographer is trying to say through his/her photograph? Does it have an opinion? Does the photo have emotion or soul?

I feel that a strong image should be both interesting from a visual standpoint and meaningful from a humanistic stand-

point. I feel that Martin Parr does this well with his projects.

One project of interest that he finished is a book titled: “Luxury“. In this book he makes the statement that often-times we find things like poverty and AIDS in Africa as serious social problems- but forget the problem of excess wealth is in society. Therefore in that book, he uncovers that social issue that we don’t often think about.

### 3. Be obsessive

I recently shared a quote by Chuck Close on Twitter and Facebook on inspiration. I cut the quote a bit short (thanks to Mattias Leppäniemi and Alex JD Smith for pointing it out). Here it is:

“The advice I like to give young artists, or really anybody who’ll listen to me, is not to wait around for inspiration. Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and get to work. If you wait around for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightning to strike you in the brain, you are not going to make an awful lot of work.

All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself. Things occur to you. If you’re sitting around trying to dream up a great art idea, you can sit there a long time before anything happens. But if you just get to work, something will occur to you and something else will occur to you and something else that you reject will push you in another direction.

“Inspiration is absolutely unnecessary and somehow deceptive. You feel like you need this great idea before you can get down to work, and I find that’s almost never the case.” - Chuck Close

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, Magnum photographer Alec Soth recently referred to Martin Parr as the “Jay-Z” of documentary photography. Parr is now 60 years old, but he hasn’t slowed down one bit. He is constantly hustling on commercial shoots and his own personal projects while traveling the world and exhibiting at the same time.

If you want to become a great street photographer, it isn’t enough to have tal-

ent. Sure it helps to have a good idea, but what I have learned from talking to many people is that it comes down to the hard work you put into it.

As Robert Doisneau once said, “Chance is the one thing you can’t buy. You have to pay for it and you have to pay for it with your life, spending a lot of time, you pay for it with time, not the wasting of time but the spending of time.”

If you also look at all the great photographers out there, they are incredibly obsessed with photography and nothing else. It is great to diversify your loves and passions in life- but if you already have half a million hobbies – I suggest cutting down and focusing more on the best hobby out there (street photography).

## 4. Think outside the box

Martin Parr’s photography is incredibly unique- and I best heard in an interview about his work that goes something like: “When looking at Martin Parr’s photographs, the viewer is often unsure whether to laugh or cry”. Even when he

was nominated to join Magnum, he was met with considerable controversy.

Regardless I believe he is one of the most creative photographers out there, and has done a ton of books on subjects that people haven’t thought about as much.

## 5. It is rare that you make a good photo

Remember when it comes to street photography, not every one of your shots are going to be good. You are going to take a lot of crappy photos in order to make the good ones. Even Martin Parr stated in an interview that he estimates that he takes “tens upon thousands” of photographs a year and prints out “maybe 15,000 of them” and, he adds, “If there are 10 good ones, it would be a good year.” – Link

I think few photographers are nearly as prolific as Martin Parr, and he (one of the greatest photographers out there right now) only gets 10 good photos in a year.

Of course we may take more than 10 good photos in a year or fewer than 10 good photographs in a year – but use this number as a ballpark figure to remind yourself that making a great street photograph is really really hard.

Takeaway point: Shoot as much as you can, but be ruthless when it comes to editing. Read one of my articles on “15 Tips How You Can Better Edit Your Work”.

During the last 5 years or so I have been shooting street photography, I think I have only taken around 5 photographs that I would feel proud of having people remember me by after I pass away. However I am currently in the project of shooting for an entire year and only showing my best 20 at the end (in December). Remember, less is more!

## 6. Find the extraordinary in the ordinary

In a recent Google+ hangouts interview, one of the attendees asked if he could give one piece of advice to aspiring

photographers. Put simply he said, “Find the extraordinary in the ordinary”.

One of the beautiful things about street photography is that we don’t need to drive 10,000 miles to take a photo of a double-rainbow in the mountains or something like that. Street photography is all about the everyday people, things, and moments. It is often the most common and mundane things which make the most interesting and meaningful images.

Therefore if you live somewhere which you don’t consider to be the most interesting place and isn’t urban like NYC or Paris- don’t become discouraged. Look for the ordinary things in your everyday life, and shoot what is closest to you.

A piece of advice I read from Martin: “Change your approach. Consider yourself to be a documentary photographer and take this duty to record your family seriously.”

## 7. Get Close



When Martin Parr shoots street photography, he gets extremely close to his subjects and doesn't ask for permission. The result is that he is able to get the shots for his projects that he envisions, and also gives the viewer a sense of "being there" in the midst of all the action.

Parr gives some advice and insight about shooting close in the two quotes below:

"I go straight in very close to people and I do that because it's the only way you can get the picture. You go right up to them. Even now, I don't find it easy. I don't announce it. I pretend to be focusing elsewhere. If you take someone's photograph it is very difficult not to look at them just after. But it's the one thing that gives the game away. I don't try and hide what I'm doing – that would be folly." – Martin Parr – British Journal of Photography interview, 1989

"If you photograph for a long time, you get to understand such things as body language. I often do not look at people I photograph, especially afterwards. Also when I want a photo, I become

somewhat fearless, and this helps a lot. There will always be someone who objects to being photographed, and when this happens you move on." – Martin Parr

One of the great things about Parr is that he (like many other street photographers who get really close to people) is great at human interaction. He often talks to his subjects when taking photographs of them and comes off as very unthreatening – due to his charisma and way of speaking.

## 8. Exaggerate your photographs

In one of Martin Parr's interview, he shared with the readers this quote:

"Part of the role of photography is to exaggerate"... Martin Parr

He elaborates in another interview:

"With photography, I like to create fiction out of reality. I try and do this by taking society's natural prejudice and giving this a twist." - Martin Parr

I don't believe that photography is ever objective- it is always going to be a subjective. When we decide to take a photograph, we make a judgement call on what focal length to use, how to frame the photograph, and what to photograph. Even more importantly, we decide what not to photograph.

Therefore realize that it is rare that photographs ever tell the "full story" – and are often exaggerated more to make a statement. Think about doing this the same with your photographs- and thinking about what sort of statement you are making with your photos.

## 9. Don't get people to smile

"Don't get everyone to smile; otherwise you'll end up with the same old family propaganda." – Martin Parr

We are so conditioned to see photographs of people smiling in photographs- as that is how we typically get people to pose.

In street photography, the photographs taken shouldn't be posed. However that doesn't mean that every once

in a while (when appropriate) we can ask our subjects to pose for us.

However if we ask our subjects to pose for us, a simple tip is to tell them not to smile. A nice line I got from Charlie Kirk is telling your subject, "Pretend like you're getting your passport taken".

Photographs of people on the street not smiling often shows them more in their natural state- and doesn't feel so forced or calculated.

## 10. Experiment

Don't feel that you have to be pigeonholed into only shooting street photography one way. Martin Parr has experimented much during his photography career- shooting with 35mm black and white film on a Leica, medium-format color film, 35mm color film with a Macro lens, and now shoots with a DSLR camera.

He has also shot "street photography" by using a videocamera for the BBC in a program titled: "Think of England". He essentially captured moments from British life (and interviewed people) into

clips – to give the viewer a better sense of a scene by hearing the sounds, more of the situation, and having more interaction.

Don't let your creativity be stifled by doing the same thing over and over again. Although I do advocate the concept of using "one camera and one lens" – still feel free to experiment using other types of equipment and shooting different styles. My suggestion is to do this for different projects.

For example, shoot for a year on a medium-format camera of environmental portraiture. Another year you can shoot street photography with black and white on a Leica of street scenes. Another year you can try out large-format of landscapes. I believe that working in terms of projects, it will help you keep your creativity alive- while staying consistent at the same time.



34

## MARY ELLEN MARK

I recently came across the excellent book: “Mary Ellen Mark on the Portrait and the Moment”, an educational workshop book published by Aperture, at the home of my friend Brian Sparks. Mary Ellen Mark is a photographer who endlessly inspires me, and especially with her recent death, I wanted to meditate on some of her thoughts and philosophies about photography and life.

### 1. Connect with people

What I love about Mary Ellen Mark is that she is genuinely interested in her subjects, and has a deep sense of empathy and love for her subjects. To her, photography



is less about making photos; it is more about making connections with her subjects.

A lot of photographers are shy with their cameras, but realize, a camera allows you to build a bridge with your subjects. The camera allows you to enter the lives of others:

“I saw that my camera gave me a connection with others that I had never had before. It allowed me to enter lives, satisfying a curiosity that was always there, but that was never explored before. On that day, I realized that the world was open to me. I realized all of the possibilities that could exist for me with my camera; all of the images that I could capture, all the lives I could enter, all the people I could meet and how much I could learn from them. On that day, my life changed forever.”

As a street photographer, you are curious about human beings and humanity. Of course we all want to make good photos, but first we need to strive to make connections with our fellow brothers and sisters.

## **Assignment:**

As an assignment, start off finding a subject that you find interesting in. But in the beginning, don't even bring out your camera or mention photography. Get to really know your subject. Start off by just chatting with them, and wait at least 30 minutes before bringing out your camera.

Then you can say something like: “Excuse me sir (or miss), I really enjoyed getting to know you and more about your life story. Do you mind if I made a few photos so I can remember this wonderful memory?”

## **2. Less is more**

Photography is more about subtraction than addition. However there is a fine line; how can you continue to subtract from the frame without having nothing to look at?

There is a quote I like from Einstein which says: “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

This is similar to the concept of “Occam's razor” — a concept that a simple

solution is often better than the more complicated one.

Mary Ellen Mark also applies the same philosophy to her photography; she tries to make her photos simple as possible (but not too simple). She strives to distill her frames into the essence of what she is trying to say:

“I always think less is more. Simplicity is really important. The line between extreme simplicity and an empty frame is a delicate one. [...] I think whether simple or complex, it’s all a matter of being able to say what you want to say with your camera.”

### **Assignment:**

Learn to subtract, not to add to the frame.

The next time you’re out shooting on the streets, see how you can subtract from a scene. Try to eliminate distracting elements from the background, and focus on the edges of the frame.

Also try to cut out elements to add more mystery to your shots.

For example, cut out the eyes of your subject. Cut out limbs and faces. Leave out key information, to add more mystery to a photograph– make your images more “open-ended” and open to interpretation.

## **3. Focus on the background**

The common mistake that we do as street photographers is as follows:

We shoot on the streets, and roam– looking for interesting moments or people. Once we see someone interesting, we start clicking away (without looking at the background). Then when we get home, we realize that our subject and content matter is great, but the background is either messy or doesn’t add to the photo.

I personally make this mistake quite a bit. So what I have tried to do to remedy this problem is this: focus on the background, not the subject.

This has helped me make stronger images, in which the subject and the background contribute to a great photograph.

Mary Ellen Mark shares the importance of the background in the photo:

“The difference between a picture that works and one that doesn’t is often what’s in the background. What you put in the background is as important as what you have in the foreground.”

Another practical tip from Mary Ellen Mark: try to separate the elements in your background, and avoid overlapping figures:

“The background can sometime fight with the subject. When you’re in a crowded area, you have to separate the elements: move around and layer a crowded frame to place things at different distances and angles. Use a flash to separate the foreground if needed. When things are layered properly between the foreground, middleground, and background, they are not blocking each other and the focal points are clear. Even if the situation is crowded, it’s up to you as the photographer to organize the picture.”

### **Assignment:**

This assignment is to avoid overlapping figures.

When you’re out on the streets, try to shoot multiple subjects, but don’t have figures blending into one another.

Some great photographers to study in regards to this include Gary Winogrand, William Klein, and Alex Webb.

## **4. A photo should stand up on its own**

We’ve all seen it before; someone uploads a photograph to Flickr or Facebook (that isn’t great), but they add a fancy and in-depth backstory to support the image.

But the problem with this kind of image is this: a photograph should be able to stand on its own.

Mary Ellen Mark says the importance of an image being a self-contained, and how it should stand on its own:

“You don’t necessarily have to know what’s happening to recognize a great picture. If a picture needs a caption to

work, i may not be a great one; it should stand up as an image of its own.”

**Assignment: Can this photo stand on its own?**

I personally don't title my photos. I just use the city and year the photo it was shot. For example: Tokyo, 2013.

But don't get me wrong, I used to use the cheesiest titles on my photos like: “Lost in thought” or “Wandering in the dark” or my favorite, “What is the meaning of life?”

I do believe a photo should be able to stand on its own two feet. If you need a fancy caption, you need to kill the photograph.

So when it comes to editing (choosing your best images), ask yourself: “If this photo had no context or caption, would it still work?”

Of course there are documentary photographers and photojournalists who use captions to describe their stories. That is an important part of their work. But as street photographers, we are creat-

ing our own reality; not trying to show some sort of “objective” reality.

## 5. Be an interpreter

To be a great photographer isn't to simply take photos of interesting things you see. Rather, it is to interpret what you see, and to create a new meaning out of reality.

For example, if you see a guy with a red afro and you take a photo of him, ask yourself, “Could any Asian tourist with an iPhone have taken the same shot?” If the answer is, “Yes”, you should probably ditch the shot.

The best photographs are often the ones where the photographer is able to make interesting juxtapositions, comparisons, and craft moments inside his/her frame.

One of the best ways to do this is to show your own unique perspective and viewpoint of the world. What are you trying to say, which nobody has said before? Mark explains more below:

“You want to be an interpreter with the camera, not an illustrator. Try to go



beyond overly literal photographs. Try interpreting what you see rather than just shooting it. Show me your point of view, how you feel about the subject. What are you saying? Why are you here?”

Mark shares the importance of interpreting what you see before you, and the importance of how you decide to shoot a scene:

“Be an interpreter, not just an observer. Think about how you frame the picture, how close you are, what angle you choose, where the light hits the subject. Is it light or dark? Don’t be afraid to be who you are, and think what you think, when you’re photographing.

### **Assignment: Juxtapose**

The best photos are often the ones where there are interesting juxtapositions in a shot—where you put two totally unrelated elements next to one another.

So next time you’re out shooting, don’t just settle for one interesting thing you see. Try to build upon it. Add more layers to the scene, and elements. Do you see a guy with a red afro in the

streets? Don’t just shoot him, perhaps look around the scene and see if there is anything else red you can add to the scene. Try to add more complexity and interest to your frame in this way.

## **6. Don’t rely on spectacular environments**

I also feel that the best photographers are able to make interesting photos in their own backyard. The best photographers (William Eggleston and Mark Cohen come to mind) have shot for decades in their backyards, and made interesting photos out of boring subject-matter.

Don’t get me wrong, I get easily bored by my hometown (Berkeley). But traveling outside of Berkeley for the last few months has helped me realize how much I love my home, and how many interesting things there are to shoot there. I need to quit complaining that I don’t live in San Francisco.

Don’t rely on exotic places for your photography, as Mary Ellen Mark explains:

“It doesn’t matter where you are. It’s too easy to rely on the exoticism of a foreign place, or on costumes. You can work in a spectacular environment, but that doesn’t make the picture for you. It has to go beyond that.”

If you do happen to be traveling, don’t take the same cliché photo that everybody has already shot before. Try to avoid taking photos that you have already seen by Steve McCurry or any other national geographic photographer. Don’t just take portraits of old men with turbans, with kids and cotton candy, or street performers. Try to make a unique photo that the world hasn’t seen before.

This is advice that Mary Ellen Mark told her students in her workshops when in Mexico:

“I want you to make pictures that work across all cultures and boundaries. The photo doesn’t just work because someone in the market has a basket on their head.”

Sometimes we can be drawn away by the “costume” (the look, outfit, or subject matter) we see. Anyone can

make an interesting photo of someone with a face tattoo. But we need to go deeper— we need to integrate other elements like “...content, emotion, composition, and depth”:

“The picture should be more than the costume, more than the event that’s taking place. Move beyond the circus, the dance, whatever the action. To make a great photograph, you need other elements like content, emotion, composition, and depth.”

Another practical tip from Mark: don’t take obvious photos. Rather, look for gestures and other interactions:

“For example, if you go to a protest, make a picture that says more than the signs people are holding. Go for juxtaposition and boldness. Focus on the gestures and exchanges between people, or look for humor in the event.”

Of course there is a balance, you want to photograph what you find interesting. Just try to find a new perspective, regardless of what you have shot before (or what others before you have shot already):

“Everyone tends to take the same types of easy pictures again and again in a spectacular environment. It’s better to find a different perspective on a subject. Look for ways of shooting that we haven’t seen before; surprise people. But most important, follow your own interests.”

**Assignment: Make interesting photos in your own (boring) city**

Many photographers I know complain that their home cities or towns are boring. But the more boring the town you live in, the better. This will be a “creative constraint”, that will force you to make interesting photos out of nothing.

After all, isn’t that what street photography is all about? Capturing the beauty in the mundane.

So restrict yourself to your town. Better yet, choose a 1-square mile radius from your house, and only shoot that neighborhood. Try to pay attention to details, and imagine what you would find interesting if you were a tourist in your own backyard.

## 7. Avoid vague emotions

What kind of photos stick with you? The ones that are emotional, and hit you like a ton of bricks to your heart.

So when you’re out shooting, look for emotional moments. But at the same time, you want to avoid boring or “vague” emotions.

For example, if I want to get a good photo of someone happy, I want it to be over-the-top. I want their laughter to be so ridiculous and over-the-top, that it just explodes with energy. Avoid taking photos of people with boring smiles and peace signs.

Mary Ellen Mark expands on the moments she looks for:

“I’m always looking for the kind of moment you can’t quite put into words but something that is odd or sad or funny. I’m looking for something that just hits me. That said, a person’s expression can’t be too vague or too cute. Wait for a true emotional moment.”

**Assignment: “What is your happiest/saddest memory?”**

Often when I am shooting street portraits of strangers, I will ask them some questions that stir up emotions in them.

Two ideas:

- “What is your happiest memory?”
- “What is one of the most difficult experiences you have overcome in your life?”

These open-ended questions allow people to show their true emotions, and also for them to drop their guards and forget about the camera.

Think of some other questions that might provoke emotions from your subjects. Whatever you do, don't ask boring questions.

## 8. Don't force it

At the same time, sometimes you need to let moments spontaneously arise, and not to force things. It is to approach the Taoist philosophy of “wu-wei”— action without force.

For example, one of Mary Ellen Mark's images shows a photo of a man pointing his gun at his wife's head. Mark explains the image, and how lucky she

was that the man happened to be (unknowingly) pointing the gun at his wife's head:

“You have to wait for things to happen rather than overdetermine it. More often than not, the subject will do something you never would have dreamed of.”

### **Assignment: Linger**

Sometimes when you're out shooting, you leave the scene too quickly. This might be because you are nervous, you are scared, or self-aware.

But in these moments, learn to “linger” — to hang around longer than you think you should.

I often find that the longer I stick around with a scene or a person, something more interesting happens, better than I could ever imagine. And this happens without me forcing anything.

I have a personal rule: whenever I think I've gotten the shot, I remind myself: “Shoot 25% more than you think you should.” Often it is the several other shots which end up being the best shots.



## 9. Build the layers in your images

A good metaphor for crafting interesting images: build layers in your photos like a brick-layer would build layer of bricks for a foundation of a house.

Generally the strongest images tend to have an interesting foreground, mid-ground, and background. Not only that, but the more interesting interactions in your scene, the more interesting it is for the viewer to observe and look at the scene.

Mary Ellen Mark expands on building out layers in a frame:

“I love to work in a documentary style probably more than formal portraiture. In this type of shooting, you wait for the action and build the frame, looking for different layers. From there, build the other parts of the frame to form a juxtaposition, or even look where the light is beautiful.”

### **Assignment: Extreme depth**

One technique I learned from my friend Charlie Kirk is to add “extreme

depth” to photos by focusing on the background, and having someone in the foreground who is intentionally out-of-focus.

For example, set your camera to aperture-priority mode, set the aperture to f/8, ISO to 1600, and set your lens to manual focus and prefocus to 5-10 meters. Then try to make photos that have layers and depth, by adding elements in the extreme foreground, and by not focusing on what is closest to you.

Street photographers starting off generally always focus on what’s closest to them. But the more experienced ones focus on the background.

## 10. On using flash

Shooting with a flash gets a bad reputation, especially in street photography. People see Bruce Gilden in action and assume that all a flash does is piss people off.

However in reality, if you use the flash mindfully, it will add another dimension to your photos. Some master photographers who have used the flash amazingly include William Klein, Daido

Moriyama, Anders Petersen, Martin Parr, Diane Arbus, and Mark Cohen.

I personally shoot a lot with a flash, because I love the separation it creates, as well as the surreal feel and emotion it adds to an image.

But if you've never shot with a flash before, how can you start? Mary Ellen Mark gives some advice:

“If you're willing to work with flash, keep in mind that there are no rule. Go to places where people are more open to being photographed. A flash will change the environment. Understand the effect it can have, but continue to shoot as you're invisible so people don't look at the camera.”

### **Assignment: Flash it up**

For an entire week, only shoot with a flash. Turn your camera to “P” (program mode), and either use the integrated flash on your camera, or use the smallest one that has “TTL” mode. Set your ISO to 400, and just start experimenting.

Photograph people you know a first, like your friends and family. Then go outside and flash flowers, trees, and other inanimate objects. Try to take two photos of each scene: one with flash, and the other without flash.

Then discover the effect and influence your flash has on your images. See if you like the added dimension, and then take it a step further; try using a flash when taking portraits of strangers (with permission). Then if you feel up for it, try to shoot candid street photography with a flash (during the day). You might be surprised to see how much people ignore you (or don't notice the flash going off).

## **11. Stick with one subject**

I recently attended a Magnum workshop with David Alan Harvey and Constantine Manos. One of the most important things I learned was that it is better to photograph fewer scenes and people, but once you find a scene or a person you are interested in, shoot the hell out of it.

For example, rather than shooting 1-2 photos of everything you see in a day, be picky with who/what you decide to photograph. But once you find an interesting person or a scene, take 50-100 photos of it.

Mary Ellen Mark has a similar philosophy; she believes in sticking with one subject you find interesting, and to focus on depth over breadth:

“I always recommend sticking with a subject you like to photograph. You don’t have to be on a magazine assignment to follow your interests and instincts. Following one subject can be an assignment in and of itself.”

### **Assignment: Work the scene**

For this assignment, you have to roam the streets all day, and you are only allowed to take photos of 3 scenes you find interesting. But once you find a scene you are interested in, you have to take at least 50+ photos of that one scene.

I recommend finding interesting scenes and backgrounds, with a lot of action. For example, find a busy intersec-

tion or the exit of a metro terminal. Wait for people to come to you, and “work the scene.”

Similarly if you find someone interesting on the streets, and you ask to take their photo (and they say yes), try to take at least 20+ photos of them. Don’t just take 1-2 photos and leave. Work the scene.

## 12. Don’t photograph people smiling

One interesting lesson I learned from Martin Parr is that when he takes photos of strangers (with permission), he will say: “Look into the lens and don’t smile. This is a dignified portrait. Pretend like you’re having your passport shot.”

The rationale behind having your subjects not smile in the frame was this: we are so used to seeing photos of people smiling in photos, because that is what we do in family albums. Think about your mom or dad saying, “Smile for the camera!”

But the reality is that very few people (not even me) walk in the streets with a huge smile on their face. So generally when you have photos of people smiling, it just looks like a boring Facebook profile picture.

Mary Ellen Mark does the same; she intentionally tries to get photos of people not smiling. She expands below:

“Sometimes, the hardest thing is to get people to stop mugging for the camera. Also with children, if they are playing too much to you, it’s not real. Treat them like adults. Sometimes I’ll say, ‘If you smile, I won’t take your photograph.’

She is often direct with this point:

“I always tell people not to smile: ‘Don’t smile, but look at me.’ Or, ‘Don’t look at me, don’t look at the camera. Look down.’ It depends.”

### **Assignment: Look into the lens and don’t smile**

Start off by approaching a loved one or friend and just ask them to do two

things: 1) Don’t smile and 2) Look straight into the lens.

You will be surprised how much more “genuine” these images will feel, and how much more interesting.

Of course it isn’t an issue of having people smiling in photos. Some of my favorite photos are of people laughing (like the NYC laughing woman). But what you want to avoid is posed smiles. If you want good genuine smiles in photos, tell your subject a joke, or ask them to think of happy memories. Or in my case with the photo I shot in NYC, I took 20 photos of her, and around so #15, she started laughing and said, “You are so crazy!” That is when I got my shot.

## **13. Don’t put away your camera**

Mary Ellen Mark told a fantastic story of how she got one of her most iconic images: a photo of a girl named Amanda smoking in the backyard.

Mark was photographing this girl named Amanda for an entire day, and was about to pack up and leave. She



went to the backyard to say goodbye to Amanda, and she saw her smoking a cigarette inside an inflatable pool with her cousin, Amy. She took 2-3 frames quickly with her Leica, and one of them was the iconic shot (the photo at the top of this article).

The morale of the story? Don't put away your camera too quickly. Mary Ellen Mark shot a lot of formal portraits of Amanda earlier (with medium-format and large-format camera), but fortunately she had her 35mm Leica around her neck, which allowed her to capture this great "decisive moment."

So Mark tells this to her students:

"I often tell students, 'Don't put away your camera. Keep it out at all times, even when you think you have the shot already.' Something can always happen."

For me, the problem is that I often put away my camera too quickly. When I shoot for an entire day and my neck is sore, I will put my camera back into my backpack. But sometimes it is those moments that I see good shots (when my

camera is still in my bag, and I can't take out my camera quickly enough to get a shot).

Morale of the story? Always have your camera either around your neck or on your hand, even when you think you already have the shot.

### **Assignment: Sleep with your camera**

For an assignment, make your camera an appendage of your body. I recommend using a small point and shoot camera. Have it with you when you're going to the grocery store, when you are going to eat at a restaurant with your partner, if you're going to a bar with your friends, or if you're driving to work (keep it in your cupholder). When you go to sleep, keep your camera by your bed stand.

The smaller your camera, the more likely you are to carry it with you, and the more likely you are to make interesting photos. If you don't have a compact camera, just use your smartphone.

If you only own DSLR's and big cameras and want something smaller, I highly recommend the Ricoh GR.

## 14. Don't be afraid to take control

As a photographer, you don't want to be meek and shy. The more insecurity you project, the less comfortable your subjects will feel around you.

For example, Mary Ellen Mark shares how nervous she was photographing Marlon Brando, who never allowed anybody to shoot him without his permission. In the beginning she was very timid, but she knew that if she needed to get strong images of him, she needed to push herself out of her comfort zone. And push she did, and she ended up getting some of the most iconic images of him with a dragonfly.

However at the same time, you have to learn how to gauge people; to find that balance between not forcing it, but pushing to get the shot:

“As a photographer, you have to understand how to gauge people. You have to read their signals and know how far you can push and when you need to back off. But I also think it's very important to

get strong and intimate photographs, and for those, you have to push.”

Mark gives more in-depth advice about taking control of your subject, and not to be shy. As a photographer, you need to show confidence and courage:

“Don't be afraid to take control; move the subject around in the background, give instructions. When I'm shooting, I communicate that i'm in charge, im the one taking the picture—sometimes I actually say that, but mostly I just act the part. Whether you're working with a group of children or a president, they need to feel that you are in control of the shoot; they trust you more. If you're doubtful or insecure they can tell, and you won't get the photograph or the right reaction from your subject.”

In street photography, don't go out and shoot like you are awkward and timid. The more awkward and uncomfortable you feel shooting on the streets, the more awkward and uncomfortable your subjects will feel.

Remember as a street photographer, you're not doing anything wrong. You're just trying to create beautiful moments from everyday life. In-fact, you're doing a good thing. You're creating historical documents for generations to appreciate in the future.

### **Assignment: Take control**

Walk in the streets like you own the streets, like you belong there. Then it isn't so much that you are taking the photos of others. Rather, it is that these individuals are entering your images, and entering your space.

With street portraits, don't feel meek. Control your subjects by telling them what to do. Ask them to stand against a more simple background, and ask them to look different directions (up, down, left, right). Ask them to look head on, or to do an interesting hand gesture. The funny thing is that most people like being told what to do, and often feel more anxious when you don't direct them.

## **15. Don't go backwards**

In the film industry, there is a saying with film directors: "You are only good as your last film."

The same philosophy applies in photography. You are only as good as your last photograph, or your last project or book.

What kept Mary Ellen Mark curious and so passionate all these years, until she passed away at 75?

She always tries to push herself forward, she tries to avoid going backwards in her photography. She thrived over the excitement of pursuing new and exciting projects:

"I feel sort of let down after I finish a big series—I firmly believe that I'm only as good as the next thing I do. I'm not interested in going back but in going forward. I miss the excitement—that amazing excitement—of starting a new project, which is why I am a photographer."

Therefore know the same is with you; you are only as good as your weakest shot.

**Assignment: Only show your best work**

I recently did something quite radical; I edited my Flickr profile to just my best 20 or so photos over the last 9 years I have been shooting street photography. I have a new rule that I will (try) to follow; if I want to add a new photo to that set of 20 images, I have to remove a photograph which I feel is weaker.

This will force me to only focus on my best work, and not to take a step backwards in my photography. I want to push myself, and see the upper-limits of my ability.

One of my other hobbies back home is powerlifting. Every week at the gym, I try to add 2.5 pounds to my deadlift, benchpress, and squat. I don't succeed every week, but this constant journey to improve (just a little bit everyday) is what drives me forward.

So the next time you decide to upload a new photo series or project, or image, ask yourself: "Is this photograph as good as my last one, or worse?"

Don't let your bad work drag you backwards.

## 16. Don't stick with the same scale

Variety is the spice of life. There is nothing more boring than eating the same thing everyday, over and over again.

The same thing is with photography. You want to have variety in your work. You don't want to just keep making the same type of photograph over and over again. You want to push your boundaries, and see what you're made out of.

A practical suggestion I learned from Mark was this: when working on a photo series, don't have all your photos at the same distance. Rather, vary the scale of images. Include some photos that are shot really close, and some that are shot from really far away.

This will add to the sequence and flow of a photobook. For example, in Mark's "Prom" book, she started off shooting all the photos at the same distance. But then she realized that she



needed to vary the distances, to add a “tension in the sequence” in the photo-book:

“Too much of the same type of picture can get tedious. I knew going in that I’d have to create some tension in the sequence to keep the viewer looking. So I was always trying to break the boredom of the same scale, the same distance.”

### **Assignment: Shoot different distances**

Try to put together a photo series with variety in terms of scale.

So if you’re doing a photo series of your loved one, don’t just shoot all close-up portraits of them. Try some close-ups, try some shot from 5 meters, try some at 1 meter, and add more variety to the orientation of the camera (landscape and portrait).

To make a great photography project, there is always a tension between consistency and variety.

Be consistent in terms of your subject matter and aesthetic and equipment. Add variety in framing and distances.

Or try the opposite: have a consistent distance you shoot your subject, but add variety in terms of the cameras, film, or equipment you use.

## 17. Focus on one great frame at a time

Sometimes the idea of becoming a great photographer or making a great project or body of work is paralyzing.

Try another approach: just focus on one frame at a time.

Mary Ellen Mark had a very ambitious approach in her photography: she wants to make every photo she takes into an “iconic” photo. She admits this is impossible, but by focusing on one frame at a time, you can slowly build yourself into becoming a great photographer.

I think it is also a great philosophy in life; nobody knows how to have a “happy” life. But focus on just making every hour of your day enjoyable, and

make each day of your life as perfect as you can.

I also heard another analogy from a writer: try to make beautiful paragraphs, as “perfect pearls.” And when you’re writing, just try to “string together your pearls.” By the end, you will have a beautiful pearl necklace.

I try to write every article like it were my last. I try to improve upon each article a little better than the one that I wrote before it. For example in this article, you might have noticed that I have added a new “assignment” subsection behind every tip.

In photography, imagine every day is the last day of your life. How can you best make use of that one day to make a memorable image?

Mary Ellen Mark share this approach of focusing on one image at a time:

“I want every picture to be iconic (which is of course, impossible). I want to elevate the subject beyond their moment and circumstance. I think in terms of individual images rather than the

photo-essay. For me, photography is about making one great image, one great frame.”

**Assignment: What shot do you want to be remembered for?**

What is one photo you want to be remembered for? Almost all famous photographers are only remembered for 1 image. Cartier-Bresson is probably most remembered for his “man jumping over the puddle” shot. Nick Ut is remembered most for his “napalm girl” photo. Garry Winogrand is probably most famous for his photo of the interracial couple holding a chimpanzee. Richard Avedon is probably the most famous for his “beekeeper” shot.

Honestly, if you can just make 1 iconic shot in your lifetime before you die, you’ve done your job as a photographer.

For me, if I died with my laughing NYC lady as my best shot, I would have no regrets. Of course, I am still striving to make better images, 1 shot at a time.

So what is that 1 shot you want to be remembered for? Identify it, print it,

or make it the wallpaper on your laptop or smartphone. Then everyday strive to make a (slightly) better shot than it.

## 18. Don't let legacy paralyze you

I think it is paramount to study the masters who have come before us, to get a sense of what makes great photography.

However at the same time, what has happened to me in the past is that I become so paralyzed by the amazing legacy left behind these amazing photographers who have come before me, and I get depressed and discouraged. I think to myself, “Man, no matter how hard I try, I will never be able to make photos as good as them.”

However what I learned was this: gain inspiration from the masters, but use it as a positive fuel to inspire and drive you forward. A photography project should never depress you; it should always encourage you to try harder.

Ultimately at the end of the day, strive less to be the most original photog-

rapher out there. Inevitably, your photos will always be different; after all, you took the photo (not somebody else).

You might get criticized for trying to copy “photographer x” or “photographer y” — but fuck it. Just focus on trying to make a great photograph, and disregard all the other bullshit you might hear from others. Mark hits the spot with this quote below:

“You can't let legacy paralyze you. You must be your own person and contribute to the legacy. Don't worry bout style and separating yourself from others shooting the same subject matter too much; the pictures will happen by shooting from your own personal point of view. Worry more about getting a great picture.”

### **Assignment: Fast from images**

There is a lot of evidence that “intermittent fasting” is good for our health. Similarly, intermittent fasting from looking at the images of others is also good for our health and photography.

Try to go a month without looking at the images of others. This means unin-

stall all the social media and photo-sharing apps from your phone. Uninstall Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, Google+, or any other sharing platform you may use.

I recently did this assignment for myself, and it has totally cleansed my mind, and helped me be more satisfied and focused with my own photography. I care less of whether my photos are “cliches” or if they have been shot before (or not). Rather, I focus on putting my energy, heart, and soul into the images I craft.

Try it out, I can guarantee it will cleanse your mind, soul, and help you be more creative with your work.

## 19. Don't take 'no' for an answer

When it comes to street photography, I have often followed the motto: “It is better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission.” Or the other popular mantra: “Shoot first, ask questions later.”

Don't get me wrong, I still ask for permission when shooting “street por-

traits.” However even when I approach a stranger to take his/her portrait, I am generally quite pushy; I don't take “no” for an answer (at least not easily).

The way I approach it is this: I see someone interesting that I am dying to photograph, and I project my confidence and desire to photograph them. I do it with so much conviction that the idea of saying “no” doesn't even enter their mind. Also when I am approaching that stranger, I don't even think of the possibility of them saying “no.”

Sometimes my subject will indeed say “no” to being photographed. But I don't take a “no” as a “no”. Rather, I interpret a “no” as a “maybe”.

I then try to push harder to try to get a “yes.” I do this by saying, “But you look so great! I promise, it will just take one second. Can't I just get one shot?” Usually most people will then say “Oh okay, fine, just one shot!” Sometimes they will just flat out say “no” and walk away. Then you can't do anything in that situation, but move onto the next situation.



Mary Ellen Mark also shares the same philosophy:

“I’ve always thought you should never just take ‘no’ for an answer.”

In her workshop book, Mark tells a story of how she was doing a project on rural poverty, and went to a church in Kentucky. The minister said it was okay to photograph, but the next day changed his mind and kicked her out. But she waited for the church service to come out, and followed some people home. She went to a house and knocked on the door. The parents didn’t answer, but this boy came out with his kitten, which allowed her to get her shot.

On another project, Mark went to Falkland Road, the area where the least expensive prostitutes lived and worked. When deciding to pursue the project, she visited Falkland Road during the day until late in the evening. She describes her experience:

“At first it was really hard. I got garbage and slurs thrown at me, and my wallet was stolen. But that did not deter me. I went back everyday. I didn’t want the

women to think I had given up or was afraid. They had all seen me walking up and down the street for about a week and had started getting used to me. To do this kind of work, you need to be passionate about it, obsessed. You cannot give up easily.”

Morale of the story? Don’t give up so easily. Be persistent. Don’t take a “no” as a “no.”

**Assignment: Turn a “no” into a “yes”**

For this assignment, your assignment is to turn a “no” into a “yes”, when asking a stranger for a photo of them.

Intentionally go out and try to look for mean looking people, or people you expect to say “no.” Then if they say “no” to being photographed, try to convince them otherwise. Tell them that you are a photography student, and you need practice. Tell them that you can email them the photo afterwards, or bring them a print. Tell them that you won’t publically post it online. Be honest, truthful, and genuine. But try to get the “no” into a “yes.” Record what works well and what

doesn't in your "shooting diary" (any cheap notebook can do).

## 20. Have a genuine interest in your subjects

People are great bullshit detectors. Even a half-idiot can tell when you are trying to feign fake interest in them to get something out of them.

In the past, I have feigned fake interest in people to get an interesting shot from them. It made me feel dirty, unclean, and fake. Nowadays I've tried to reform my ways; I try to find people that I genuinely are interested in, and would actually want to get to know closer as a human being. The human connection comes first, then the photo comes second.

Mary Ellen Mark also shares the importance of being truly interested in your subject. instead of just faking it to get an interesting photo (that might get you a lot of "likes" on social media):

"Sometimes I watch photographers act in a way that's meant to draw out a subject and help them get pictures.

They're being friendly, asking questions, but it's because they want pictures.

There's no real interest; it's an act. I can see right through that and so can the subject."

### **Assignment: Buy a stranger a beer (or coffee)**

In the Magnum workshop I attended with David Alan Harvey, I was given the assignment to do a documentary project. I decided to visit a local bar in Provincetown, and would go there at night with some of my friends, have a beer, and get to know some of the locals at the bar.

I found interesting characters in the bar. I sat down, listened to their life story attentively for about an hour, and even bought them a few beers. This helped me build rapport with them.

Later on, I asked if I could make some photos of them. They had no problem, as I was able to make them trust me by me opening up to them as well. I didn't just ask them questions about their life, I also told them about my life; my difficulties, my insecurities, and my frustrations. The more you open yourself

up to your subjects, the more they will open themselves up to you.

So as an assignment, find a stranger at a cafe or a bar that you find interesting, and you want to learn about their life story. Approach them, ask them if the seat next to them is taken, and ask them about their life story. Offer to buy them a coffee or a beer (not to bribe them, but do it out of genuine generosity).

See where this leads you, and don't forget to make a few photos along the way.

## 21. Edit ruthlessly

In photography I try to follow a mantra: "Kill your babies." The concept is this: you become emotionally attached to your photographs like they were your own children. But in reality, your photos have no feelings, and you shouldn't let the memories of the backstories of the photos influence your judgement of them.

Therefore you need to learn how to ruthlessly edit your shots; to only keep

your best images. Remember, you're only as good as your weakest photo.

As an analogy, imagine a 100-ton wrecking ball suspended by metal chains in the air. All the chains are solid, steel-welded, and bullet-proof. But one chain is weak. What happens to the wrecking ball? You got it, it breaks (from that one weak link).

Morale of the story; don't have any weak links in your body of work, and edit ruthlessly. Mark explains:

"If you want to be a photographer, it's important to learn how to edit your work. It is one of the most difficult things to do. To be a great editor, you need to be ruthless about cutting picture that almost work, pictures that are not quite good enough because the expression is off or the moment is there. 'almost' and 'not quite' are not good enough. You have to separate yourself from the subject and only consider the picture on its own merits. Would you put the picture in a frame on the wall? Will that picture live on its own?"

It is extremely difficult to edit your own work, but always easier to edit the work of others. Start off by editing the work of your close friends and colleagues in street photography, and also ask them to edit your work:

“it can be easier to learn to edit by working with other people’s photographs—you’re not attached to the subject in the same way and have no memory of the moment. You only think about the finished picture.”

### **Assignment: Keep, or ditch?**

A lot of photographers upload images to social media, wanting some sort of feedback. The problem? They don’t ask for it.

So the next time you have a photo you aren’t sure about or want some honest critique on, upload it to your social media platform of choice with the caption: “Keep, or ditch?” And then you can follow-up and ask, “Why is that a keep, or why is that a ditch?”

Most photographers will be blunt and honest (if you ask for it).

Another tip: when you show your photos to somebody, ask them to “ruthlessly edit” your shots and to “kill your babies.” Once you’ve given them permission to turn off their filter, they will tell you how it is.

It is painful, I know— I get emotionally attached to my shots (especially my bad ones). But the only way to improve is to get honest and constructive critique on your work.

## **22. Don’t leave the scene too quickly**

We’ve all been there before; we see a good scene, but we feel nervous or afraid that the person will be annoyed or angry. We end up just taking 1-2 shots, and wanting to run the hell out of there.

Don’t worry, this is a common response. You are a human being after all. There is the “fight or flight” saying in psychology, when we feel afraid or confronted. The other two also include: “freeze or faint.”

Sometimes I have been approached by a stranger who got very angry at me,



and I would want to just run away, freeze (from the fright), or want to just pass out (faint).

But know that at the end of the day, you won't die from shooting street photography. The worst that will even happen is someone will yell at you, threaten to call the cops, or perhaps even shove you. But I have never heard any stories of people getting stabbed, seriously wounded, or killed for shooting a street photograph. In-fact, driving a car in a downtown city is probably more dangerous than shooting street photography.

So when you see a person or a scene that you find interesting, don't "flee" from the scene too quickly. Stick around longer than you think you should.

The moment you feel uncomfortable with the subject is the moment you need to stick around longer. I have a personal rule: whenever I feel uncomfortable being around my subject, I try to stick around 25% longer than I think I should. Generally this results in better photos (usually the photos I shoot towards the end of a session tend to be better than

the photos from the beginning). Mark shares her wisdom:

"It can be hard to break the ice and take the time needed to make a strong picture. Part of photographing involves staying with a subject or a person longer (don't leave the moment you start to get uncomfortable), and part of it is just having the nerve to go ahead and photograph. You have to give yourself permission to be there, to stay there."

### **Assignment: Make yourself uncomfortable**

Put yourself into a situation (on purpose) that will make you feel uncomfortable, and when you start feeling uncomfortable, stick around for 25% percent longer.

Some ideas you can make yourself uncomfortable:

1. Say hello to a stranger in an elevator and ask them how their day is going.
2. When entering an elevator, stand the opposite direction that everybody else is.

3. Do pushups in a random and public place (cafe, airport lounge, bar).
4. Tell the barista at a coffeeshop that you are having a bad day, and if they could cheer you up by giving you a free coffee.
5. Stand foot-to-foot with a friend or loved one, and make uninterrupted eye contact with them for one minute (with permission, of course).

The more comfortable you are with awkwardness, the more you can develop your confidence in street photography.

## 23. Don't chimp

There is something called “chimping” in digital photography, which is checking the LCD screen after you take each shot. Why is this bad? It fools you into thinking that you got the shot, when in reality, the next photo you take might be even better.

Turn off the LCD screen review if you shoot digital. If you're like me and have absolutely no self-control, just shoot film. Then you literally can't

chimp. I know some photographers who actually tape up the back of their LCD screen with gaffer's tape, because they can't control themselves.

Mark explains more in depth the downsides of “chimping”:

“With digital, one can just snap through a number of pictures, and some people tend to look at the back of their camera instead of the subject. When you can look at what you just shot on the camera, you might think you have the picture and stop too soon when in fact you didn't get it. You can't really tell if you've caught the right expression or subtle gestures or fine focus on the tiny back of the camera. Of course, you can't tell that with film either, but at least you're not looking at the back of the camera or stopping because you are confident that you got the picture.”

**Assignment: Don't look at your photos for a week (after shooting them)**

As a simple assignment, the next time you go out and shoot digitally,

you're not allowed to look at your photos until a week after you've shot them.

So turn off your LCD screen, and stay in the moment when you're shooting an interesting scene. Then let your photos sit and "marinate" for a week before looking at them.

This will help you be more objective when judging your images, and also help you be more present while shooting.

## 24. Never stop

Mary Ellen Mark shot into the very end, when she died at age 75. Her life, career, dedication to photography and teaching has been astounding. What kept her going all these years? She explains below, by showing her love for photography:

"How do you know if photography is what you should be doing? If you love it, if it's something that you can't get away from, if you're consumed by it if you're obsessed with it, then maybe it's something you should be doing. It's not an easy life. But if you love it, you may not be able to stop. Everytime I start a

new project or am assigned to photograph someone, I'm always terrified, thinking I'm going to fail. It always like jumping into cold water. But I find photography truly exciting and I continue to love it after so many years. I'm still fascinated by wonderful photographs. They don't have to be mine. When I look at really great work, I'm moved by it. It's still difficult and challenging for me to take a truly great picture. It's very easy to make a good picture, but a great picture is a different story. And that challenge keeps me going back out there. You're only as good as the next thing you do."

## Conclusion

For more inspiration from Mary Ellen Mark, make sure to see more of her work on her website, and also pick up some of her books, especially her workshop book published by Aperture: "Mary Ellen Mark on the Portrait and the Moment."

If there's one main lesson I've learned from Mary Ellen Mark it is this: to focus on one shot at a time, and not be overwhelmed by everything else. She

taught me to enjoy the photographic process and the importance of connecting with your subjects and treating them with love, compassion, and heart – – like every human being deserves to.

Rest in peace Mary, your legacy lives on!





35

## RENE BURRI

On October, 2014 Rene Burri passed away, at age 81. He had an incredible career of photography behind him, and produced many iconic images, which include those of Che, Picasso, and many other street photographs which perfectly combined geometry, story, and form.

About a year ago I got a copy of his color street photography, which was published in “Impossible Reminiscences”— and was deeply moved by his color work. I feel that his photographs have an emotional and cultural sensitivity to them. Rene’s work feels like a more empathetic Henri Cartier-Bresson.

I therefore felt inspired to write an article on Rene Burri. Unfortunately there isn't too many interviews he has conducted, but based on what I could find online— here are some lessons I have learned from him:

## 1. Cover things that nobody else is thinking about

In an interview Rene Burri was asked what advice he would give aspiring photographers. He gave the advice to “... go and cover things that nobody else is thinking about”. He also recommends us to be curious and to “put your nose into things”:

“Everybody now has a cell phone and can take snaps which is great – even children. But my advice for young photographers – what I think young photographers should do – is to go and cover things that nobody else is thinking about. Put your nose into things. Use the third eye of the camera and don't be completely dependent on Photoshop or the way other people want you to cast the world.”

Furthermore, Rene Burri shared the importance of discovering things by ourselves— to not take someone else's word for it. For us to live our experiences directly, not through others:

“Go and discover for yourself, because the fantastic thing about photography is that you are able to freeze a moment that can never come back.”

### Takeaway point:

As a photographer, you see the world uniquely and different from others. I think in photography it is easy to follow the crowd— to photograph what others have already photographed. This tends to be easy. When we are starting off in street photography, we cover the same subjects: street performers, homeless people, people walking by funny billboards, and people jumping over puddles.

But think about the things that you think about (that nobody else thinks about). Think about what makes your view of the world unique and different from others.

Even if you are interested in similar subject-matter as other photographers, or interested in pursuing a photography project that has already been done before (let's say you wanted to photograph the NYC Subway)—how can you do it differently from the way others have done it before?

For example, there were tons of photographers who shot street photography on the New York City Subway in black and white in the past (like Walker Evans), but Bruce Davidson was the first to do it in color in his “Subway” book. There were a lot of photographers who shot street photography with nice geometry (Andre Kertesz and Henri Cartier-Bresson), but Alex Webb changed it up by shooting in color and also added more complexity to the geometric compositions he made.

A million photographers have photographed “America” and chose it as their main subject matter—but if you decide to pursue the topic, how can you do it differently from others?

To take it a step further—what are some other issues, concerns, or problems you see in society that you wish to cover (that nobody else is thinking about?)

Also realize if you live in a small town or city, you have a greater opportunity in making a unique body of work.

Continue to follow your curiosity, and don't be afraid to “put your nose into things”. If there is anything that piques your interest, go for it. If you're shooting in the streets and you see an interesting store, go inside. Talk to the people you meet inside.

If you see someone interesting at the bus stop, perhaps go over to them and have a chat with them and ask if you can shoot their portrait.

Always stay curious, and keep searching and photographing.

## 2. Look at your images upside-down

If you look at the work of Rene Burri, you will be blown away by the way he composes his images. He captures the



beauty of humanity as well as incorporating geometry, architecture, and form.

How did he learn to compose his photographs so well? A practical tip: he learned from Henri Cartier-Bresson to look at his contact-sheets (images) upside-down. What does this do? It makes you better judge the compositions of your images, because you are no longer distracted by what is happening in the frame—you focus on the shapes and geometry of your images.

In an interview, Rene Burri tells the story of how Henri Cartier-Bresson used to look at his photos upside-down, and how he learned an important lesson:

“Henri Cartier-Bresson aggravated me very often. Why? He would look through your contacts upside down! He did this because he always wanted to see the composition. And I used to say, ‘I’m going to strangle you one day! Isn’t it interesting looking at my pictures?’ But I learned so much from that and the moment came when I too pulled the picture over the separations slip on the contact

sheet and tried to look at it in the same way.

### **Takeaway point:**

Composition isn’t the most important thing in a photograph—the emotional content and impact of an image is the most important thing.

But then again, if your photograph doesn’t have strong composition, form, and geometry—it won’t hold the interest of your viewer as long. And not only that, but having a strong composition helps add balance, beauty, and focus to your images.

Always try your best to consider composition when you’re shooting in the streets. See how you can better incorporate leading lines, contrast (figure-to-ground), diagonals, triangles, or curves in your scene. You can also learn more about [composition](#) here.

If you have a hard time seeing your compositions when you’re out shooting, judge the composition of your images afterwards and edit (choose) your images based on these factors.



A good way to judge your compositions is to flip your images upside-down. You can do this easily in Lightroom. Also you can make your images really small thumbnails, which helps you see the contrast and geometric forms in your images easier.

Another tip you can do (this is what Henri Cartier-Bresson did) is print out your photos and draw lines over your images to judge your compositions. Cartier-Bresson did it with tracing paper. You can even do it in Photoshop (if you don't have a printer handy).

So at the end of the day, always think of composition and how you can use it to better enhance the content and emotions in your images.

### 3. Kill your mentor

Henri Cartier-Bresson was the mentor of Rene Burri for a long time. But after a while, it is good to “kill your mentor” — meaning, you disregard their advice after a while.

Of course during your “apprenticeship” phase it is good to soak in and

learn everything from your mentor. But once you've reached a certain point, it is good to “graduate” from your mentor, and continue along your own path and to cultivate your own ideas and philosophies.

Rene Burri shares the story when he photographed his famous “Men on a rooftop” image— and he shot it with a telephoto lens (instead of shooting with a 35mm–90mm lens as Henri Cartier-Bresson told everyone to do):

“In those days Henri Cartier-Bresson limited us to lenses from 35 mm to 90 mm. When I showed him the photos he said, ‘brilliant René!’ I went outside and shouted ‘Hah!’ He heard me and said ‘what was that?’ I said, ‘nothing, never mind’. The lens I used was 180 mm – I never told him! At that point I broke loose from my mentor. I killed my mentor!”

#### **Takeaway point:**

When you are starting off as an apprentice in photography, I think it is important to listen to your mentor and to

follow them and imitate them as much as you possibly can.

In photography if you don't have direct access to a mentor, just find a master photographer whose work you admire and try to imitate them as much as possible.

However at a certain point, you will start to have your own world-views and opinions about photography. At that point it is important to break loose from the “rules” and “guidelines” given to you by your master— and to “kill your mentor”. Then you can really spread your wings, and go down your own unique life path in photography.

## 4. Provoke the memories or fantasies of your viewer

The best photographs are the ones that are engaging and open-ended. These photographs help connect the viewer with your images in a more personal way.

The most boring photographs tend to be the ones in which you look at them, see what they are, and move on.

When Rene Burri talked about his book: “Impossible Reminiscences” he talked about how he intentionally left out the captions next to his photographs to allow the viewer to challenge themselves by making up their own little stories, and to “work with their own memory or fantasy” to provoke some sort of emotion. He explains more below:

“[In Impossible Reminiscences] you have to look at the pictures, there are no captions so you have to make up your own mind, you have to look and not just read and know that it's Chicago 1979. It's a little tougher for the viewer this way, then in the back I have written text about each picture. Each picture has a story, when people are looking at it they work with their own memory or fantasy or whatever it provokes.”

### Takeaway point:

In photography there are generally two types of images: “Open” photos and “closed” photos.

“Open” photos are open-ended. You can come up with your own interpretation of the images. You can come up

with your own stories of what is going on in the image. You use your own personal history, your own memories, and fantasize what is happening.

“Closed” photos are closed to interpretation. You simply show the viewer what you saw, and that is it. There is no room for improvisation to the viewer, and the images are generally forgettable.

See how you can create more open-ended street photographs. You can do this by leaving out important information, for obscuring faces, for obscuring eyes, and by creating an image that has an interesting tension between the subject and the environment.

## 5. Be influenced by literature

I think the best photographers are the ones whom are able to gain inspiration and influence from outside fields.

For Rene Burri, he said that his biggest inspiration in photography came from literature. He explains below:

“The most important influence for me is literature. As a kid I would read

stories about the red Indians and from once I read the text it was already illustrated in my mind and I saw the characters like a film. So I have always read great literature. One of the greatest chaps is certainly Shakespeare. I was once an extra in the theater and I would stand in the corner, or get killed or bring in a letter without saying a word so I could listen to the whole script and Shakespeare is fantastic.”

Once I learned this about Rene Burri— I can definitely see how literature has influenced and informed his photography. The majority of Rene Burri’s images are very cinematic. They are open-ended and are set in interesting backdrops. They almost look and feel cinematic. There are lots of interesting characters in his images, and there are enough blanks for the viewer to make up his/her own stories.

### Takeaway point:

Think of how you can gain inspiration for your street photography in fields outside of photography. That can include literature, music, film, dance, psychol-

ogy, sociology, architecture, political science, or whatever.

See how your outside influences color your existence and perception of the world, and see how you can either consciously or subconsciously apply this to your photography.

For example, I studied sociology as an undergraduate at UCLA, and now when I'm out shooting on the streets, I try to color my experiences seeing it through a sociological lens. I try to make street photographs that serve as social commentary and critique. Not only that, but I am a natural extrovert, so I love to approach strangers and talk with them and hear about their stories (while shooting "street portraits" of them).

So what are these outside interests for you? Perhaps write them down on a piece of paper or in a journal, and see how you can combine your interest with your photography.

## 6. Follow your curiosity

Out of all the people who I have met who are over 70 years old and in great

health, they all have one thing in common: they are curious.

Curiosity is one of the most beautiful things in life. Curiosity gives you a reason to explore. Curiosity gives you a reason to wake up in the morning. Curiosity keeps you moving forward.

There is no better trait for a street photographer than being curious (and sometimes slightly nosey). No amount of cameras or equipment will help you feel more "curious." Rather, you should simply see your camera as an outlet for your curiosity.

Use your curiosity and channel it with your camera. Buying a new camera won't make you more curious.

Rene Burri shares the importance of photography to channel his curiosity:

"The camera is like my third eye it is an outlet for my curiosity. I was always curious as a kid and you have to use your senses. I wanted to meet the big giants of the 19th century, a sculptor, an artist, a dictator a musician and then I would find the pictures would just happen. You don't capture a picture you are



responding. I respond to situations and I am very fast – fastest gun in the West – even at my age.

### **Takeaway point:**

So how do you cultivate more curiosity in your life and photography?

Personally I try to do this: go to an unfamiliar area, and simply bring along my camera. I start off trying to just explore the area and find interesting things. I then have my camera with me, and I simply photograph what I find interesting. I go down streets that I am curious about— which look interesting. I approach interesting looking people who I might be curious to learn more about.

I am also curious about learning more about other photographers, which is the fuel, which drives this “Learn from the masters” series. I feel the power of the Internet is that it allows us to channel our curiosity in a powerful way. In what other century could we have access to unlimited information, regardless of where we are?

So if you ever find the work of a photographer who you are curious of learn-

ing more about, buy their books, read interviews with them online, and visit their exhibitions.

If there is a certain photography project or experiment you want to try out— rather than just asking other people for their opinion, simply follow your curiosity and try it yourself.

As long as you stay curious your entire life, you will never die (creatively).

## **Conclusion**

To recap, here are the 6 lessons I’ve learned from Rene Burri:

1. Cover things that nobody else is thinking about
2. Look at your images upside-down
3. Kill your mentor
4. Provoke the memories or fantasies of your viewer
5. Be influenced by literature
6. Follow your curiosity

I think the common thread which holds all these lessons together is this:

be curious and don't take life for granted.

Explore the world first-handedly by yourself, and seek what you are personally interested in. Make images that are emotionally impactful for you, and use strong composition to hold it all together. Try to provoke stories in the mind of your viewer, and always stay photographing.

Rene Burri had a beautiful photographic life, and passed away at 81— and kept photographing until the very end.

How can we live our lives, make beautiful images, and not regret the chance to capture and see the world? Let's go out and shoot.

# RICHARD AVEDON

36



Richard Avedon isn't a street photographer—nor did he consider himself one. However, he did shoot street photography in his life, in Italy, New York, Santa Monica, and more.

I was particularly drawn to Richard Avedon because I have a fascination with portraiture and the human face. Even for my personal street photography, I might consider it “street portraiture.”

I have recently binged on everything I could about Avedon—and have gained a ton of inspiration from his photography, his love of life, and his personal philosophies. I hope you enjoy these lessons as much as I did.

## 1. Your photos are more about yourself (than your subject)

One of the touchy subjects when photographing a subject is to capture their “authentic” self—and not impose so much of yourself onto them.

However Avedon took the opposite approach. He openly acknowledged that

as a photographer—it was he who was in control. His vision of an artist was more important than how his subjects saw themselves.

In a sense—I think Avedon was striving to capture what he thought was the “true” authenticity of his subjects.

Avedon starts off by sharing that most people have things about themselves that they don't want to show:

“I am not necessarily interested in the secret of a person. The fact that there are qualities a subject doesn't want me to observe is an interesting fact (interesting enough for a portrait). It then becomes a portrait of someone who doesn't want something to show. That is interesting.”

Avedon elaborates on capturing the “truth” behind a person:

“There is no truth in photography. There is no truth about anyone's person. My portraits are much more about me than they are about the people I photograph. I used to think that it was a collaboration, that it was something that happened as a result of what the subject



wanted to project and what the photographer wanted to photograph. I no longer think it is that at all.”

“It is complicated and unresolved in my mind because I believe in moral responsibility of all kinds. I feel I have no right to say, “This is the way it is” and in another way, I can’t help myself. It is for me the only way to breathe and to live. I could say it is the nature of art to make such assumptions but there has never been an art like photography before. You cannot make a photograph of a person without that person’s presence, and that very presence implies truth. A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is truth.”

He continues by sharing the control he has over the subject (and scene):

“The photographer has complete control, the issue is a moral one and it is complicated. Everyone comes to the camera with a certain expectation and the de-

ception on my part is that I might appear to be indeed part of their expectation. If you are painted or written about, you can say: but that’s not me, that’s Bacon, that’s Soutine; that’s not me, that’s Celine.”

In another interview, Avedon continues sharing his thoughts on the conundrum of showing “truth” in a portrait:

“It is complicated and unresolved in my mind because I believe in moral responsibility of all kinds. I feel I have no right to say, “This is the way it is” and in another way, I can’t help myself. It is for me the only way to breathe and to live. I could say it is the nature of art to make such assumptions but there has never been an art like photography before. You cannot make a photograph of a person without that person’s presence, and that very presence implies truth.”

The part below is pure gold:

“A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photo-

graphs are accurate. None of them is truth.”

In another interview, Avedon elaborates on the distinction between “accuracy” and “truth”— and how subjective it is:

“[Photographs are] representations of what’s there. “This jacket is cut this way”; that’s very accurate. This really did happen in front of this camera at this... at a given moment. But it’s no more truth... the given moment is part of what I’m feeling that day, what they’re feeling that day, and what I want to accomplish as an artist.”

Avedon also shares his thoughts on how cameras can lie, and how photographers say what they want to say (depending on when they hit the shutter):

“Camera lies all the time. It’s all it does is lie, because when you choose this moment instead of this moment, when you... the moment you’ve made a choice, you’re lying about something larger. Lying is an ugly word. I don’t mean lying. But any artist picks and chooses what they want to paint or write

about or say. Photographers are the same.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I think when we’re shooting on the streets— we are painting our subjective views of the world with our camera (rather than an ‘objective’ view of the world). I think in street photography— we have less of an ethical duty (than documentary or photojournalists) to show the “truth.”

I think ultimately the photos we take (as Avedon said) — are more of a reflection who we are (than the subjects).

For example, I am personally drawn to people who look depressed, lost, and stuck in solitude. Even though I am a generally optimistic person— my studies in sociology have trained me to be a social critic. I tend to see a lot of negativity in everyday life.

However on the flip side, I know a lot of photographers whose photos are very happy. For example, Kurt Kamka has photos of people all (or mostly) smiling. He is one of the happy guys I have

met, and his positivity and love shows through his photos.

So know that although photography is a form of communication and a two-way street between you and your subject, you still have the ultimate control as a photographer.

Make your photos personal, and realize that the photos you take are more of a self-portrait of yourself (than anything else).

## 2. On controversy

Richard Avedon's photos have always been controversial. Many of his critics called him cold, calculating, and very unjust towards his subjects. Many of his subjects also don't like the way they end up being portrayed.

### **a) Photographing people looking their best (or not):**

In the below excerpt, Avedon shares his thoughts that everyone is always trying to look their best (which isn't always accurate). Furthermore, he doesn't take these complaints too seriously:

JEFFREY BROWN: Not everyone is always happy with the results. Avedon took this portrait of the renowned literary critic Harold Bloom.

RICHARD AVEDON: And he said, "I hate that picture. It doesn't look like me." Well, for a very smart man to think that a picture is supposed to look like him... would you go to Modigliani and say, "I want it to look like me?"

JEFFREY BROWN: But, see, we think of photography differently, don't we? We take pictures of each other all the time, and we want it... we expect it to look like us.

RICHARD AVEDON: How many pictures have you torn up because you hate them? What ends up in your scrapbook? The pictures where you look like a good guy and a good family man, and the children look adorable— and they're screaming the next minute. I've never seen a family album of screaming people.

JEFFREY BROWN: You do have, though, people say, "I don't like this; this isn't me."

RICHARD AVEDON: Pretty general response.

JEFFREY BROWN: It doesn't worry you?

RICHARD AVEDON: No. Worry? I mean, it's a picture, for God's sake.

**b) On manipulating his subjects:**

Furthermore, there have been times when Avedon would purposefully manipulate his subjects to get a photo he wanted— which he felt was more “authentic”:

“There are times when it is necessary to trick the sitter into what you want. but never for the sake of the trick.”

For example when he took this famous photo of the Windsors:

“I would go every night to the casino in Nice— and I watched them. I watched the way she was with him, the way they were with people. I wanted to bring out the loss of humanity in them. Not the meanness and there was a lot of meanness and narcissism. So I knew exactly what I had to try to accomplish dur-

ing the sitting. I photographed them in their hotel suite in New York. And they had their pug dogs, and they had their ‘ladies home journal’ faces on— they were posing, royally. And nothing (if not for a second)— anything I had observed when they were gambling, presented to me. And I did a kind of ‘living by your wits’. I knew they loved their dogs. and I told them, ‘If i seem a bit hesitant or disturbed— its because my taxi ran over a dog.’ and both of their faces dropped, because they loved dogs, a lot more than they loved Jews. The expression on their faces is true— because you can't evoke an expression that doesn't come out of the life of a person.”

**c) On capturing people when they feel vulnerable:**

In his greatest project (in my opinion) “In the American West” — he photographed a girl named Sandra Bennett (who ended up being on the front cover of the book). She is beautiful with freckles, but pensive— and looks a bit disconcerted.



Years after he took the photo, Avedon and some reporters tracked down his past subjects. Sandra (now an adult) told the reporter:

“The picture was awful— it was your worst hair day, clothes day, the worst photo of your life you want to bury. I was mortified. I was a senior in high school, I was homecoming queen, and I had this photo coming to haunt me.”

Sandra then confronts Avedon face-to-face and says the following:

“What was very difficult for me— was that you caught me vulnerable here. But also bare-bottom, very exposed – where I tried to cover everything.”

Avedon then says in response to Sandra how (ultimately) he is the one who had control over the situation:

“You can’t say you weren’t there in the picture you have to accept— you are there, and the control is with the photographer. I have the control in the end, and I can’t do it alone. You have a lot to say— which by that I mean the way you look, confront the camera, all the experi-

ence whether you are trusting or not. In the end, I can tear the pictures up— choose the smiling or serious one. Or exaggerate something through the printing. It is lending yourself to artists.”

#### **d) Photography vs reportage/ journalism:**

Avedon also had some interesting views when it comes to photography — being more like fiction (than anything else):

“I think the larger issue is that photography is not reportage, it is not journalism— it is fiction. When I go to the west and do the working class (it is more about the working class than the west)—it is my view. Like John Wayne is Hollywood’s view. So it means my idea of the working class is a fiction.”

#### **e) On photography being invasive:**

Avedon shares some thoughts on his work being invasive— and how important it is to make “disturbing” photos that emotionally effect the viewer:

“It’s so strange to me that anyone would ever think that a work of art shouldn’t be disturbing or shouldn’t be invasive. That’s the property of work—that’s the arena of a work of art. It is to disturb, it to make you think, to make you feel. If my work didn’t disturb from time to time, it would be a failure in my own eyes. It’s meant to disturb—in a positive way.”

**Takeaway point:**

I don’t think any artist who wants to achieve greatness can do so without pissing some people off.

But as a photographer—who are you ultimately trying to please? Yourself, or your critics?

Who cares about these critics who may hate on your work. They are too busy sitting on their laptops, and criticizing the work of others (because they are jealous, or just dissatisfied with their own work).

Avedon had tons of criticism in his work in his lifetime. But he ignored it. He was constantly furious with doing his work—creating new work, breaking out

of the little boxes that critics were trying to put him in—combining portraiture, commercial photography, documentary, and fine art.

I think if Avedon listened to all the criticisms he received during his life (and just stopped photographing)—we wouldn’t have this incredible body of work that he left behind.

So as a takeaway point for you—follow your own heart. Follow your gut. Follow your own instincts. Don’t give a flying fuck what others think about your work—or how they will criticize your work.

As Andy Warhol once said—while they are busy judging your work (whether it is good or not)—just keep creating more work and creatively flourish.

Your photos will never be subjective, and appreciated 100% by your audience.

There is a lovely quote on criticism that my good friend Greg Marsden shared with me:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.” – Theodore Roosevelt

### 3. On his work ethic

There are few photographers who were as obsessive, hard-working, and perfectionist as Avedon was.

**a) Importance of working hard (everyday):**

Avedon shares a bit of his personal background, and his creative routine:

“There’s a biological factor if you can do it, or who has the ability to do it. A lot of people want to be photographers, and it wasn’t a master plan [for me]. I just loved to get up every morning [I still do]. In the morning, I’m ready to work at 9am. It’s a gift that was given to me. Maybe I was a shrimp, maybe in the locker room I was a failure, maybe I don’t know what it was. But I had a bedroom, and the kids were playing on the streets, and i would draw the shade– and it was a little split, and i could see out of them. I don’t know where it comes from, I don’t think anybody does. But at some moment, it comes together if you’re lucky.”

Avedon also shares the importance of working hard everyday at your creative work:

“If you do work everyday at your life, you get better at it. The trick is: to keep it alive. To keep it crucial.”

**b) On putting pressure on yourself:**

Avedon also harnesses some of the fear he has — to keep his wits sharp and to make great photos:

“There’s nothing hard about photography. I get scared, and I’m longing for the fear to come back. I feel the fear when i have the camera in hand. I’m scared like when an athlete is scared, you’re going for the high jump. You can blow it. That’s what taking a photo is.”

**c) The sacrifice he paid with his family:**

Unfortunately, Avedon’s workaholism did pay a price with his family:

“I think when you work as I’ve worked– theres something I didn’t do something successfully, which is my family life. Marriage. I don’t think you can do it all.”

However Avedon says on the other hand— he has no regrets:

“I think if you pay that price, that’s not a terrible price. There is no guarantee any family life is going to work out.”

**d) Disregarding compliments:**

One of the greatest strengths of Avedon was that he didn’t care much for compliments. I think his comes from his tough training, when he worked at Harper’s Bazaar with Brodovich (a man with very high standards):

“Brodovich was the father. He was very much like my father. Very withdrawn and disciplined and very strong values. He gave no compliments, which killed a lot of young photographers—they couldn’t take it. I didn’t believe compliments. I never believed compliments even until this day. So I responded to the kind of toughness plus the aristocracy and standards.” - Richard Avedon

While working at Harper’s Bazaar, the 3 closest people he worked with were all perfectionists. He said the following:

“The addiction of perfection of those three people — and that’s why those pictures hold.” - Richard Avedon

**e) On never being satisfied:**

Even with one of Avedon’s most famous elephant photo— he considers the photo a failure (for a small detail):



“I don’t know why I didn’t have the sash blowing out to the left to complete the line of the picture. The picture will always be a failure to me, because the sash isn’t out there.” - Richard Avedon

**f) On shooting until the end:**

It is incredible— Avedon shot and worked everyday until he died at 81 (while on assignment).

Avedon reflects on the work he creates:

“The thing that has happened to me lately is the sense I didn’t take the photos. That they have a life of their own. It’s endlessly mysterious to me.”

When Avedon was still alive— he also shared how he wanted to keep working, and producing new work (even as an older man):

“I’ve become my own widow. I’m in charge of my archives, I create books— I create exhibitions. but it will be over. And when it’s over then I’ll read and rest, and begin to become a photographer again— I hope. My god in the question of being an older man with passion is

Matisse, because when one would have thought he had done everything— he got into bed and re-created color and did the most beautiful work of his life, and most modern work of his life. If i can be re-born for the few years that are left to me— it would make me very happy. And if not, I’ll either really go with full force or ill stop.”

**g) Don’t feel you need to prove yourself to others:**

Another golden nugget of wisdom (applies not just to photography, but life): don’t feel like you need to prove yourself to others. Avedon shares below:

“What I like about being older is that I don’t feel I need to prove myself anymore. Like an onion peeling, I don’t go to dinner parties [been there], I don’t work for magazines anymore. What’s the unnecessary? What’s important? Doing the work making the work better. Doing the job better than I did before, and the few close friends in the kitchen you get together with. We sit down and talk, really. There is no turning to the left and

right— and asking people about random talk.”

#### **h) On thinking of your own mortality:**

I think there is nothing better to keep you motivated (than the thought of death).

For example, in 1974, he fell dangerously ill to inflammation of heart, and kept working. The second attack was life threatening. At around the time (when he was 60) — he started his “In the American” west series (which lasted 5 years). He was motivated much by his older age, and I think it is that thought of death which really propelled him to create this incredible body of work.

Avedon shares:

“I think my best work as a body of work is ‘In the American West’. I did the western photos when I was around 60, and I think that — being 60 is different from 30,40,50— you begin to get a sense of your own mortality. I think my aging, the sort of stepping into the last big chapters— was embedded in this body of work. As deeper connection to those peo-

ple who were strangers. Because of my condition of that time.”

Of course, the work wasn’t without controversy. Critics loved it or hated it. Avedon was charged for exploiting his subjects, and falsifying the west. Avedon shares:

“The book was called ‘In the American West’ — which really set off an enormous, hostile response to the book. What was an east coast successful photographer doing photographing working class people in the west? Was this really the west, and what was he doing?”

#### **Takeaway point:**

I think “talent” is overrated in photography and the arts. Based on all the great creatives I have studied— it is their hard work ethic which ties them all together.

Avedon was never satisfied with his work. He wanted to always push it to the next level. He was incredibly self-centered in his work, because he believed in it. He disregarded what others thought of him and his photos— he had this fire in his heart that kept him alive.

He photographed until he died at 81. Now that is a life of photography I would love to emulate.

Also as a big takeaway point: realize that you have nothing to prove with your photography. You don't need to impress anybody — but yourself.

Focus on constantly improving your work, and put in the hours. Disregard everything else.

## 4. On how he photographed

To hear about Richard Avedon's approach and signature style is fascinating.

One of the things Avedon is most famous for is taking portraits on an 8×10 camera, with a totally white background, and black borders— with the human face as his main subject.

Paul Roth, who is the senior curator and director of photography and media arts, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C said the following about Avedon:

“In 1969, the tools Avedon used were the same tools he had used before. He photographed with a big 8×10 view

camera, which was already kind of anachronistic at that time. It's the kind of camera we associated more with Nadar in the 19th century. He photographed people against a white backdrop so that there was no contextualizing, no environment for us to locate or place them. He had done that before, but in 1969, he made it into a fetish. He would show the black border, the edges of his negative. He contrasted the white background against the black edge of the film in a way that was very radical. It made the pictures very tough and aggressive. Furthermore, bodies would be sliced, feet cut off at the ankles, heads cut off at the crown. He didn't use flattering, chiaroscuro lighting. And he was fascinated by age. He had this wonderful expression called avalanche. He would describe seeing age descending on a person like an avalanche, covering them over. So Avedon took great care to photograph the folds of skin, wrinkles, and moles, all with a very sharp lens. And that was also very radical. Traditionally portraiture idealizes its subject—and gives some sense of their clothes and surroundings. Avedon

don dispensed with all of that. It's hard to overemphasize how radical that kind of portraiture was at the time."

**a) Focus on subtraction (saying no):**

I find it fascinating that Avedon used negation as a big part of his photography. Addition via subtraction. Avedon shares:

"I work out of a series of "no's". No to distracting elements in a photograph. No to exquisite light. No to certain subject matter, no to certain people (I can't express myself through). No to props. All these no's force me into the yes. And I have no help. I have a white background, the person I'm interested in, and the thing that happens between us."

**b) On choosing faces:**

Nobody has photographed the human face more (or as well) as Richard Avedon. How does Avedon find an interesting face to photograph? A past assistant shares a story when working with Avedon:

"The very first weekend we worked together, we were walking through a stadium for the Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas, and Dick said to me, "Which face would you choose?" I thought to myself, "You're the famous photographer. You tell me," but what he was doing was putting me on the spot right from the beginning to force me to look and to learn."

The key: making a photograph that will last for many years:

"Whether he was considering a cowboy or a coal miner, Avedon would always ask, "Is that face going to hold the wall and be as riveting six years from now?" When you take a person out of context — out of the mine, out from beside the road with a vast expanse of Oklahoma prairie behind him — then you really have to have a face that's going to say something."

**c) Harnessing your own emotions:**

Avedon was also quite in-touch with his emotional side in his photography:



“To be an artist— to be a photographer, you need to nurture the thing that most people discard. You have to keep them alive in order to tap them. It’s been important my entire life not to let go of anything which most people would throw in the ashcan. I need to be in touch with my fragility, the man in me, the woman in me. The child in me. The grandfather in me. all these things, they need to be kept alive.”

Avedon also harnesses fear into his work:

“I think I do photograph what I’m afraid of. Things I couldn’t deal with the camera. My father’s death, madness, when I was young—women. I didn’t understand. It gave me a sort of control over the situation which was legitimate, because good work was being done. And by photographing what I was afraid of, or what I was interested in— I laid the ghost. It got out of my system and onto the page.”

He also shares his thoughts on death:

JEFFREY BROWN: You wrote in the catalog essay that “Photography is a sad art.” Why?

RICHARD AVEDON: It’s something about a minute later, it’s gone, it’s dead, and the only thing that lives on the wall is the photograph. And do you realize that in this exhibition, almost everyone is dead? They’re all gone, and their work lives, and the photograph lives. They never get old in a photograph. So it’s sad in that way.

Avedon even photographed his father, who was losing his battle with cancer (on the brink of death). When asked why he made the series, Avedon said:

“It gave me a sort of control over the situation. I got it out of my system and onto the page.”

Avedon was also able to touch into the darker emotions behind many of the famous faces he photographed:

“People — running from unhappiness, hiding in power — are locked within their reputations, ambitions, beliefs.”

#### **d) On dancing with your subjects:**

Much of Avedon's work has great energy and vitality to it. For his early fashion work, he would often dance with his models with his Rolleiflex— and his subjects would respond by dancing as well. This led to a body of work which had energy, vibrance, and edginess.

Avedon shares his thoughts on capturing movement:

“One of the most powerful parts of movement is that it is a constant surprise. You don't know what the fabric is going to do, what the hair is going to do, you can control it to a certain degree—and there is a surprise. And you realize when I photograph movement, I have to anticipate that by the time it has happened— otherwise it's too late to photograph it. So there's this terrific interchange between the moving figure and myself that is like dancing.”

Even when photographing his subjects, he would tell them to jump, and to “jump higher!”

#### **e) On photographing the face:**

Avedon is most famous for photographing fascinating faces. This is what he describes his approach in photographing faces:

“Different animals have different kinds of eyes for accomplishing what their goals are. An eagle has a literal zoom lens in the eye so that from way above he can zoom down into the rodent he is going to attack. And in the way I think my eyes always went to what I was interested in— the face.”

He elaborates on how he analyzes faces:

“I think I'm sort of a reader— I used to love handwriting analysis. But that's nothing compared to reading a face. I think if I had decided to go into the fortune telling business, I would have probably been very good. What happens to me in work— I look for something in a face, and I look for contradiction, complexity. Something that are contradictory and yet connected.”

**Takeaway point:**

What I learned from Avedon is the importance of capturing soul, energy, and emotions from your subjects.

Being interested in shooting portraits of strangers in the streets, I always try to channel my “inner-Avedon” — to try to quickly analyze a person, and try to create an image I have of them in my mind— which I think shows a part of them which is vulnerable or emotional.

I think there is nothing more difficult than photographing the human face. There is so much expression, intricacies, and subtleties in the human face.

Ultimately— I think Avedon’s most memorable images are the ones that are a bit unsettling, emotional, and controversial. Don’t shy away from controversy— just follow your own heart when photographing your subjects.

## 5. You have an incredible responsibility

In an excellent documentary on Richard Avedon called “Darkness and Light”, Richard Avedon concludes with these words of wisdom to photographers:

“We live in a world of images. Images have replaced language — and reading. The responsibility to your role in history in whatever is going to happen to human beings— you are the new writers. And we can no longer be sloppy about what we do with a camera. You have this weapon in your hands which is a camera, and it is going to teach the world, it’s going to record the world, it is going to explain to the world and to the children that are coming — what this world was like. It is an incredible responsibility.” - Richard Avedon

## Conclusion

Avedon is a man who lived with conviction and dedicated his entire, soul, and being into his photography and his work. There are few photographers who have had the work ethic of Avedon— and created such a diverse body of work.

Although Avedon is mostly known as an editorial, advertising, and portrait photographer— I still think his “In the American West” is one of the most personal and insightful portrait series done in America. And they were done mostly

of strangers in the streets he met (very similar to shooting ‘street portraits’).

If you are interested in street portraits—devour the work of Avedon. Look at the way he captures the emotion and soul of his subjects. How he embraces ambiguity and complexity in the faces he captures. How he interacts with his subjects, and projects his own feelings onto his subjects.

And lastly, don’t be afraid of controversy. Follow your own heart, and photograph by channeling your own emotions. Make your photos personal—and never stop working.





37

## RICHARD KALVAR

Richard Kalvar is one of the contemporary masters in street photograph, and also a member of Magnum. I have always loved his quirky and observant street photographs, and am quite pleased how active he is— especially on Facebook and the Magnum Blog. I gained a lot of insight about his work and street photography through his various interviews online. Read more to gain inspiration from him!

### Richard Kalvar's Background

**How he got started:**

Richard Kalvar shares how he got started in photography:

“When I was a kid, particularly as I got a little older, I had a creative streak, which I didn’t really know how to channel. It mostly came out in screwing around with my friends when I was in high school and college. Then I dropped out of college, got the photography job, and learned about photography almost in spite of myself, because it was clear that I wasn’t going to be a fashion photographer. I wasn’t really interested in it.”

Kalvar shares how getting guided by mentors helped him in the beginning:

“I had the good fortune to be hired by a fashion photographer who had a broad knowledge of photography and was a smart guy and who introduced me to things outside of fashion photography. He showed me books. His name is Jerome Ducrot. He was a very good photographer. I left him after about a year. We had a big fight before I left, and then there was a big reconciliation, and when

I left, he gave me a camera as a going away present.”

One of the biggest things that got Richard Kalvar started on his personal work was to travel through Europe on his own:

“I decided to go to Europe, just to travel around. It was while traveling around Europe, where the goal wasn’t to take pictures but just to have an adventure, that I started taking a few pictures, and by the end of the trip, I knew – I could feel that I was doing something with photography, and that this is what I wanted to do.”

He shares how the trip transformed his photography:

“I didn’t see any of the pictures I took. I saved my film, I sent some to my father, but I didn’t see it for almost a year. But I knew. I knew at the end of the trip that this was for me – that I’d found something that corresponded to the screwing around I used to do with my friends – I could express myself, express a way of seeing, a way of being, through photography.”

## Career in photography?

Richard Kalvar shares how he transitioned into building a career in photography. He starts off from his humble beginnings:

“Back in the late sixties, times were different. Vietnam, the hippy era. A lot of people questioning things and so on. It was also a period in which the country was pretty rich. I came from a relatively poor family, but you didn’t worry about making a living. You could always get a job; drive a taxi, work in a restaurant. An awful lot of people, including myself, were more open to marginal activities.”

Photojournalism was the last thing on his mind, and he focused on expressing himself through his photography (than his career):

“I wasn’t really thinking about making a living as a photojournalist, I was thinking about being a photographer. From the very beginning, once I started to do it in a serious way, I was less concerned about a career in photography, working for magazines than in using it to express myself. I was fortunate

enough to live in that brief period when you didn’t have to have a lot of money, and you didn’t have to worry about having a lot of money.”

Kalvar shares how he developed his interest in photography:

“I was able to develop what I was interested in, without having to worry about clients. Although I did get into the marketplace quickly, to make a living, since I didn’t want to drive a taxi or wait on tables, so I thought well okay, I’ll try to get some work in photography.

## Joining Magnum:

Kalvar shares how he got into Magnum:

“In the late 60s when I was in NY, I showed my work around. I went to see photographers like Andre Kertesz and Lisette Model and also a few people at Magnum. I left a portfolio up there. The people who reacted most were Elliott Erwitt and Charles Harbutt. When I applied in 1975, after leaving my old agency, Viva, it helped that I knew these people at Magnum.”



He also shares his first gigs, to just make a living:

“When I started out in France, I worked for various magazines. Women’s magazines, things about knitting, anything to make a living. I was taking my own pictures, working for whoever would pay me, and occasionally going off and doing something that was vaguely photojournalistic.”

### **Inspirations in photography:**

Richard Kalvar shares his inspirations in photography:

“I’ve always tried to photograph in my own natural way, but I can’t help noticing a connection with a bunch of mid-Atlantic (i.e., European and north-east coast American) photographers who do more or less what I’ve defined above: Robert Frank, Cartier-Bresson, Arbus, Friedlander, Erwitte... I find photographers like Paul Strand or Walker Evans admirable, but they leave me a little cold. When I first began in photography, I was liberated by seeing *The Americans*. Not that I wanted to take the same pictures as Frank, but I was excited by his

way of “reacting to” rather than “showing”. “Showing” struck me as a little boring.”

Below are some specific lessons Kalvar has taught me about street photography:

## **1. Good pictures come once in a while**

One of the biggest frustrations in street photography is to make good photos. Good photos happen very infrequently. Richard Kalvar shares his experience looking at contact sheets, and when he can identify a “keeper”:

“It’s hard to put into words. It hits me when I look at the contact sheets. There’s a certain irrational element that afterwards I can describe and try to analyze. I look at the sheets and suddenly I see, amid all the crap, something that sticks out and works – and works in a way that has a kind of hysterical tension in it. It’s funny, but also disturbing at the same time. It’s no longer the thing that was being photographed, it’s a scene, it’s almost a play.”



Kalvar shares how difficult it is to get great street photographs:

“I don’t have too many that work – after 40 years of photography, there were only 89 pictures in the show, but every once in a while the good things come together.”

How well could Kalvar identify a good street photograph when out on the streets? He shares he discovers it more through the editing process:

“I don’t set out looking for a certain kind of picture. It’s just that I’m kind of unconsciously drawn to that kind of thing, and I know when to recognize it in my contact sheets. Now, obviously, I’m doing the kind of things that might make it happen more.”

He describes a little more about “nailing” the shot:

“Let’s just say that it’s very satisfying. And nailing the picture is a two-step process: first photographing, then discovering if it really works on the contact sheet (or now on the computer screen).”

**Takeaway point:**

Realize that good street photographs come very infrequently. I think street photography is the most difficult genre of photography. This is because it is so unpredictable– and we have no control. We can’t control what our subjects look like, the light, the background– we can just be in the right spot and click at the right moment.

Even Richard Kalvar admits to only having 89 good photos after 40+ years of shooting in the streets. That averages to only around 2 good photos a year.

So realize everytime you go out to the streets– you’re not going to make a good photo. Work hard and hustle in the streets, but know that if you get 1-2 good photos a year, it is a good rate.

## 2. Walk a lot

One of the most important traits of a street photographer is to have good legs– and to walk around a lot. Kalvar explains:

“I walk around a lot. That’s necessary. I try to go to places where interesting things might happen. And I’m al-

ways looking. At relations between people. I'm attracted to people doing things with each other. Mainly talking, as a matter of fact."

Kalvar is especially drawn to conversations in the streets:

"Whenever I see a conversation in the streets, I'm immediately attracted to it. I'm curious. I have your standard voyeuristic instincts, and conversation is great photographic raw material. Generally, nothing happens. It's a conversation, so what, big deal! But every once in a while something does happen. By going after that kind of situation I increase my chances of being there when that thing happens that's going to make the picture."

#### **Takeaway point:**

The more you go out and shoot, the more likely you are to make a good photo. So increase your luck by walking around a lot. Be curious. Like Kalvar, be drawn to people, situations, and conversations. Realize that most of the time nothing will happen, but the more persis-

tent you are— the more you will strike gold.

### **3. Let yourself go**

How do you loosen up and see great "decisive moments" when you're out on the streets? Kalvar lets his mind go—which helps moments come to him:

"It's hard to know how much the situation is responsible for the picture and how much your availability is. In French, there's a word, "disponible", meaning, you're letting yourself go, you're available for things to happen. It's a mental and emotional opening. In other words, you're ready."

Kalvar expands on the importance of being open and sensitive to photographic moments:

"Sometimes something obvious happens and you happen to have a camera and you take the picture, but sometimes it's because you're ready, you're sensitive to things, and you're not thinking about other things – you're concentrated and you're more open to things happening. I couldn't tell you the exact percentage,

but both ways of functioning come into play.”

**Takeaway point:**

I feel that to truly capture great street photographs is to be perceptive. To notice interesting things that happen in the world. It doesn’t matter what camera you have— you need to have observant eyes to see the world in a unique way.

So when you’re shooting in the streets— loosen up and let your mind go. Fall into the “flow” of things. Don’t feel so tense when you’re on the streets. Smile, chat to people, have a nice coffee, possibly listen to music— anything that helps you relax.

Once you relax on the streets, you can let the moments come to you (rather than needing to feel you always have to hunt for them).

## 4. It works, or it doesn’t work

In street photography, one of the most important things is to be brutal

when it comes to editing. That means, being very selective with your best shots.

Kalvar stresses the importance of results in photography: it either works or it doesn’t work:

“What counts is the result. It works or it doesn’t work. You may think after you’ve taken a picture that you may have something. And then you find out that you don’t have anything, that you almost had something but that in fact, you pressed the button at the wrong time. That you took a lot of pictures, but you were on auto-pilot – that instead of waiting, you shot buckshot at it, so you missed the one that might really work.”

Kalvar also shares that you can “re-discover” great photos through his contact sheets:

“But every once in a while, I look at my contact sheets and I discover something I hadn’t even seen. That’s possible, too.”

**Takeaway point:**

Be absolutely brutal when you’re selecting your best images. Once again, Kal-

var says he only gets 1-2 good photos a year. So perhaps when you're editing your shots ask yourself: Is this photo going to be my best 1 or 2 photos in a year?

It is difficult to “kill your babies” photos that you feel emotionally connected to which may have an interesting backstory. But realize at the end of the day, your photo either works or it doesn't work.

One of the best ways to edit your photos ruthlessly is to get feedback from another photographer who you trust. Tell them to be absolutely brutal— and help you only choose your best images (and which images to kill). It is painful, but necessary.

## 5. Take lousy photos

Don't always expect to take great photos when you're out on the streets. You have to take a lot of lousy photos to get the few good ones. Kalvar explains:

“Yeah, I take a lot of lousy pictures, and sometimes it turns out that one of

the ones that I didn't even think about was in fact pretty good.”

Kalvar also shares what he looks for when shooting in the streets:

“I don't look for bushes or hands. I look for something that catches my interest, and I have no idea in advance what it might be. The next step is getting up the nerve to approach the subject without disrupting the scene or getting my face punched in. Then I might start taking a picture or two. In general, the result is pretty lousy, but every once in a while something unexpected happens (in reality, or in my brain) and I get excited. And then, even more rarely, I might succeed in making it into something special.”

### Takeaway point:

Don't be afraid of taking lousy photos. Rather, realize how many lousy photos you need to take in order to make a few great photos. It was Henri Cartier-Bresson who said: “Sometimes you need to milk the cow to get a little bit of cheese.”



So don't be disappointed by all of your lousy photos. Rather, realize they are a necessary part of the equation to make great photos.

## 6. Take photos in a place you dream of

Kalvar is a big fan of traveling to re-inspire him in his work. He shares how he did his first project in Rome:

“Jean-Loup Sieff decided to do a series of books. He had Doisneau do one, and Martine Franck, who was also at Magnum, did one, and I was supposed to do the next one. The idea was that you get a little bit of money and go to some place you've always dreamt about working in, and take pictures. Then the Pope died, in '78. I got an assignment from Newsweek to take the same pictures everyone else was taking, and I'd never been to Rome. It was fantastic discovery! It was early in August, and Newsweek had an office near the Spanish Steps. I came in late afternoon, early evening, and the light – I was bowled over. So beautiful! It was so wonderful being in Rome. So I did the stuff that I had to do, and there's

the funeral, and the election of the new Pope. Between the two, there's nothing.”

Kalvar shares how he took photos that interested him:

“I started wandering around, taking pictures for myself, in black and white. I was working for Newsweek in color, of course. It was great, being there, taking pictures. It was relatively easy to photograph. People weren't hostile, and they were expressive! So I decided to do the Sieff book in Rome. Except that the book never happened, but I kept going back anyway.”

### Takeaway point:

If you have always had a dream place to shoot street photography– go! You only have one life to live. There will always be concerns of time, family, and money. But if you never go, you will always regret it on your deathbed.

If you have a place in mind you want to shoot street photography, start planning for it immediately. Plan when you'd like to go, tell your friends and family, and start saving up money. You don't want to miss out on the wonderful op-

portunity of traveling and photographing your dream location.

## 7. Be sneaky and aggressive

I personally don't like being sneaky when shooting street photography– but this is the way that Kalvar works. He explains how he does this in order not to get noticed by his subjects:

“It's more difficult now, but I\*\*'m a fairly sneaky photographer\*\*, so sometimes I can succeed in getting around it. I'm kind of shy and sneaky and aggressive at the same time. Sometimes I have the nerve, sometimes I don't.”

Kalvar addresses the issue of people being suspicious– and how difficult it can be shooting in the streets:

“It's true that as far as security is concerned, people are suspicious of everything now. America is in many ways a lawyer oriented society – everyone's suing all the time – but for photography, America's okay, and France is the most difficult place to work, for legal reasons. People here have a statutory right to their own image, and their privacy. You

take a picture and they can sue you. Even if it doesn't do them any harm! So that's been a tremendous problem.”

Kalvar does admit it is getting a little better:

“It's mostly the last 10 or 15 years, although it's been getting a little better lately. For a while the courts were awarding damages to anyone who sued. It's discouraging. Even now, you have magazines and newspapers that put bands on the eyes and pixelize faces and so on. It leads people to say, “Why are you taking my picture? You don't have the right! You're making money off my image!” That part's really unpleasant and makes things difficult. It's worse than it was before. It's true in other countries too. Although often there are no problems, or they're minor. There are more photographers around. Before, you might have been the first photographer who'd ever shown-up in a particular village. Now, there are people taking pictures with their telephones. It's harder to work, but it's not impossible.”

**Takeaway point:**

All the street photographers I know have some bit of fear, hesitations, and worries when it comes to shooting street photography. It is totally normal. There will be a lot of photos you miss taking because you weren't bold enough.

Realize street photography is difficult for everybody– even the masters. But know that street photography is certainly not impossible. Just go out and shoot with a smile, and know why you are taking photos in the streets. You are photographing society, history, and trying to make a statement through your work. You are trying to express yourself, and experience the world through shooting in the streets. You're not out there to hurt anybody– so don't hesitate or feel guilty.

## 8. Be an amateur photographer

One interesting discussion Kalvar talks about quite frequently is splitting his personal work and his professional work. At the end of the day, he embraces the amateur in himself– and how it is of-

ten his non-professional work which is his best images:

“For my personal pictures, I'm not going to do anything different from what I've done in the past. I have 40 years work behind me, and it should be consistent. I like the feeling of film and the cameras that I use, so I don't think I'll change. But I'm an amateur photographer and a professional photographer. I'm a much more interesting amateur photographer than I am a professional photographer. The amateur just had the show here in Paris and is publishing the book and so on. The pro is the guy who's trying to make a living and works for whomever will pay him. For that kind of work, I use a digital camera, nine times out of ten. There are great advantages to it – you can process cheaply and quickly, the quality very good. I've tried working with the Leica M8, but it wasn't very successful. It's not quite ready for prime time.” - Richard Kalvar

Kalvar also discusses a bit talking digital versus film:

“Since I go back and forth, there are things I miss from digital when I’m working with a film camera. You don’t have to change the film roll when things are getting exciting. You can’t see the picture with a film camera – I wish I could do that a little bit, because I’ve gotten used to it. Sometimes it’s a question of habit. I use a Leica, and when I take a picture, I immediately advance the film. But sometimes now, I forget I have to do it myself, and I’ve missed a few pictures that way.”

In a blog post: “Schizophrenia” Kalvar discusses this dichotomy between professional and amateur work more. He starts off the importance of making a living as a professional photographer:

“A number of years ago I made the very regrettable error of allowing myself to be born into a family that didn’t have much money, so when I started photographing in a serious way, I had to find a means of making a living. At the time it didn’t seem to me that I could do that through my personal photographs, so I began to seek professional work taking pictures. I suppose that to support my habit I could have driven a taxi, or be-

come a customs inspector like Henri Rousseau or Nathaniel Hawthorne, but using the camera seemed like the path of least resistance.”

However he did see some similarities between his professional and amateur work. They both were observational and candid:

“I started to get some work with newspapers and magazines, and then with commercial clients. The magazine work was often similar to my personal photography in that the photos were unposed, and based on observation.”

But Kalvar shared the frustrations of doing professional work– having less control:

“There were important differences. The journalistic pictures were less free. They tended to be more descriptive, straight-forward and first-degree. And I couldn’t come back from a day’s shooting and say, “Too bad, I didn’t see anything that inspired me so I didn’t take any pictures”; as a professional, I had to produce and to meet a deadline, so the bar of acceptable quality was necessarily



lower. I also did posed stuff, portraits and the like. Just between the two thousand of us, I enjoyed and continue to enjoy this kind of work: as a source of revenue of course, but also because it's interesting to see and try different things, and to solve different problems. I like to say, in my immodest moments, that I'm a pretty good professional photographer, but a more interesting amateur one."

He talks more about the drawbacks between working both professionally and doing personal work:

"Naturally there are drawbacks and dangers in serving two masters (oneself and someone else). A good friend of mine had another friend who was a sculptor, who also had trouble earning a living with his art. He took a design job at a factory that manufactured store window dummies, but was quickly let go when he couldn't help making the legs too long, or the head too twisted. In my case the danger is more in the other direction. The client explicitly or implicitly defines the parameters. If I'm working for a press organ and I feel that the most interesting thing I'm seeing that day is my

feet, I can be sure that my employer will be unhappy with the results. If I'm working for a large company organizing, say, an international get-together, I have no doubt that unflattering pictures of the participants will be frowned upon. To what extent will that lead to self-censorship, even of the photos that I take for my own pleasure while working for the client?"

But you can still balance professional and personal work. He brings up Elliott Erwitt for example, also in Magnum:

"How you present the various things you do can also be problematic. Someone I've always admired for his ability to walk and chew gum at the same time is my colleague Elliott Erwitt. He's an excellent portraitist, a fantastic advertising photographer, an intelligent and sensitive photojournalist, and a superb observer of the human comedy. But far, far better than all that are his brilliantly witty found photographs, some of the finest ever taken. But Elliott has a tendency to put them all in the same bag, to publish them together. To my mind the mix-

ture of genres, the juxtaposition of the great and the merely very good diminish the power of the best pictures. I wish he didn't do that."

### **Takeaway point:**

I know a lot of people with full-time jobs who dream of being a professional photographer. Whenever somebody asks me how to become a professional photographer— I try to be encouraging and motivating, but honestly— I think it is better to separate the both.

"Serving two masters" can be difficult. To split one's personal work and professional work can be exhausting and discouraging. I think it is wonderful how many people have day jobs to pay the bills, and can just do street photography completely on their own terms on the side.

I am personally lucky that I don't do any commercial work. I make my living through teaching workshops. But even I have a hard time to find time to shoot— because I am quite busy blogging and running administrative things for travel, workshops, emails, finances, etc.

So regardless of what your job is, embrace the amateur inside you. You don't need to be a professional to make great photos. Shoot what you love. Shoot what fascinates you.

## **9. Play with reality**

Even though Richard Kalvar is part of Magnum, his work isn't documentary. He rather likes to play with mystery and reality in his photos:

"What's always interested me in photography is the way you can play with reality. Photography is based on reality, it looks like reality, but it's not reality. That's true of anyone's pictures. It's a picture of something, but it's not the thing itself. It's different from the reality — it doesn't move in space, it has no sound, but it reminds you of reality — so much so that you believe it's reality."

Kalvar shares the importance of creating abstraction to make more mystery in photos:

"In order for the mystery to work, you need abstraction from reality. Black and white is an additional abstraction, in

addition to selective framing, to the freezing of the moment that in reality is a part of an infinite number of other moments (you have one moment and it never moves again; you can keep looking at the picture forever). The black and white is one more step away from reality. Color, for me, is realer, but less interesting.”

Kalvar also looks for creating little dramas in his photos:

“I’m trying to create little dramas that lead people to think, to feel, to dream, to fantasize, to smile... It’s more than just catching beautiful moments; I want to fascinate, to hypnotize, to move my viewers. Making greater statements about the world is not my thing. I think there’s a coherence in the work that comes not from an overriding philosophy but from a consistent way of looking and feeling.”

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the things I love most about Kalvar’s work is how mysterious and strange it is. His work isn’t about telling

the full story– it is about suggesting them.

Kalvar works in black and white to create more of a sense of mystery in his shots. You don’t always have to work in black and white to create this sense of drama– but it often helps create more abstraction.

If you want to create more more interesting photos, create more mystery. Don’t photograph everything in the frame. Decide what to include, and what to exclude. Blend your subject to the background. Get close, and build abstraction into your scene. Make the viewer think hard when looking at your images, and don’t give away the full story.

## **10. Keep things out of the frame**

One mistake I see a lot of beginner street photographers make is to try to include everything in the frame. But to make a good frame is to be selective what to keep out of the frame. Kalvar explains:

“The framing is very important – you have to keep out things that distract from the little drama that’s in the picture. I’d like my pictures to exist almost in a dream state and have people react to them almost as if they’re coming in and out of daydreams, you know?”

### **Takeaway point:**

Similar to the previous point, don’t tell the whole story by showing too much. Show less, and you will make a more interesting frame.

## **11. Stay genuine**

We all want to be more recognized for our photography. But how do we balance pleasing our audience by creating original work– versus creating original work that is genuine to us? Kalvar shares the importance of being genuine in your photography:

“But it’s what I like to do, it’s natural for me. I’m not going to change now.” It’s true that if someone were to start doing what I do, or what Friedlander’s done, there’s less interest, unless it comes out of a genuine feeling, rather

than a desire to imitate what’s already been done. If it comes out of something real, it’s not going to be the same as what other people did. When people find out I shoot black and white, they say, oh, just like Doisneau. Well, first of all, I do unposed pictures, and anyway I’m not Doisneau. What I do is different.”

Kalvar shares the importance of creating personal images:

“I think that other people coming along can use traditional form and do something creative and interesting and different from what other photographers do. If they do something that uses a traditional form and is not creative and interesting and different, and it’s not really personal, then I can understand the criticism of it.”

Kalvar also shares the importance of creating good photography, over creating unique work:

“Searching for novelty, in itself, is not very interesting. And a lot of stuff that’s shown now is crap. A lot of it isn’t. It’s not because it’s different that it becomes good. And it’s not because



things are done in a more traditional way that they're necessarily bad. You still want something that's personal and creative, and to me, that's the key, whatever form it takes."

What is a timeless way to captivate your audience? Tell stories through your images:

"Think about movies or novels. It's the same as it was 20 or 50 years ago. There are stories. People are interested in stories. In novels, people are interested in the story and how it's told. The form evolves, but it's possible to continue in a preexisting form and still do creative and interesting things."

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't worry so much about creating unique work. Focus on making great and personal work. Be genuine in your photography.

You might copy the technique or approach of other photographers. That isn't necessarily a bad thing. Just make sure you do it in your own unique way.

Remix the work that you have already seen before, and see how you can add your own personal spin.

## **12. Shoot from the heart, guts, and brain**

In an interview, Blake Andrews asks Kalvar about his thoughts on street photography:

Blake: "I'm glad you mentioned Magnum because that was my next question. What do they think of street photography? I know there's a range of personalities there. But some of them don't get it? By street I mean amateur unplanned candid."

Kalvar: "As you say, there's quite a range. I get the feeling inside of Magnum and outside (especially outside) that a lot of people think it's an old-fashioned approach: not taking unposed pictures, but having my particular sensibility. I think that I do what I feel like doing, which may not follow contemporary fashions but which comes spontaneously from the heart, the guts and the brain. To me, that's what counts."

### Takeaway point:

I read a lot of arguments on the internet on the definition of street photography. The debate on posed versus unposed. The debate on taking photos on the streets versus indoors. The debate on asking for permission versus shooting without permission.

The old-school approach is to shoot street photography candidly. But as Kalvar says, follow your own sensibilities in street photography. Make your street photography personal. Don't feel obliged to follow what others are doing.

Don't follow the contemporary fashions in street photography. Let your work come "...spontaneously from the heart, the guts and the brain." That is what truly counts.

## 13. Investigate conversations

What does Kalvar look for when he's shooting on the streets? One of the tips he gives is to investigate conversations on the streets. He explains why:

"[Conversations are] good raw material for me, because they involve the interaction between people (or the lack of it), and that's what I like to play with. I like hands and bushes; it's just that I don't go out looking for them. But they often hit me over the head."

### Takeaway point:

One of the best traits of a street photographer is to be curious. And slightly nosy.

So if you don't know what to shoot on the streets, look for people in public having conversations with each other. This often leads to interesting hand gestures, facial expressions, and random happenings. Stick around them, and wait for any "decisive moments" that happen. And in that moment, shoot.

## 14. Don't explain photos

Much of Richard Kalvar's images have a great deal of mystery. When I look at his images as a viewer, I am quite curious of the back-story.

However Kalvar doesn't like explaining the back-story of his photos, because

he feels it kills the mystery of the shot. He explains in the interview with Blake Andrews:

Blake: “Can I ask about one specific photo, the woman eating a popsicle near the foot? That photo was sort of the entrée into your work for me. After I saw it I got very excited and looked up all your work. This was maybe 10 years ago. What was going on there?”

Kalvar: “First let me address the question “What was going on there?” in general. I try to avoid answering, because when I do, people generally stop looking and turn the page. If you kill the magic and the mystery, what’s left but humdrum reality? But just between you and me and the millions of people who read your blog, there was a woman eating a popsicle, a guy playing the guitar, and another one taking a sunbath on the roof of his beat-up station wagon. He was kind of beat up, too.”

Kalvar continues by explaining how he likes to keep his images open-ended, for the viewers to come up with their own interpretations:

“It’s tempting to satisfy people’s curiosity as to what was “really going on” in a scene, but it always leaves a bad taste in my mouth. If there’s a mystery, the viewer should try to unravel it for him- or herself, subjectively, through intelligence, imagination and association. I want people to keep looking, not just move on to the next thing.”

Kalvar ends by sharing another tip: a great way to make more engaging photos is to tell lies:

“That’s part of the magic of photography. Look at a picture and you have no idea what was going on. The only thing you can know is what’s visually depicted, and we all know photographers lie. That’s where the fun comes in. To be able to tell a lie with “reality” is a very tough trick.”

### **Takeaway point:**

One thing that annoys me is when I see elaborate back-stories being explained in photographs in captions on Facebook or Flickr. Although I do love hearing the backstory, I feel it kills some of the magic in a photograph. I like the

sense of mystery, and being able to come up with my own little story in my head.

I generally recommend most photographers to title or caption their photos simply: location and date. That provides enough context to the scene, but also leaves the image open-ended enough.

Know that the most interesting photos are the ones that tend to have mystery. Know that in street photography, you don't need to feel obligated to tell "truths." All photos are a fabrication of the way we see reality. So in a sense, they are all "lies." But make interesting lies with your images— that create a sense of wonderment, curiosity, and excitement in your viewers.

## 15. On the definition of "street photography"

Kalvar expands on how he personally feels when people describe his work as "street photography":

"I'm not crazy about the term "street photography" to describe what I do, because it's not necessarily done on the street. The pictures can be taken on

a farm, at the zoo, in an office, and so on. Let's say we consider the general category of "unposed pictures of people" (or sometimes animals or even inanimate objects when they happen to be possessed by human souls), and then the subcategory "with nothing particularly important going on.""

Kalvar says if he could define what he likes to do, it is to play with reality and drama in everyday life:

"If we further narrow it down to the "play" sub-subcategory, we get into the domain I've worked in for forty years. That's what I like to do: play with ordinary reality, using unposed actors who are oblivious to the dramas I've placed them in."

How does Kalvar define "street photography"? He shares that he doesn't think street photography necessarily has to be done on the streets:

"The kind of photography I do for pleasure is generally called "Street Photography", but no one who actually does it limits himself or herself to the street. We take pictures wherever we find them,



and whether it's on the street or on a farm or at a wedding makes no difference."

However an important distinction Kalvar gives is the difference between candid and posed images:

"The key distinction is not between "street and "non-street", but between "found" and "set up"."

The last important difference Kalvar brings up is when photography is "acceptable" or not. For example, in the streets versus private events:

"There's another useful distinction to be made, between situations where it's acceptable to take pictures and those where it's not. Walking around sticking your camera in people's faces when they don't know what you're up to is risky business; photographing at a wedding is generally not (although I photographed at a wedding in Naples in 2011 and got an awful lot of funny looks...)."

#### **Takeaway point:**

Richard Kalvar isn't a stickler when it comes to defining street photography.

For himself, he likes to take unposed photos in public areas (not necessarily the streets). He also likes to create a sense of drama in his images.

However what I love about him is that he allows other street photographers the flexibility to shoot however they would like to. He could care less where and how photographers shoot. But he does bring up the important distinction between candid vs posed shots, and photos on the streets versus "acceptable" situations.

At the end of the day, shoot whatever interests you. Don't care if it is called "street photography" or not. Create your own personal definition for street photography and disregard what others say.

## 16. Travel a lot

What advice does Kalvar have for photographers starting off? He stresses the importance of traveling:

"Travel a lot; try to go to places where interesting things might happen. In the late 60s, after I worked for Jerome

Ducrot, I saved up a little money and came to Europe to hitchhike with the camera he gave me as a present, and a couple of lenses. I wasn't there to photograph –[traveling round Europe] was one of the things that people did back then. I started taking a few pictures. I wouldn't say it was a project, but by the time I went back, after 10 months, I was a photographer. That's the thing that changed my life the most, that trip."

### **Takeaway point:**

You don't need to travel to become a great street photographer. But if you are starting off in photography– traveling is a great way to get your feet wet. It is a great opportunity to travel, meet new people, see new sights, and feed your visual palette.

So rather than saving up money to buy that new camera or lens, invest the funds for experiences. Rather than using that \$1000 for gear, use it for a round-trip ticket to somewhere in the world. Use that money to travel and see the world. That will be the best experience

money can buy, and which will truly help your photography.

## 17. On "Decisive Moments"

In street photography, we talk a lot about "decisive moments." What does Kalvar think about "the decisive moment?" He dispels some notions, and shares how "the decisive moment" is a very personal and subjective thing. What may be "decisive" to you, may not be "decisive" to me. Kalvar shares:

"At the last Magnum annual meeting in Arles, at the end of June, we were looking at portfolios of potential nominees. During the projection of the portfolio of a photographer who had a lot of pictures of meaningless moments, I remarked that I was tired of seeing pictures where there would be no apparent difference if the picture had been taken a second before or a second after. One of my colleagues said with a derisive and dismissive snort, "Oh, he still believes in the Decisive Moment!"."

However Kalvar explains the irony– that all photographers are looking for some kind of "decisive moments":

“I looked around the room (with my mind’s eye, that is) and I saw that almost all of us, the ones that photograph humans and animals, at least, are looking for the decisive moment. Anyone can photograph indecisive moments; of what interest could it possibly be to look at the photographs of 7 billion people photographing just anything? What about the photographers who still believe in the interestingly or well-composed picture, the one that really grabs you? How old-fashioned!”

Kalvar paints two conclusions regarding the decisive moment. The first is how subjective a “decisive moment” can be:

1. “The first is that the moment that Henri Cartier-Bresson thought was decisive is not the same decisive moment for everyone. Henri made rules about what should be done, but he was in fact describing what HE did. Your decisive moment is not the same as mine, but most of us are looking for a moment that is necessary for what we’re trying to do. Unnecessary moments quickly become easy, common, and boring.”

The second is how it is important to break the rules:

2. “The second thing is that it’s sometimes good to break the rules. But if the rules are pretty good to begin with, that iconoclasm only works the first couple of times. Afterwards it’s just repetitive and uninteresting, the new and less good normal. And as I said, easy.”

Kalvar expands on the idea of having rules:

“By the way, HCB was totally opposed to cropping pictures. But he cropped [the famous photograph of the man jumping over the puddle].”

He wraps up his thoughts on the “decisive moment”:

“We each have our own criteria for the decisive moment. But in any case a second earlier or a second later and the pictures would be about as interesting as much of the stuff you currently see on walls.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Sometimes I feel frustrated when I miss “the decisive moment” on the

streets. For example, I was shooting on the streets of NYC yesterday, and missed a “decisive moment” of a man in a suit puffing a cigar. It made me angry and frustrated that I was a bit too slow. But I kept my chin up, and low and behold—10 minutes later I see another guy in a suit smoking a cigar, and this time I got the photograph!

Know there are billions of “decisive moments” happening every second, every day, everywhere around the world. If you miss one “decisive moment” it doesn’t mean you won’t find a more interesting “decisive moment” somewhere else.

“The decisive moment” is also a very subjective thing. What you define as “the decisive moment” isn’t the same as what another person might find as “the decisive moment.”

But at the same time, don’t just try to seek “decisive moments” for the sake of them. As Kalvar recounts, many photographers are bored of just seeing cliché photos of people jumping over puddles. Rather, think about the emotion, mean-

ing, and depth of your images. Don’t just rely on capturing some weird or wacky moments.

## 18. On “rules”

In photography, there are no rules. Only guidelines. However funny enough for Kalvar, following “the rules” actually helped him in his photography.

He starts off by starting with a quote from W. Eugene Smith in which he says: “I didn’t write the rules, why should I follow them?”. Kalvar shares his fascination with the quote— and how he started off by following “the rules”:

“That’s a great quote (and a fascinating interview). When I first began in photography I regurgitated a number of rules for the worst possible reasons, which I then regurgitated in my photos. Don’t crop, shoot in black and white, don’t set up pictures... all part of the photographic zeitgeist, the Cartier-Bressonian canon.”

He also shares how photographers can get suckered into buying certain cameras, because they “should”:



“And then I ran into a friend of mine, another struggling young photographer named Nick Lawrence who was a little ahead of me at the time. He used a Leica, and when I asked him why, he said that Leica was the best, and owning one he didn’t have to think about equipment any more. That seemed to make sense to me, so I saved up and bought myself an M4. What a dumb reason to buy a camera!”

However sometimes having these “rules” can actually end up helping you:

“So there I was, equipped with the standard rules and the standard camera. Well you know, sometimes it turns out that the things that you do for the wrong reasons turn out to be the right things to do anyway. In retrospect, I’m really glad that I decided not to crop, because that developed my compositional discipline and my ability to organize a picture instinctively, in the viewfinder. It also obliged me to work very close up to my subjects in order to fill my 35mm lens frame. I had to be a toreador, not a sniper. Also, I had the feeling of doing something difficult, getting the picture

right in the first place; anyone could crop a picture and find something interesting, but doing it in the camera was special. These things were essential to my photographic development.”

Kalvar also shares how working in black and white (the tradition of street photography) helped him find his own personal vision:

“As I evolved I quickly understood that what fascinated me were the differences between the frozen, isolated, silent photograph and the reality it purported to represent, and at the same time the obvious resemblances between the two. I could play with the notion that people thought that a picture was reality when of course it wasn’t. Photographing in black and white created a further level of abstraction. The black and white pushed the link but didn’t break it, and made the overall impression more dreamlike. So that rule served me well.”

The “rule” that Henri Cartier-Bresson also made in photography was to not pose photos. Even though this

was restrictive, it ended up helping Kalvar in the long run:

“Since I was playing at the intersection of appearance and reality, the credibility of the reality leg was essential. Setting pictures up (or today, modifying them in Photoshop) would destroy the relationship between the two. It would cheapen my photography. By posing pictures, people like Doisneau lessened the value of their work. You never know whether they’ve set something up (easy), or found it and tamed it (hard!). Some photographers like Elliot Erwitt have managed to work successfully on the edge, but that wouldn’t be right for me.”

Lastly, the “rule” in street photography was to shoot with a Leica. However in the end, it ended up working for him too:

“Photographing with my discrete little Leica allowed me to remain unobtrusive despite being very close to my subjects, without which nothing would have been possible.”

The last quote that sums up Kalvar’s thoughts on rules is:

“I didn’t write the rules, but following them set me free.”

Kalvar also brings up some interesting caveats regarding his personal rules in his photography:

a) “Sometimes people set pictures up FOR you, but that’s part of reality, too.” - Richard Kalvar

b) “For a while, for some strange reason, I believed that you shouldn’t have people looking directly into the camera – rule 427B. That one fell by the wayside pretty quickly, as I realized that some of the best pictures were the ones where people were looking directly at you, creating a link between you and the rest of the scene. It’s okay if people look at you, as long as you don’t tell them to do it (rule 223F, paragraph 17).” - Richard Kalvar

### **Takeaway point:**

Kalvar started his photography by following the “rules” of Henri Cartier-Bresson, which included shooting with a

Leica, not cropping, shooting in black and white, and not posing photos.

Even though the “rules” were very restrictive— Kalvar says that having these restrictions eventually “set him free” in his photography, and helped him tremendously.

However not all of us are Henri Cartier-Bresson or Richard Kalvar. Following these “rules” won’t necessarily help all of us.

On the other hand, if you are a photographer just starting off— following some “rules” (or I like to call “guidelines”) help us in our photography. I think by creating restrictions in our work, this helps us be more creative. So it is good to start off by following the rules and guidelines of others in photography— but as time goes on, create your own set of rules.

My personal rules in street photography are below:

1. Don’t mix black and white and color in a series
2. Don’t crop

3. Don’t upload images until I let them marinate and sit for at least a month (preferably a year)

4. Focus on projects, not single images

5. Don’t mix digital and film in a project (sometimes I break this rule)

6. Don’t share any images online until I have gotten critique in real-life

Don’t feel obliged to follow my “rules” in street photography— but take the pieces you like, discard the rest, and modify and remix them.

## Conclusion

Richard Kalvar is a great source of inspiration and knowledge. I think my biggest take-aways from him is the importance of creating a sense of mystery in photographs, and not telling the full story. Let the viewer do the work of interpreting the photograph for themselves.

Also don’t worry too much about the definitions of “street photography” photograph what interests you, and how you like to photograph.

Lastly, make your photography personal. Shoot for yourself, be true to your own voice, and explore the world with your camera.





38

## ROBERT CAPA

Robert Capa is one of the greatest photographers to have ever lived. When he was still alive, he was proclaimed as “The Greatest War-Photographer in the World”. He captured some of the most intense wars during his time, including the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), Chinese resistance to the Japanese invasion (covered in 1938), the European theater of World War II from (1941-45), the first Arab-Israeli War (1948), and the French Indochina War (1954) and tragically passed away by stepping on a mine.

During his lifetime, he co-founded Magnum alongside photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger, David “Chim” Seymour, and William Vandivert in 1947. He also mentored many young photographers in Magnum such as Eve Arnold, Elliot Erwitt, Burt Glinn, Inge Morath, and Marc Riboud.

Capa also famously coined the phrase: “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough” and his bravery on the front-lines helped him capture some of the most intense, intimate, and emotional photos of war.

So who exactly was Robert Capa, the man and the photographer? How did he start off as a photographer, start Magnum, and create a legacy that has lasted for decades? I wanted to learn more about Robert Capa and did some research on him through the biography “Blood And Champagne: The Life And Times Of Robert Capa” as well as the autobiography Capa himself wrote: “Slightly Out of Focus” where he shares his personal stories from World War II.

Interested in learning more about the legend Robert Capa? If so, read on.

## Robert Capa’s youth

Robert Capa was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1913 under the name of André Friedman. Ever since he was a young kid, he hung out with gang of kids who “lived on their wits” and even had the nickname: “Capa” (which means shark). Growing up, he constantly complained of being bored, and he wanted to always seek out danger. His father (a compulsive gambler and adventurer) would tell Capa all these incredible stories as a child (which I think inspired Capa to seek out a life of adventure himself).

Capa was never afraid to try out new things– even if it was dangerous. For example, he started skiing with no knowledge of it whatsoever. When he was young, he also involved himself with leftist revolutionaries.

### **How Robert Capa got started in photography:**

When Robert Capa was 18 years old, he moved to Vienna, then to Prague,

and finally set roots in Berlin. While in Berlin, he was going to study political science. However looking back at what he was truly interested he considered studying journalism as a career while still in Budapest. Instead, he decided to choose photography. This is what Capa says about his decision in 1953:

“While pursuing my studies, my parents means gave out, and I decided to become a photographer, which was the nearest thing to journalism for anyone who found himself without a language.”

While in Berlin, Capa sought out photographer Eva Besnyo and asked her if she could help him find a job with an agency or in a studio. This is what happened between them two:

“This photography business, is it a good way to make a living?” – Capa

“You can’t talk like that! It’s not a profession. It’s a calling.” – Besnyo

“Never mind about that. Is it good fun?” – Besnyo

“Yes. It is very enjoyable.” – Besnyo

Eva Besnyo knew some people who could help Robert Capa (at the time still known as Andre Friedman) and referred him to Otto Umbehers, an ex-miner who studied design at the Bauhaus school of art and design, and was now director of portraiture and advertising work at a prestigious agency called “Dephot.” Besnyo called Umbehers and asked if he could use a “very clever boy.” Umbehers told Besnyo to call over Capa.

Next thing we know, Capa was working in Dephot’s darkroom as an assistant, refilling bottles of fixer and developer, hanging up prints to dry, and learning the basics of exposure and printing.

Over time, Capa started to assist Felix Man, an esteemed photojournalist and other photographers. With them, he went out on assignments to record daily life in the city.

During this time he also borrowed an early model of the Leica from the Dephot office and quickly learned how to take advantage of its technical advantages. It gave him a lot of flexibility to capture action on the streets, as the expo-

sure times would go all the way to 1/1000th's of a second.

During the time he was in Berlin, Germany was in political disarray. Capa was able to make his first break as a photographer when he saw images of India by Harald Lechenperg, one of Dephot's most esteemed reporters.

He rushed into Simon Guttman's office (Dephot's director) and exclaimed how amazing Lechenperg's photos were. At this moment, Guttman noticed Capa's passion, and decided to take Capa under his wing. This eventually lead Guttman to send out Robert Capa on his first big assignment: to photograph Leon Trotsky as he lectured on "the meaning of the Russian Revolution".

During Trotsky's lecture— Capa wasn't the only photographer there, but he took the most dramatic photos. This was because he got really close to his subjects— just a few feet away. Although his images weren't technically perfect, they were full of intimacy and intensity— something that other photographers lacked in their images. This lead

Capa to gaining his first full page layout in the magazine: "Der Welt Spiegel". Soon afterwards, Capa decided to leave Berlin, because of Nazi uprising (being a Hungarian jew).

Moving forward, I will go more in-depth about the lessons I've learned from Robert Capa— and how I apply these philosophies to street photography.

## 1. Invent yourself

After Capa fled Berlin, he ended up in Paris. He struggled to eat in Paris being dead-broke, and even had to sell his prized Leica in 1934 to survive. Even at one point he resorted to fishing just to eat.

While in Paris, he met Gerda Pohorylle (later changed her name to Gerda Taro) and started to teach her photography.

Around the time, Robert Capa (still known then as Andre Friedman) had a great idea with Gerda: to form an association of three people. They thought the idea of creating an association would end



up bringing them more jobs (and help them pay the bills).

1. The first person in the association would be Gerda, worked in picture agency— as secretary and sales representative.
2. The second person would be Andre Friedman who was the Andre as darkroom hired hand.
3. The third person would be the rich, famous, talented, (and fake) American photographer named: “Robert Capa”, who was allegedly visiting France at the time.

In a radio interview in 1947, Robert Capa explains why he made up this fake persona:

“I had a name which was a little bit different from Bob Capa. The real name of mine was not too good. I was just as foolish as I am now but younger. I couldn’t get an assignment. I needed a new name badly”

So Capa came up the idea of making up a fake name– and shares why he chose the name “Robert Capa”:

“I was figuring on a new one... Robert would sound very American because that was how somebody had to sound. Capa sounded American and it’s easy to pronounce. So Bob Capa sounds like a good name. And then I invented that Bob Capa was a famous American photographer who came over to Europe and did not want to bore the French editors because they didn’t pay enough.. So I just moved in with my little Leica, took some pictures, and wrote Bob Capa on it which sold four double prices.”

Apparently because this fictitious Capa was supposed to be so rich, Gerda wouldn’t sell his photos to any French newspaper for less than 150 francs a piece— three times the prevailing rate. this ended up serving them well.

### **Takeaway point:**

What I found very inspirational about Robert Capa making up this false alter-ego was that it took guts, cunning, and showed that he held his own fate in his own hands.

Rather than complaining that his name: “Andre Friedman” wasn’t enticing

enough to editors he made up his own alter ego: “Robert Capa”.

It took a lot of guts to do so– and he actually got caught a few times by some editors about his fake persona. However when the editors would figure out that Andre Friedman and Robert Capa were the same person they simply ignored the fact as they loved “Capa’s” photographs.

How can we practically apply this lesson to our own lives as photographers? I don’t suggest all of us to go out and make fake pseudonyms for ourselves as photographers.

However Capa has taught me that the perception we give off as photographers is all fabricated. By controlling the images we decide to show, our accomplishments, and personality– we can (somewhat) control how other people perceive us.

So if you want to become a famous photographer, know that you will have to do a top-notch job marketing yourself. Show your accomplishments and “sell your name” and show strong images. Edi-

tors and curators love to feature photographers who have a “brand”.

Not to say that all of us have this aspiration. If your aspiration is to simply make photographs for a hobby and for pure fun– that is totally fine too. But if you want to have your photographs reach a larger audience and build your name and brand– you will need to learn how to “market” yourself.

## 2. Create your own cooperative

At the time that Robert Capa lived, photographers had very little control, copyright ownership, and protection over their images. Corporations such as Life magazine would often take advantage and exploit photographers.

So Since 1945, Capa was active in the American Society of Magazine Photographers to promote photographers’ rights and control.

Fueled by this frustration he said to photographer Gisele Freund, “Why be exploited by others? Let’s exploit ourselves.”

Apparently the idea Capa had for Magnum went all the way back in 1935, when a picture of his showing the Paris stock market was bought and captioned by the Nazi Muncher Illustrierte Presse to show how the French Jews planned to destabilize the French franc. Pissed off how his image was used in a deceitful way to promote anti-Semitic propaganda, he thought a cooperative like Magnum could proven this from happening (if photographers had more control over their images).

Fast-forward and in Mid-April, 1947, Capa met with a group of photographers on the second floor of the Museum of Modern Art in NYC (with lots of champagne). Present at the meeting was Life photographer Bill Vandivert and wife, Rita, Maria Eisner, and David ‘Chim’ Seymour. Announced the birth of his brainchild— a cooperative named “Magnum”. They later involved George Rodger and Henri Cartier-Bresson as founding members.

So why the name: “Magnum”? according to Pierre Gassmann, the agency’s name arose spontaneously from

earlier meeting at Paris where a Magnum of Champagne was uncorked and somebody shouted: “Magnum!”

Journalist Russell Miller writes:

“It was . . . presumably agreed by those present [at the first meeting] that Magnum was a fine new name for such a bold new venture, indicative as it was of greatness in its literal Latin translation, toughness in its gun connotation and celebration in its champagne mode.”

So how would Magnum split up photography assignments? This was the outline:

- Chim would cover Europe
- Cartier-Bresson would cover India and the Far East
- Rodger would concentrate on Africa and the Middle East
- Bill van Divert would cover the United States
- Capa would go wherever he pleased

According to the original agreement, each founder would provide \$400 in

startup fees. Magnum would take 40% of fees from assignments setup for photographer-members, 30% of the fees from assignments the photographers found themselves, and 50% of resales.

Bill Vandivert and wife, Rita would run the NY office at 8th street in Greenwich village, with Rita receiving \$8000 a year as the Bureau's manager. Maria Eisner run the Paris office from her home at 125 rue du faubourg-st-honore, and received \$4000.

French photographer Romeo Martinez (who knew Capa and the founding members) wrote about the brilliance of Magnum:

“Capa's idea— specifically, that the journalist is nothing if he doesn't own his negatives— will prove to be the sanest idea in the history of photojournalism.” (1997). “The co-op is the best formula for retaining those rights and for ensuring the freedom of action of each of its members.”

Capa also realized that Magnum needed to provide commercial content:

mainstream picture-essays to stay economically variable.

Around this time Capa was a bit concerned with Henri Cartier-Bresson as his style was “surrealistic.” Capa thought that the “surrealist aesthetic” wouldn't appeal to magazine editors who had money.

The famous advice Robert Capa gave Henri Cartier-Bresson was the following:

“Watch out for labels. They're reassuring but somebody's going to stick one on you that you'll never get rid of— ‘the little surrealist photographer.’ You'll be lost— you'll get precious and mannered. Take instead the label of ‘photo-journalist’ and keep the other thing for yourself, in your heart of hearts.”

Although Capa wasn't good with money (he often gambled it away), wasn't good at managing people, or the business side of things— Capa was a superb charismatic front-man of Magnum, charming editors and developing post-war contacts wherever he saw potential revenue sources.

**Takeaway point:**



We are always stronger as a group rather than just as individuals. The same applies in photography. To be a part of a photography collective is helpful in many different ways: having more people to critique your work openly in honesty, to continue to develop and grow, to have more marketing power, as well as the ability to put on group exhibitions and shows, and potentially books and other opportunities.

I have seen many street photography related collectives pop up through the years: Burn My Eye, ECHIE, That's Life, Tiny Collective, OBSERVE, Publigraphy, Street-Photographers, STRATA, STROMA and others which have been around longer such as strange.rs and In-Public.

The inspirational thing about all these collectives are that these photographers learned to put their strengths together— to create something greater than just themselves.

So if you want to gain more recognition, have a sense of community, and to continue to grow and improve— consider

joining a collective (or starting one of your own).

It doesn't have to be big or fancy— you can start off a collective just by having an informal group of photographers meet up and discuss images. Then perhaps down the line you guys could do a group exhibition, a group book, a group workshop, lecture— the opportunities are boundless.

### 3. Capture emotion

Robert Capa wasn't the most edgy, innovative, or technically advanced photographers. Jim Morris, Capa's friend and editor at Life Magazine said this about Capa's work of the liberation:

“At the time, I remember not being too impressed— I was disappointed by them... It was easy to edit his pictures, not difficult to follow his line of thought. He didn't go in for crazy angles. He was pretty much an eye-level photographer. You might say that it was a weakness— he wasn't fluid enough in his approach to subject matter.”

However looking back around 60 years later this is what Morris said about Capa's work: "Would love to see those contact sheets of the liberation story again."

Although Capa was limited in his technical and artistic range– he still had the incredible ability to capture "the decisive moment" and record raw emotion in his images.

This is what writer John Steinbeck said about Capa's work in his memorial portfolio in Popular Photography:

"Capa knew what to look for and what to do with it when he found it. He knew, for example, that you cannot photograph war, because it is largely an emotion. But he did photograph that emotion by shooting beside it. He could show the horror of a whole people in the face of a child. His camera caught and held emotion."

Steinbeck continues about the love and compassion he had in his work:

"Capa's work is itself the picture of a great heart and an overwhelming compassion. No one can take his place. No

one can take the place of any fine artist, but we are fortunate to have in his pictures the quality of the man. I worked and traveled with him a great deal. He may have had closer friends but he had none who loved him more. It was his pleasure to seem casual and careless about his work. He was not. His pictures are not accidents. The emotion in them did not come by chance. He could photograph motion and gaiety and heartbreak. He could photograph thought. He captured a world and it was Capa's world."

The famous photographer and curator Edward Steichen said this about Capa at his memorial service:

"He understood life. He lived life intensely. He gave richly of what he had to give to life... He lived valiantly, vigorously, with a rare integrity."

### **Takeaway point:**

Robert Capa photographed 5 of the most tragic and emotionally stirring wars in his lifetime. He did so with great compassion, integrity, and love.

To photograph war, destruction, and death is emotionally and psychologically

jarring. Even after Capa went home after photographing war– he suffered many symptoms of PTSD, and resorted heavily to drinking, sleeping with prostitutes, and gambling. He lived a life where death was just around the corner.

Although Capa wasn't a saint in his personal life– the images he created gave so much back to society. He photographed his subjects with great dignity, empathy, and soul. If it weren't for his images– we wouldn't know of the brave men and women who gave their lives in the war, to defend their own country.

As street photographers we don't even get close to the intensity of war. We don't have as much of an ethical duty to capture “truth” and “objectivity” in our images– and document war, death, and famine. However, we still do have a duty to capture the human condition of everyday life.

To create memorable images that will last beyond your life– focus on emotion. Capturing composition is important, but Capa didn't have the most interesting compositions. Focusing on emo-

tion and how your images affect the hearts of your viewers is paramount.

## 4. Create photos for people to remember

Capa also had a drive to photograph to document history– and raise awareness of the wars he recorded to the public.

Capa created images so people wouldn't forget. He wanted people to remember the atrocities of war, and the pain and destruction the war caused.

Even though Capa did love the sense of adventure in his photography, he knew the personal risks he took. During the war this is what he said of it in Life Magazine:

“The war is like an actress who is getting old. It is less and less photogenic and more and more dangerous.”

In an assignment he had for Life magazine in 1944, he showed the awful truth of the coverage of winter advance around Monte Pantano in Italy in a story headlined: “It's a tough war.”

In the story they describe the images Capa shot:

“With the troops of the Fifth Army during the battle for the Liri valley... was Life photographer Robert Capa. His pictures, are grim and unsentimental, but they tell something of what war is like in Italy.”

Readers in America were shocked by the images that Capa recorded. One civilian said this to Life’s editor:

“We need stories like ‘It’s a Tough War’ to slap us in the face and keep us awake to realities”.

Another soldier wrote this about Capa’s images:

“Capa’s pictures clearly portray the bitterness and grimness of the battles to be fought before we reach Berlin and Tokyo. It also brings home the realization of our responsibilities in doing all we can do to support the boys with bonds and work on the home front.”

Capa’s photographs served an important social purpose— for people to remember the atrocities of war. Capa’s images

were able to influence and emotionally affect the public. Capa’s images also rose awareness of what was actually happening overseas in the war.

Capa recounts the “last photograph of World War II” of an American soldier killed by a German sniper:

“It was obvious that the war was just about over, because we knew the Russians were already in Berlin [sic] and that we had to stop shortly after taking Leipzig. We got into Leipzig after a fight, and just had to cross one more bridge. The Germans put up some resistance so we couldn’t cross. There was a bog apartment building which overlooked the bridge. So I figured, “I’m going to get up on the last floor and maybe I’ll get a nice picture of Leipzig in the last minute of the fight.” I got in a nice bourgeois apartment where there was a nice young man on the balcony—a young sergeant who was [setting up] a heavy machine-gun. I took a picture of him. But, God, the war was over. Who wanted to see one more picture of somebody shooting? We had been doing that same picture now for four years and everybody wanted some-



thing different, and by the time this picture would have reached New York probably the headline would be “Peace”. So it made no sense whatsoever. But he looked clean-cut like it was the first day of the war and he was very earnest. So I said, “All right, this will be my last picture of the war.” And I put my camera up and took a portrait shot of him and while I shot my portrait of him he was killed by a sniper. It was a very clean and somehow a very beautiful death, and I think that’s what I remember most from this war.”

And when asked why the image was so important to him, Capa stated:

“It was certainly a picture to remember because I knew that the day after, people will begin to forget.”

Takeaway point:

Know that the photographs you capture today will be historical in the future. You are photographing history as it is actively happening.

I know a lot of street photographers who shoot in the streets to document their communities, city, and society.

They see how times are always changing— and they feel that they have an ethical duty to capture this change.

Know that as a street photographer that your images will record a sign of the times. Your images aren’t just funny photos of weird things happening in the streets. They serve as an important social document to our future generations.

Create images that people won’t forget— and let us follow in Capa’s footsteps.

## 5. Be brave

Robert Capa once famously said, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.”

What made Capa’s images stand out from his peers is that he got closer to the action than anybody. With physical proximity, he gained emotional proximity to his subjects. His images made the viewer feel that they were really there.

However Capa was still a human being. There were many times he was scared and afraid to take photographs.

For example, when he went in to photograph the Normandy invasion during D-Day, this is what he said (with humor and self-deprecation):

“The war correspondent had his stake— his life— in his own own hands, and he can put it on this horse or on that horse, or he can put it back in his pocket at the very last minute. I am a gambler. I decided to go in with Company E in the first wave.”

When Capa was on the beach, he was quite horrified. He managed to shoot around 79 images on his two Contax cameras, while dodging bullets from the oncoming German fire. He saw countless people die around him, with the water turning blood-red. After shooting around 4 rolls of 35mm film, he was barely able to escape.

He then passed out from exhaustion, and awoke next to another soldier. The soldier felt guilty for leaving the invasion so quickly and being a coward—but Capa said that he too, was afraid—and regretted leaving so quickly. Those images ended up being the most power-

ful photographs ever taken at D-Day (even though 3 films were ruined by Life’s darkroom staff, in an attempt to rush to develop his films).

What fueled Capa’s courage to photograph moments like this— which put his life at risk? Capa shares:

“It’s not easy always to stand aside and be unable to do anything except to record the sufferings around one.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Don’t be brave just for the sake of being brave. Don’t be brave to show off. Rather, use your bravery as a way to create meaningful images.

In street photography, overcoming your fear is one of the most difficult things to do. Although we don’t have to worry about death (like war photographers do)— we still have a fear of getting attacked physically, verbally, upsetting people, or making people feel uncomfortable.

But know that street photography isn’t a selfish pursuit. You are trying to capture that will record, document, and

paint a picture about society. Your images will serve a social purpose. They can inspire your viewers, force them to reflect on life, and hopefully feel some sort of emotion inside.

So whenever you are nervous or afraid in street photography— know you are photographing for others, not yourself. You are photographing in the streets for a greater purpose.

## 6. Mentor younger photographers

One of Capa's great traits was that he was extremely loving and supporting of young photographers. While he was still alive, he mentored many new Magnum recruits— including Eve Arnold, Elliot Erwitt, Burt Glinn, Inge Morath, and Marc Riboud.

For example, one of Robert Capa's earliest recruits include Werner Bischof, a Swiss photographer who impressed Capa with photos he took in 1946 of Europe's refugee children.

Although Capa was only 3 years his senior, Bischof saw him as father figure.

Capa encouraged Bischof to continue pursuing his artistic work, while making a living for mainstream magazines.

Another photographer Capa mentored was Inge Morath. When Capa first took her under his wing, he advised her to assist Henri Cartier-Bresson. Upon meeting Cartier-Bresson, Morath was impressed and said he was “the fastest” photographer she ever saw at work. Morath learned to look inconspicuous like Cartier-Bresson, wearing plain overcoats, and trying to visualize her photos before taking them. Cartier-Bresson also suggested Morath to look at images upside down to judge her compositions. If it wasn't for Capa recommending Morath to Cartier-Bresson, she wouldn't have fully flourished as a photographer. This is what Morath specifically said about Capa:

“He was extraordinarily generous with his time. And with money when he had it. He had the most amazing instinct for people, and for how to get the best out of people that I've ever seen. He was inspirational mentor, and all remember him with enormous affection.

Ernst Haas, another of Capa's early recruits said this about Capa:

“Capa was trying to create a ‘poetry of war— a tragic poetry.’ He ‘considered himself anti-art, religion, poetry, sentimental, but it was his hands that really gave away his character. They were tender and feminine and the opposite of his whole appearance, voice, and so on...

Capa wanted to state purely “I was there” , and he wanted to do it without any composition so you would feel the reality of a happening. And you don't really oppose if you just land with a parachute. That is a feeling, and he created this kind of feeling.”

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the most rewarding things in my life has been to mentor younger photographers. When I was fresh out of college and working full-time, I volunteered 2 hours every Friday morning to teach photography to underprivileged students at a continuation school called Phoenix High. With much generosity from you—we were able to donate cameras to their program and help them flourish crea-

tively despite their tough circumstances in life. It made me so happy to see how excited they were about photography, and how they were able to express themselves through their work. Many of them even turned their lives to the better (away from gangs and drugs) and focused more on photography.

One of the things I also love the most about teaching street photography workshops is seeing attendees build their confidence, improve their photographic skills, and build a sense of community with other students. Whenever I see a student at one of my workshops overcome their fears of shooting in the streets and build their confidence— it makes me feel so proud and fulfilled.

Regardless of your experience in street photography— you can always be a mentor to someone else. It can be as simple as your kid, your spouse, your cousin, or volunteering time at a photography program at a local school. Even simpler— you can devote time to critique and give constructive feedback to other street photographers on the web.



By mentoring other photographers, you will not only help them grow and develop— you will also become a more knowledgeable photographer yourself. For example, I found that when I tutored my friends in high school in some of my classes— it helped me learn the material better. Also in writing these articles about the master street photographers, I have learned an incredible amount myself.

So donate your love, time, and energy to other photographers— and you will benefit greatly.

## 7. Be charismatic

One of Capa's greatest strengths as a photographer was his charisma. Milton Wolff, a commander described Capa's character:

“Capa always put on a good face. No gloomy Gus, that madman Hungarian! We all admired his photographs, his guts. You can see from his pictures in Spain how close he was most of the time to the front. He'd butter up officers to get into their good books, so he'd get close to the action.”

In other accounts I read on Capa, apparently he would go near the front lines with a flask of whiskey and share them with soldiers and commanders. When he built up a sense of trust and good-will with them, he was given access to take photographs he wanted.

### Takeaway point:

I think having charisma as a street photographer is a hugely beneficial trait. Having charisma allows you to be more confident in the streets, interact with people more comfortably, and also defuse potentially negative situations.

Whenever I go out and shoot in the streets, I advise going out with a smile. A smile immediately disarms people who might be suspicious of you. Not only that, but talk to strangers and interact with them. Also feel free to ask for permission to take their photographs. By showing charm and enthusiasm when on the streets— it can lead to great street photography opportunities.

## 8. Report “the truth”

On Robert Capa's autobiography: "Slightly Out of Focus" he wrote a disclaimer on the dust jacket:

"Writing the truth being obviously so difficult, I have in the interests of it allowed myself to go sometimes slightly beyond and slightly this side of it. All events and persons in this book are accidental and have something to do with the truth."

Showing the "truth" in photography is a noble pursuit— but you will never show the whole truth. All photography is subjective. You decide where to stand, when to click the shutter— and what to include in the frame (and what to exclude). I don't believe there is any true "objectivity" in photography.

John Hersey, a Pulitzer prize winner and friend of Capa while he was in Sicily in 1943 writes about capturing the "truth":

"Capa has a clear idea of what makes a great picture: "It is a cut of the whole event which will show more of the real truth of the affair to someone who was not there than the whole scene.

Above all — and this is what shows in his pictures— Capa, who has spent so much energy on inventions for his own person, has deep, human sympathy for men and women trapped in reality."

So what Hersey says is that sometimes showing a small piece of an event will show more of the "real truth" of a scene than showing the whole scene.

### **Takeaway point:**

In photography you can't just shoot everything with a fisheye lens. We make conscious decisions what to include in the frame and what to exclude.

Robert Capa experienced so much pain, anguish, strength, joy, and all of the overwhelming feelings of war. But how could he capture all of those experiences in his images? Rather than just showing the entirety of scenes— he would focus on individuals; children in the streets, the proud soldiers, people he would encounter— as well as individual scenes. By showing fragments of his experiences and stitching them all together in a body of work could he describe a "true" portrait of war.

But what ultimately matters in Capa's work is his deep humanistic empathy towards his subjects. That is something that cannot be debated (although perhaps some of the "authenticity" of his images can be debated— like the controversy over the his famous 'falling soldier' image).

As street photographers know that we can never accurately portrait the ultimate "truth" in our images. What we capture through our lenses will always be a representation of the reality we experience. And our job as street photographers is to take our subjective view of the world and share it with others.

I feel as a street photographer we don't share the same ethical duties as documentary or photojournalist photographers. With documentary and photojournalists, they strive harder to show a more "objective truth." But as street photographers, we have more freedom to show our own view of reality. I feel the difference is that documentary and photojournalists are documenting certain events of individuals over a longer period of time— whereas street photogra-

phy tends to be more random and fragmented in terms of the imagery we capture.

So know that although you will never show "objective truth" about humanity through your photographs— you can always show your love, empathy, and viewpoint of society and the world. Aim to create your own reality through your images, and share your unique viewpoint with the world.

## Conclusion

Robert Capa was an incredible photographer and a human being. He came from nothing— and through his wit, cunning, and charm was he able to build up his image as "The Greatest War-Photographer in the World". He never liked playing by the rules of others— and helped found Magnum, which has influenced photographic history more than any other cooperative that has existed.

Even though his personal past is littered with scandals, gambling, and other illicit activities— his deep human empathy and compassion was evident through his actions and images. He mentored

many younger photographers and took them under his wing all of whom became great photographers. His images also show deep love to his subjects, and he often put his life on the line to create the most dramatic images of war (to show all the horrors and ills of it).

Although Capa may not have been the greatest photographer in history, he was surely one of the most courageous, inspirational, and influential.





39

## ROBERT FRANK

“The Americans” by Robert Frank is one of the most influential photo books published of all-time. It has inspired countless numbers of photographers across all genres, especially appealing to documentary and street photographers. I know the book has had a profound impact on my photography and how I approach projects.

While I am not an expert on Robert Frank or “The Americans”, I will share what I personally have learned from his work. For your reference, I used Steidl’s “Looking In: Robert Frank’s The Americans” as a primary resource for this article.

The article is incredibly long, and I encourage you to read it not all in one sitting, but in different phases.

I would also highly recommend saving this article and reading it on Instapaper or Pocket. These services allow you to save the article to read later on your phone, iPad, computer, etc.

## Introduction to ‘The Americans’:

“The Americans” is a photography book by Swiss-born Robert Frank, published first in France (1958) and then in the US (1959). It consisted of 83 photographs, with only one photograph per page. I am certain that many of you are familiar with Robert Frank and “The Americans”. But for those of you who are not as familiar with “The Americans” let’s address why it was so important and influential.

*Why was “The Americans” so influential?*

“The Americans” was influential for several reasons. I will try my best to outline why I perceive it to be so influential:

## 1. It challenged the documentary tradition

During the era that Frank published “The Americans”, documentary photography was seen to be as something transparent and not to be influenced by the thoughts, emotions, or viewpoint of the photographer. A quote from the book on “Looking In: The Americans”:

“In the late 1950s and early 1960s neither The Americans nor Frank’s work made on his Guggenheim fellowship were well received, especially by the photography press. Edgy, critical, and often opaque at a time when photography was generally understood to be wholesome, simplistic, and patently transparent, the photographs disconcerted editors even before the book was published.”

When Robert Frank worked on the Americans, consider it from his viewpoint. He was Swiss-born, and he saw America from an outsider perspective. Although his work was a labor of love, he clearly showed the ugly parts of American society, which included mass

consumerism, racism, and the divide between the rich and poor.

Frank was clear in saying that his work was a personal account of America, as he mentioned in U.S. Camera Annual 1958. Frank shared that the book was “...personal and, therefore, various facets of American society and life have been ignored.”

Through “The Americans” Frank wanted to highlight the darker side of America which hadn’t been shown before.

## 2. It challenged the aesthetic of photography

During the 1950’s, the tradition and aesthetic of photography championed clean, well-exposed, and sharp photographs. Technical perfection was considered king. However in Frank’s “The Americans”, he was first harshly criticized by critics saying things like the prints were “Flawed by meaningless blur grain, muddy exposure, drunken horizons, and general sloppiness”.

Not only that, but critics would see Frank as having “contempt for any standards of quality or discipline in technique.” To better understand where Frank got his gritty aesthetic from, let us explore a bit of his background: When Frank started photography in his early twenties, he studied with Alexey Brodovitch, a Russian-born innovator for Harper’s Bazaar. Brodovitch was well known for turning the magazine from having drab and boring photographs and adding dynamic montages of photos and text.

What Frank learned from Brodovitch was “to respond to situations not analytically or intellectually but emotionally and to create highly original works of art that reflected their personal respond to their environment.”

Therefore Frank learned that in order to create emotional photographs, he needed to experiment with different techniques in photographing, printing, and presenting his work. Brodovitch was experimental, and “encouraged students to use blur, imprecise focus, large foreground forms, bleach negatives, radically

crop and distort print, or print two photographs on top of each other, put gauze over lens of enlargers – to not capture facts of scene but to experience it.”

This mentorship from Brodovitch had a strong influence on the young Robert Frank. From his work leading up to “The Americans”, he did very much that. He would often shoot at night using imprecise focus, incorporated blur into his work, and would use grainy film. Not only that, but Frank experimented printing his photographs with extreme contrast (disregarding the need to create an image with good tonal range), printing in extreme shapes (trapezoids), and would crop radically.

Therefore when Frank shot “The Americans”, he kept those same aesthetics. If you look closely at his contact sheets, many of his photographs were either too bright, too dark, so off-balance, and out-of-focus that “Frank seems at times not even to have looked through the viewfinder or bothered to check the controls on his camera.”

Frank certainly did this with the purpose to better convey the feelings that he had about America– the dark, alienating, and foreign. Not only from Brodovitch, but he also had many other influences from his study of abstract expressionist painters such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. From them he learned the following:

“[Frank] had learned about the relationship between tone and scale to the sensation of weight, and he recognized that shadows or out-of-focus forms need not be legible – could even approach abstraction – and still be highly evocative. With this understanding, his photographs became not merely unclear in their subjects and casual in their style but also potent, deeply haunting, and deliberately ambiguous.”

Therefore through this examination of his studies with Brodovitch and his inspiration from abstract expressionist painters such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, he used this gritty aesthetic deliberately for “The Americans”.



Did it piss off the critics? It certainly did, who simply thought that Frank was being sloppy and lacking technique. But it was through his experimentation and going against the grain of the style of what everyone was photographing at the time — did he create a meaningful and memorable project.

### 3. It challenged the rules of photography, and emphasized feeling

Not only did Frank challenge how he approached documentary photography and the aesthetic in which he employed— he also created images with an emphasis on feeling above all else. Frank says this about his own work:

“The photograph must be the result of a head to head, a confrontation with a power, a force that one interrogates or questions.”

To create images that are docile and straightforward aren’t enough for Frank. Rather, he wants to create images that are full of power, energy, and ask questions. He didn’t want to create a “picture

that really said it all, that was a masterpiece.” Rather, he would try to create images that he would gain feeling and emotion from the photos. An excerpt from “Looking In” also shows the challenge that Frank faced at the time:

“Rebelling against the popular 1950s notion championed by Edward Steichen and others that photography was a universal language, easily understood by all, he wanted a form that was open-ended, even deliberately ambiguous— one that engaged his viewers, rewarded their prolonged consideration, and perhaps even left them with as many questions as answers.”

Therefore in “The Americans”, he didn’t want to create simply a straightforward documentation of America that was more “objective”. Rather, he took very subjective photographs that challenged the viewers of “The Americans” to ask themselves what they were looking at — and to challenge their own views and prejudices about America.

#### 4. It focused less on the “single image”

When Robert Frank decided to start shooting “The Americans”, “straight photography” was the favored style – in which single images, not projects, were king. “Looking in” elaborates:

“‘Straight’ photography was a favored term when both men began to photograph. A Linchpin of “modern” photography, in the United States at least, this approach emphasized relatively un-manipulated prints made from a single negative, with glory given to the work that summarized an instant into a supreme moment of beauty of human understanding. [Frank didn’t pledge] allegiance to such “pure” photography, in which a single, great exposure was the ultimate achievement”.

Therefore by working on this project, Frank was less interested about creating single powerful images (as many photographers on social media do nowadays as well). Rather, he was more interested in creating a strong body of work in which his interpretation of America

wouldn’t be summed up in a single image- but rather through all of his images as a collective.

#### Why Frank Decided To Shoot “The Americans”:

Frank was born in Switzerland to a middle-class family and secured solid photography training there. His early influences were some of the most important Swiss photographers, editors, and designers such as Arnold Kubler, Gotthard Schuh, and Jakob Tuggener.

Although he had great inspirational figures in Switzerland Frank reported:

“I wanted to get out of Switzerland. I didn’t want to build my future there. The country was too closed, too small for me.”

Therefore he embarked on a journey to America, and spent a considerable amount of time in NYC, where he met some of the most influential photographers and curators at the time including Andre Kertesz, Walker Evans, Louis Faure, and Edward Steichen.

However in around 1953, Frank became discouraged after wandering and shooting the streets of NYC for about 6 years. One of his main frustrations was that he couldn't get his photographs published more widely. For example, he would often be rejected by LIFE magazine to publish his work. Frank shares his frustrations and his disdain for the stories made for LIFE:

“I developed a tremendous contempt for LIFE, which helped me. You have to be enraged. I also wanted to follow my own intuition and do it my own way, and to make concessions – not make a LIFE story. That was another thing I hated. Those goddamned stories with a beginning and an end. If I hate all those stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end then obviously I will make an effort to produce something that will stand up to those stories but not be like them”.

Not only that, but he was also rejected when he applied for membership to the prestigious Magnum Photo Agency. After a brief hiatus in Switzerland, he went back to the states and

said, “This is the last time that I go back to New York and try to reach the top through my personal work.”

What ensued afterwards was history. Through support from Walker Evans, Edward Steichen, and Alexey Brodovitch – he applied for a Guggenheim fellowship to make a book on America to reveal “the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere.” With great fortune, he became the first European-born photographer to be awarded the Guggenheim in 1955.

When Frank embarked to photograph “The Americans”, he traveled over 10,000 miles across 30 states in 9 months. Upon returning to New York in the June of 1956, he spent nearly a year developing his 767 rolls of film, making contacts sheets from which he made 1000 work prints. After that, he refined his selection and then established the sequence for the book.

Before Frank went on to shoot “The Americans” he learned many lessons from his mentors.

## 1. Lessons from Walker Evans (on working in a methodological manner)

Walker Evans, the already famous photographer for taking his “American Photographs” book was one of Frank’s early mentors. Not only did Evans champion Frank’s work, but Frank learned many lessons from him (although their styles were quite different). Frank worked in a very sociological, methodological manner – often utilizing a large-format camera and wanted to create transparent and “objective” photographs. On one account, when Frank went out to shoot with Evans, Frank noted how it was important to be more reflective (rather than spontaneous) when photographing.

However at the end of the day, Frank shot much more with with emotion and feel – utilizing a small Leica rangefinder, which was more sporadic and vigorous.

“Evans had also photographed people in the south, but he had often gotten

to know them first, as in his work with James Agee for their celebrated book ‘Let Us Now Praise Famous Men’ (1941). Frank made no similar effort and rarely conversed with the people he photographed, for despite what was written in his Guggenheim application, his intention was not sociological, analytical, or documentary. Responding to the country, as he later said, not by “looking at it but by feeling something from it.”

Frank acted very much like the detached observer when photographing, and didn’t strive to make a sociological or analytical view like Evans did. Rather to Frank, the feeling that the viewer got from the photograph was the most important.

### **Takeaway point:**

It is important for us to know our own tendencies (in terms of our shooting styles) whether we tend to be more contemplative or sporadic. We should strive to balance ourselves out. For example, if we tend to photograph slowly, we can gain skill by trying to photograph quicker. If we are much more sporadic



and vigorous when shooting street photography, we should slow down and try to be more contemplative. But at the end of the day, it is important to know your true self and style – and stick mainly with it.

## 2. Lessons from Henri Cartier-Bresson (on inspiration, influences, and originality)

When Frank first moved to NYC, one of the first photography exhibitions he saw was by Henri Cartier-Bresson at the MOMA. Cartier-Bresson's work had a huge impact on Frank that challenged him to take his photography to the next level. "Looking In" shares:

"Frank quickly learned from and assimilated new influences, often only to turn against them after extracting that all he found useful, a pattern that repeated itself throughout his life. Within the first three weeks of his arrival in New York, he visited the Henri Cartier-Bresson exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, among the last of the exhibi-

tions that Beaumont and Nancy Newhall organized here. Frank was deeply impressed, it challenged him to become more than a fashion photographer.

Furthermore Cartier-Bresson's exhibition showed Frank the power of photography and how many opportunities it presented:

Frank said later that seeing that exhibition "Was a very good instruction." He saw that the field of photography was much broader and more open to him, continuing: "I had the feeling that I could do something else. I just saw possibilities. I wanted to try them and do them."

Although Frank obtained a great deal of inspiration from Henri Cartier-Bresson, he still felt it was important to have his own vision. He also touches on how equipment wasn't as important as creating your own unique work. Frank says:

"To do good work you need a further intelligence. And you can't just imitate a famous 35mm photographer.

Cartier-Bresson won't help, wide-angle lenses won't help either."

### **Takeaway point:**

To sum up, Frank believed the importance of having role models and other photographers to draw inspiration from. However he realized that merely imitating their aesthetic or using the focal lengths that they used wouldn't create interesting or unique art. So don't try to simply imitate photographers you look up to. Draw inspiration from them, but strive towards your own vision. Oh yeah, and having certain cameras or lenses will do little in creating unique work (they knew that even half a century ago).

## **3. Lessons from Edward Steichen (on getting closer to your subjects / keeping your photography and income separate)**

Edward Steichen, one of the most influential and important photographer curators of all time gave the young Frank lots of great advice when it came to his

photography. In a letter dated April 2, 1952 Steichen advised Frank the importance of getting closer to his subjects, not just physically but emotionally:

"I sometimes feel that I would like to see you more in closer to people. It seems to me that you are ready now to begin probing beyond environment into the soul of man. I believe you made a fine decision in taking yourself and family away from the tenseness of the business of photography there. You must let every moment of the freedom you are having contribute to your growing and growing. Just as the microscope and the telescope seek a still closer look at the universe, we as photographer must seek to penetrate deeper and closer into our brothers. Please excuse if this sounds like preaching. It is dictated by an interest and affection for you and yours."

Steichen saw Frank's strength at capturing the environment and mood of his subjects, but stressed the importance of getting to know "the soul of man". Steichen only thought it would be possible for Frank to do this by spending more time getting in-depth with the subjects

that he captured, to get to know the small nuances and what made his subjects unique.

After hearing this advice, Frank was inspired to go to Caerau, Wales in 1953, where he photographed a miner named Ben James for several days. Frank lived with him in his home and photographed his entire day. Frank would rise with him, follow him to work, even late into the night. This would be great early training in the early tradition of documentary photography to help him immerse himself into his “Americans” project.

Steichen also gave Frank some practical advice with his photography (that carries lots of practical value today as well) on not doing photography full-time. That is, to practice photography on the side while getting a source of income elsewhere. Steichen stressed the importance of getting an income elsewhere to keep photography separate from the need to earn a living – to truly focus on the photography without any constraints. As Frank recalled, Steichen told him the following:

“It is better to be a plumber in the daytime so you can be a photographer at night time.” - Steichen

### **Takeaway point:**

Although Frank didn’t entirely listen to Steichen (for the rest of his career he pursued video-making and his photography) I think it carries great value for photographers today. Many of us don’t have the luxury or the chance to pursue our photography full-time. Although many of us dream of making our photography a living, Steichen’s advice of keeping your photography and work separate carries strong weight. Don’t think that your day job prevents you from creating strong photographic work – rather see it as something that will help support you and in your photography.

## **4. Lessons from Brodovitch (on equipment and taking risks)**

When Frank was a young photographer, he shot mostly with a medium-format square-format Rolleiflex camera. However Alexey Brodovitch, a Russian-

born photographer, designer and instructor (who Frank looked up to) suggested him to ditch the Rolleiflex for a 35mm Leica. Brodovitch suggested that the Leica could create more fluid, immediate images, whereas the Rolleiflex was much slower and bulkier by comparison.

Furthermore, Brodovitch encouraged Frank to “unlearn his methodological Swiss habits and taught him to take risks”. You can see that Frank took up Brodovitch’s advice by leaving his comfortable home of Switzerland to pursue photography in NYC.

Takeaway point: You don’t need to shoot with a Leica to be a great street photographer. However at the time, the Leica was the smallest, most maneuverable, and quickest camera to use. Therefore in today’s terms, I would advise against using a bulky DSLR and perhaps using a more nimble camera like a Micro 4/3rds, compact camera, or even an iPhone. Of course you can still create great work with a DSLR but note that it may weigh you down.

## How Frank Prepared his Trip to Photograph “The Americans”

For those of you who are curious how Frank prepared his trip to photograph “The Americans” below is a rough itinerary of what he prepared:

1. Gathered maps and itineraries from the American Automobile Association
2. Collected letters of reference from the Guggenheim Foundation and friends in the press (in-case people questioned his photographing intentions)
3. Introductions to representatives to industries around the country (to capture a wide variety of images)
4. Suggestions from fellow photographers of places to visit
  - Walker Evans: The South
  - Ben Schultz and Todd Walker: Los Angeles
  - Wayne Miller: San Francisco



Frank also prepared some symbols that he wanted to pursue/capture:

1. Flags
2. Cowboys
3. Rich Socialites
4. Juke-boxes
5. Politicians

Frank also numbered his rolls of film in chronological order and labeled according to location. He also sometimes labeled his film according to subject matter.

## Subject matter that Frank Ended up Photographing

Below are some re-occurring subjects that he ended up photographing in his trips around the U.S.

### **1. Cars (photos. 77, 78, 80)**

Frank saw how cars isolated people, separated them from surroundings.

### **2. American Lunch Counters (photo. 69)**

Frank was fascinated by American Lunch Counters, especially how strang-

ers would sit next to each other while eating. This was something very different from what Europeans would do.

### **3. Consumerism**

When traveling around the states, Frank was surprised to see how powerful the role of consumerism culture was in American life. He saw the over-abundance of choices, with people constantly bombarded by signs, cards, newspapers, magazines, and advertisements.

### **4. Suburbs**

Frank was interested in the suburbs, in the sense of how Americans were becoming much more solitary in nature. For example a photograph he took of a drive-in movie theater in a Detroit suburb showed the lonely beauty of watching a movie alone by yourself. Whereas in the past watching a movie was done side-by-side others in a communal type-of-way.

### **5. Public parks**

Frank was drawn how in public parks people would mix in together, and also be totally unaware of his camera.

## 6. Cemeteries (photos. 80, 74)

Frank photographed several cemeteries in his journeys, and tried to capture their emotional resonance and somberness.

## 7. Juke-boxes (photos. 17, 65, 67, 43)

Frank found the jukeboxes to be quite hypnotic – and expressive of the allure of American music.

# The Working Style of Robert Frank

When Frank photographed “The Americans”, he learned much of his working style from Walker Evans. An excerpt from “Looking in” which shows how Frank learned to be much more patient when photographing from Evans:

“When Frank helped Evans photograph tools for Fortune, he “learned what it is to be simple” and “to look at one thing and look at it very clearly and in a final way”. Frank was impressed with Evan’s careful observation of his subjects and his patience in waiting until the light revealed the scene exactly as he

wanted to picture it. Although patience was never an attribute Frank valued or cultivated, keen observation and simplicity proved invaluable to him in the coming months.”

Although Frank discovered the importance of being patient in his working methods, Frank was also more intuitive and photographed quite swiftly. In the excerpt below it explains how he would take several exposures decisively and work quite fluidly:

“The year before, when he had photographed cowboys at Madison square garden or socialites at the toy ball, he had made many exposures of the people and the scenes that interested him, no doubt hoping that an editor would find one of use. But now, with the knowledge that he had plenty of materials, a full year to work on the project, and no one to please but himself, he responded more immediately and intuitively. He took one, two, or three exposures, swiftly, surely, and decisively, and then moved on, for he recognized, “First thought, best thought...When one re-

leases a second time, there is already a moment lost.”

Over time when Frank worked on “The Americans” his working style evolved into being much more graceful and casual. “Looking in” elaborates on this point:

“In the coming months, as he gained more confidence in his new approach and worked himself into what he later referred to as a “State of grace”, Frank’s style became looser, more casual, even gestural, and all about movement. [...] Frank photographed his subjects with their backs to the camera, their faces partially obscured, or looming ominously in the foreground, as if they were about to turn and confront him (photos 29, 32).

One of the most poignant themes that Frank pursued in “The Americans” was the disparity of wealth in America, as well as the blatant racism. One of the subject matters that hadn’t been explored much during his period was the rich. He didn’t want to just photograph the poor and the middle class – as he

wanted to paint a fuller-picture of the American socio-economic classes.

However the difficulty he found in photographing “the richer people, the upper class people” was that they were more difficult to find and photograph. Whereas the poor and the middle class would often be out in the open, the rich would be more secluded, behind closed doors. To locate and photograph the rich, he focused on finding them at movie premieres and balls where the wealthy were abundant.

When it came to capturing racism, he had a difficult time to convey this concept through his photographs. He first started off much more objectively, photographing signs of water fountains that said “white” and “colored”. “Looking-in” shares:

As they traveled from Norfolk to Richmond, Virginia, to Charlotte, North Carolina, Frank was “amazed” by the discrimination he saw. Although he had lived in New York for several years and had traveled to St. Louis and Kansas City, nothing prepared him for the rigid

segregation of the south, which he described as “totally a new experience”. His contact sheets show that he initially addressed the issue of segregation by photographing the signs for “white” and “colored” water fountains or waiting areas that he frequently encountered.

However as Frank went deeper into the south, he realized more nuanced ways to capture racism through his photos that weren’t “too clear”. He did this in different ways by juxtaposing the living conditions of the wealthy whites and the poverty-ridden African Americans. He also became to admire the struggling African Americans much more than their wealthy counterparts:

But as he ventured deeper into the south, and his objectives became increasingly layered and nuanced, he rejected these easier, more obvious solutions as “too clear” and “banal”. He came to understand that he wanted not only to comment on the pervasive presence of racism but also to reveal the affinity he felt for African Americans and to celebrate their openness and lack of suspicion compared to the Caucasians he encountered.

## 1. What Frank learned about editing/sequencing/bookmaking:

*a) How Frank learned how to group photos by subject matter*

Before Frank shot “The Americans” he learned how to edit and group photos by subject matter from Michael Wolgensigner, a Swiss commercial photographer favored by the modernist graphic designers of the time. Wolgensigner showed Frank how to make contact prints of 2 1/4” negatives and glue them onto cards, grouped by subject matter.

While Frank was still in Zurich, he made cards with the contact prints of his photographs. Some of his basic themes included animals, architecture, children, farming, and people. Larger themes he approached included: reportage, sports, transportation, work, and Zurich itself.

This training from Wolgensigner to edit and group photos by themes helped build Frank’s discipline– and to work efficiently, pragmatically, and systematically. Although some of his classifications



were very basic (children, animals, people), he soon took this to the next level and started thinking about it more conceptually. It helped him what “Looking Inside” says: “[It helped him] recognize subjects and themes that had meaning on him”.

### **Takeaway point:**

When you are working on a project (or thinking about starting a project) – try printing out some of your images on small 4×6 prints and group them according to subject matter. You can also do this on Lightroom and other image-editing software, but doing it with physical prints will help you get a more tactile and fluid experience. By grouping your images to subject matter, you will start seeing the reoccurring themes in your work or certain types of images that interest you. Using this as a starting point, you can start thinking more critically and conceptually about your project.

### *b) What Frank learned about sequencing (adding blank pages)*

Another photographer Frank drew early inspiration from was a Swiss pho-

tographer named Jakob Tuggener. In one of Tuggener’s books titled: “Fabrik, A Photo Epos of Technology” was comprised up of 72 photographs that showed the destructive power of technology and influence on humans.

Tuggener’s book was divided into 9 parts, each which had a different aspect of the industries and modern technologies. Each photograph was separated by blank pages to function as “hyphens” or “breaks” to provide the viewer to give a chance to reflect on what they just saw. Frank ended up doing the same with “The Americans” – inserting blank pages in-between to also give the viewer a chance to reflect on the previous images. Frank says himself, “To see his photos affirmed the idea that one must ‘be present’.

Therefore by inserting blank pages in-between each photograph forces the viewer of the book to be more of an active viewer, trying to make hidden connections and see the flow of the story, rather than mindlessly flipping through pages. Tuggener was also interested in filmmaking, so you can say that the way

that he sequenced his photographs was familiar to that of modernist films, and in admiration of pioneering Soviet Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein's principles of montage. Frank also mentioned to Tugener's book to being "like cinema".

Even Alexey Brodovitch, the Russian-born photographer/designer that Frank looked up to, said that he: "Understood that the act of looking at a book was temporal experience, akin to watching a film".

### **Takeaway point:**

When you are sequencing a project or a book, realize the power and importance of blank pages. Don't simply do it as a stylistic tool, but make it intentional.

*c) How Frank learned that sequencing could be a "profound work of art"*

The first real example in which Frank sequenced a book (that hugely inspired the sequencing in "The Americans" was from his book: "Black White and Things". The book was focused on the somber and joyous moments of life.

What "Looking In" says about how Frank sequenced the book and built up a sense of rhythm:

"Compounding the sequence's impact, tone, and meaning, Frank for the first time placed most of the photographs opposite blank pages, allowing an almost stately progression of image after image to build up in the reader's mind. Yet, as readers look through the book, they quickly discover that they must move both forward and backward through it, remembering what they have seen before and knowing what will come next. Thus, form and content become interdependent, and meaning is established as much by the movement between the photographs as by the photographs themselves."

To emphasize, the meaning Frank created in his book wasn't just the photographs themselves, but the movement and pauses in-between the pages of the book. Frank also found it important that he didn't have to explain everything to the viewer so directly:

“Something must be left for the onlooker. He must have something to see. It is not all said for him”.

In terms of what Frank wanted people to feel when looking at his photos? Frank likens it to a poem:

“[I want my viewers to] feel the way they do when they want to read a line of a poem twice”.

**Takeaway point:**

When you are putting together a project or book, know that the sequencing of the book is just as important as the images themselves. Be very deliberate on the order you put your images together, and try to create a certain rhythm to it in which certain photos next to one another can be similar (or dissimilar). Sequencing isn't something scientific, rather it is something that you feel. Try to sequence your images in which they flow well, and ask your peers for their suggestions on sequencing as well.

*d) On pairing images together*

A spread from Frank's “Black white and things” book. Although in “The

Americans” Frank left the opposite page blank, you can see how he paired these images that looked similar. Jesus on the left side of the page and a hot air balloon on the right? Perhaps Frank was trying to juxtapose religion and American consumerism?

Although in Frank's “The Americans” he only included individual photos per page, he learned the concept of pairing photos together on separate pages from Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein:

“Two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality”.

This is another important concept that you can take-away when creating your own photography book.

**Takeaway point:**

Try to pair images on opposite sides of the pages that may be similar or different- that synthesize into a new concept or have a new meaning. For example, you can have two images on opposite pages that mirror one another or are similar. For example, you have a photo-

graph of a child on the left side of the page, and of a baby animal on the right side of the page.

Or have a photograph of something that is predominantly red on the left side of the page, and another photograph of something red on the right side of the page. You can also do this with polar opposites. For example, if you have a photograph of a rich man on the left side of a page and a photograph of manure on the right side of the page, it will suggest to the viewer your feelings of the rich.

Another example perhaps would be having a photograph of an SUV/Hummer on the left side of the page and of dollar bills on the right side of the page to show how you may feel how wasteful SUV's/Hummers may be.

## 2. How Frank processed his film and made initial edits

When Frank was done shooting “The Americans” – he had the monumental task of developing his film, creating contact sheets, making initial edits, and organizing them. “Looking In” writes:

“Throughout the summer and fall of 1956, Frank finished developing the more than 767 rolls of film he had shot for the project, made contact sheets of them, reviewed more than 2,700 frames, and marked those images he thought were of interest. He then embarked on the monumental task of making approximately 1,000 work prints, which he annotated, often with a red grease pencil, with the corresponding number of the roll of film.”

### Takeaway point:

When making initial edits of a project you are working on, mark anything of which is interest to you. Then you can continue on a more precise edit afterwards.

## 3. Frank editing his work

When Frank first started developing his film (at his friend's darkroom) he was ruthless in editing. “Looking In” mentions:

“[Frank] edited them on the spot, unsentimentally cutting off and throwing away those frames he found of no inter-



est. With a quick eye and sure judgment, he discovered that ‘even when the photographs are bad, looking at them is instructive.’”

Not only was Frank able to quickly discard his worst images, but he also used them as a tool to better learn what his good images were. Robert Frank once said this about editing: “What you reject... is just as important“. “Looking In” also said this about Frank’s editing:

“Trying to make sense of this vast accumulation, Frank knew that just as he photographed ‘by process of elimination,’ so too by editing the work prints he could “come into the core” of what he wanted to express.”

Takeaway point: Be ruthless when it comes to your own editing. While you don’t necessarily need to cut up the negatives of your bad photos or delete them, be critical with yourself. Would you want that image to make it into a book? Would you want to see it in an exhibition printed large? Also don’t be frustrated with your rejected images- but learn from them.

## 4. Initially categorizing his images

Frank also categorized his images accordingly:

“[Frank] also noted those subjects that he had repeatedly explored, such as cars, jukeboxes, and lunch counters, and those that he had only tangentially touched upon, especially religion, the media, the flag, and the look of the new suburban landscape.”

By noting the general categories of subjects that he shot, he was able to get a better understanding of what themes he found interesting about America- as well as other themes he wished to explore more. This included religion, the media, the flag, and the suburban landscape. After his first round of developing and looking at his negatives, he would then go back and make a conscious effort to re-shoot those certain themes. Frank also started to realize that the type of images he was taking started changing. “Looking In” writes:

“[Frank] also recognized that in the last few months not only had his style and approach changed, so too had his intention. No longer striving for poetic effect or even beautiful photographs he now openly sought to express his opinions about what he saw— his anger at the abuse of power, his suspicion of wealth and its privileges, his support for those less fortunate, and most of all, his fears about the kind of culture he saw emerging in the country.”

This goes back to the idea that Frank wasn’t shooting “The Americans” as a transparent documentary project, but rather a project that was personal to him — and full of meaning, anger, and suspicion. This is what Frank said when asked about his thoughts:

“America is an interesting country, but there is a lot that I do not like and that I would never accept. I am also trying to show this through my photos”.

Therefore his images weren’t just about creating aesthetically pleasing images. Rather, he wanted to bring atten-

tion to injustices he saw through his photos.

### **Takeaway point:**

When you are working on a project, by categorizing your images and tracking them – you can see how your own intention, style, and approach can change and evolve. When you see your work evolving into something else than you originally intended, don’t try to force it. Go with the flow and let your work take a life of its own.

## **5. Organizing his prints**

When Frank made his nearly 1,000 work prints, he did the following to organize his prints. “Looking In” shares:

“Out of this chaos [Frank] began to construct some order. He spread the work prints out on tables and the floor of his apartment and thumbtacked, even stapled them to its walls.

By tacking and stapling the images on his apartment, he would live with the photographs – and get a better sense of what he felt were the strongest images, and how he should sequence them.

“Looking In” elaborates on the themes that Frank identified:

“Following the training he had received in Zurich from Michael Wolgensinger, he grouped them at first by themes: cars, race, religion, politics, and the media were the major components, but he also arranged them by depictions of the way Americans live, work, eat, and play, as well as by more minor subjects that had caught his attention — such as cemeteries, jukeboxes, and lunch counters. And he devoted one group to images of his family.”

Frank would then constantly move around and re-pin his photos in different parts of his walls and houses:

“As the boundaries between the groups were porous and the divisions fluid, he frequently moved prints around, often ripping them off the walls only to thumbtack them next to a new neighbor or set them aside entirely in a box. Sometimes he put red circular marks on those photographs he considered strongest; occasionally he marked

them to indicate how they should be cropped.”

Also through this process, Frank decided which photos and themes he should eliminate:

“In the process, [Frank] entirely eliminated some subjects he had thought he might explore, such as the suburban landscape people trapped by the detritus of consumer culture, and any literal allusion to the immigrant experience. He later estimated that he spent 3 to 4 months doing this evaluation and editing— it was, he told a group of students, “the biggest job on that book.”

Therefore you could see that in order to create “The Americans” – Frank took editing very seriously. Not only did he edit by intuition, but he also did it analytically by exploring certain themes. Another important note to make is how he decided to get rid of some themes in the book, such as the suburban landscape, consumer culture, and the immigrant experience. By cutting out these other themes, he was able to focus on the central themes in his book such as

race, religion, and the overwhelming sense of alienation.

### **Takeaway point:**

When you are editing your own work, try the same technique. Although we have ways to do it digitally (Lightroom, Aperture, etc) there is great merit in doing it via the analogue approach. Print our small 4×6's and spread them out on the ground, tack them to your walls, and move them around. There is something amazing about this tactile approach which is hard to describe – which can help you get a better final edit/sequence of your work.

## **6. Creating the structure of “The Americans”**

Upon editing his work, Frank then focused on the sequence and the structure of the book:

“Next, he worked on the sequence itself. Laying out some of the work prints on the floor or tables and pinning others to the walls, he slowly devised a structure. Like his own “Black white and things”, Evans’ “American photographs”,

and Tuggener’s “Fabrik”, his book would be divided into four chapters, each separated by blank pages, most opening with a photograph of a flag.

One thing that Frank also did which was radical at the time was to crop his images. Sometimes radically, and at other times less radically:

By spring 1957, Frank had cut down his one thousand work prints to approximately one hundred and made new prints, which he more carefully considered the cropping. Sometimes he used the full negative, as in Trolley- New Orleans, but more often he presented only a portion of it.”

“Looking In” shares some of the figures Frank eliminated through his cropping:

“[Frank] eliminated a distracting figure on the far right in City Fathers – Hoboken, New Jersey; emphasized the cross like forms behind the conventioneer, in Political Rally – Chicago, and the evangelist in Jehovah’s Witness- Los Angeles, tightened the relationship between the campaign posters and the bumper pool



table in Luncheonette – Butte, Montana; and focused more closely on the lonely young woman in Elevator – Miami Beach and on the scheming politicians in Convention hall – Chicago.”

Some of Frank’s crops were radical:

“He even extracted two vertical prints, Hotel Lobby – Miami and Movie Premiere – Hollywood from horizontal negatives.”

One of his famous photos from a ball, originally a horizontal photograph. Cropped into a vertical photograph.

Touching upon sequencing again in the book and creating a maquette (a dummy book):

“Working quickly and intuitively, with no preconceived ideas about the subject of each chapter, he sequenced the book, once again laying the photographs out on tables and the floor and pinning them to the walls. As he worked, he established only one rule: if two selected photographs came from the same contact sheet, one would follow the other in the sequence. And finally he made a maquette, 8 3/8 by 9 1/2 inches,

with photostats of ninety two of the selected images.”

### Takeaway point:

Although personally I am not a huge fan of cropping, you can see that Frank cropped many of his photos – some of them quite radically (turning horizontal shots into vertical shots). Therefore if you want to make a photograph more powerful, have more focus onto a single subject, and get rid of distractions, crop your shots.

## 7. The initial maquette (dummy book) of “The Americans”

The maquette (initial dummy book) of “The Americans” showed many things about what Frank tried to express through the sequencing. “Looking In” shares:

“The maquette indicates that, as he had begun to do in ‘Black White and Things [one of his previous books],’ in his book on america, meaning would be garnered through a deliberate progres-

sion of images that did not rely on obvious side by side comparisons but instead engaged readers in a much more active manner, asking them to recall what they had seen on previous pages and reflect on their relationship to what they currently saw.

Many other books published during Frank's time often showed two photos side-by-side on opposite sides of the page— sometimes with similar subject matter and sometimes totally opposite. Rather, Frank deliberately had only one photograph per two-page spread, to force the viewer to recall the images they saw before and think about the meaning. "Looking In" continues:

"While demanding more of his readers and enticing them to join him in a voyage of discovery, Frank also more fully engaged them intellectually, emotionally and even viscerally."

To force the reader to make connections between the breaks or pauses in a book challenged them to be much more active in digesting and understanding

the book. Rather than being passive readers, they would be active participants.

### **Takeaway point:**

Depending on what you want your project to do for the reader, consider either pairing similar images (or different images) side-by-side on the same spread. Or insert breaks in-between to help the reader become a much more active participant in reading your project/book.

## **8. The flow of images**

When Frank sequenced the book, he didn't want to have a book of stand-alone images. He didn't see any of his photos as individual images, but part of a larger collection. When asked about how he sequenced the book, Frank said in an interview:

"I tried to not just have one picture thrown in alone, isolated as a picture. That's what I tried to do. I think it often sort of succeeds."

Not only did he want to create meaning through associations and relationships, but he also wanted to create a

movement through his photos. Frank continues:

“I wanted to create some kind of rhythm... I’m not sure now whether I wanted to have first pictures that didn’t move and then move movement in the pictures later on in the next few.”

During his lifetime Frank was very fascinated with theater and film (he pursued it actively after completing “The Americans”). Very much so he tried to sequence the book like a moving picture – having the static photos move with energy, vigor, and life.

### **Takeaway point:**

Don’t think of your photography project or book as a book of single images, but rather a collective full of images that flow well and have meaning stacked on one another.

## **The Critical Response of Frank’s “The Americans”**

Although Frank’s “The Americans” is now revered as one of the most important photo-books ever made in the history of photography, it was very contro-

versial when it first came out – and Frank encountered considerable criticism.

For example critics described the book to be “a slashing and bitter attack on some U.S. institutions,” “a wart-covered picture of America,” and a “disturbing” portrayal of “the Ugly American.”

Frank was also personally accused of being a “joyless man who hates the country of his adoption” and “a liar perversely basking in the kind of world and the kind of misery he is perpetually seeking and persistently creating.”

Some more criticisms that he received was that he was a “poor essayist with no convincing storyteller at all” and that his ulterior intent was to “...let his pictures be used to spread hatred among nations.”

More criticism that Frank received that the photographs themselves had “...no sociological comment. No real reportorial function... being merely neurotic, and to some degree dishonest”.

Frank's title of "The Americans" also received considerable attacks, with his detractors saying that it was "Utterly misleading! A degradation of a nation!" It is important to note that influential works generally face lots of opposition and criticism.

### **Takeaway point:**

Even the best photography books and projects in history have received considerable criticism. Know that when you create a book, project, or a body of work – don't expect it to be praised by everyone (no matter how great it is). If anything, take criticism as a sign that your work is evoking a reaction (which may in-fact be a good thing).

## **On Originality (when applying for the Guggenheim)**

One of the worst pieces of advice I often hear photographers telling others is: "Don't work on that project, it has already been done before". When it comes to Robert Frank's "The Americans", photographers see it as a very original and groundbreaking piece of work. However

in reality, when Frank decided to embark on his project, America had already been photographed quite extensively by renowned photographers such as Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Evans creating his pivotal project on America was actually the one who encouraged the young Frank to apply for a Guggenheim to embark on his project. "Looking In" writes:

"A few months before "The Family of Man" exhibition opened, Evans as a confidential advisor to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation encouraged Frank to apply for a fellowship. Frank's intended project– to photograph throughout the United States– was neither unexpected nor novel."

Also from the text, about the other famous photographers who embarked on photographing America:

"Many American and European photographer before him — from Cartier-Bresson to Frank's friend Elliott Erwitt, to name only two of the most recent— had photographed their travels throughout the United States."



### **Takeaway point:**

When you are working on a project and people tell you not to work on the project because “it has been done before” — take their advice with a pinch of salt. Of course we want to create original pieces of work and not copy photographers who have already done strong bodies of work on a certain subject or topic.

However what we can take away from Frank’s example is that he still embarked on “The Americans” even though the topic had been covered thoroughly. If you want to embark on your own project that has already been “done before” — add your own style, originality, and flair to it. As photography has been around for over a century now, most subject matters have been thoroughly covered by photographers. There are very few subjects, which are “original”. But know that because you are the one taking the photos, they will always be original in that regard.

## **Frank’s Guggenheim Fellowship Application**

When Frank applied to photograph The Americans he needed financial support to go on his 2-year long journey throughout America. To finance his trip, his mentor Walker Evans encouraged Frank to apply for the Guggenheim fellowship. With considerable amount of help from Evans (on writing the proposal), he submitted his proposal, which awarded him \$3,600 to loop around America from 1955-1956. The proposal of the grant in-full is shown below:

### **Part 1: Frank’s brief summary of the proposal**

“To photograph freely throughout the United States, using the miniature camera exclusively. The making of a broad, voluminous picture record of things American, past and present. This project is essentially the visual study of a civilization and will include caption notes; but it is only partly documentary in nature: one of its aims is more artistic than the word documentary implies.”

### **Part 2: The full statement of intent**

“I am applying for a Fellowship with a very simple intention: I wish to continue, develop and widen the kind of work I already do, and have been doing for some ten years, and apply it to the American nation in general. I am submitting work that will be seen to be documentation — most broadly speaking. Work of this kind is, I believe, to be found carrying its own visual impact without much work explanation. The project I have in mind is one that will shape itself as it proceeds, and is essentially elastic.

The material is there: the practice will be in the photographer's hand, the vision in his mind. One says this with some embarrassment but one cannot do less than claim vision if one is to ask for consideration. “The photographing of America” is a large order — read at all literally, the phrase would be an absurdity. What I have in mind, then, is observation and record of what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere.

Incidentally, it is fair to assume that when an observant American travels abroad his eye will see freshly; and that the reverse may be true when a European eye looks at the United States. I speak of the things that are there, anywhere and everywhere — easily found, not easily selected and interpreted. A small catalog comes to the mind's eye: a town at night, a parking lot, a supermarket, a highway, the man who owns three cars and the man who owns none, the farmer and his children, a new house and a warped clapboard house, the dictation of taste, the dream of grandeur, advertising, neon lights, the faces of the leaders and the faces of the followers, gas tanks and post offices and backyards.

The uses of my project would be sociological, historical and aesthetic. My total production will be voluminous, as is usually the case when the photographer works with miniature film. I intend to classify and annotate my work on the spot, as I proceed. Ultimately the file I shall make should be deposited in a collection such as the one in the Library of Congress. A more immediate use I have

in mind is both book and magazine publication.”

## Quotes by Frank on “The Americans”

What I learned from “Looking In” is that although photographers have analyzed Frank’s “The Americans” to death, teachers, and academics- Frank himself said very little about his project. Some quotes that didn’t necessarily fit into the rest of the article I have compiled here:

### **1. On why he used black and white for “The Americans”**

“Black and white is the vision of Hope and despair. That is what I want in my photographs.”

### **2. What he wanted to show through his photographs:**

“Somber people and black events quiet things and peaceful places and the things people have come in contact with this, i try to show in my photographs”

### **3. On why he photographs:**

“Above all, I know that a life for a photographer cannot be a matter of indifference.”

## Getting “The Americans” published

Many of us know how difficult a task it is to get our work published in a book. Even during Frank’s time, it was quite difficult. In an interview with Robert Delpire (the original publisher of “The Americans”) by Michel Frizot in Feb 2008, we discover how Frank first approached Delpire to get his work published in a book:

Michel Frizot: How did the publication of Les Americains come about?

Robert Delpire: One late day in summer 1954, I think, Frank was in Paris and he told me, “I want to do a big project on America, and I’d like to apply for a Guggenheim grant. You would need to sign a paper for me, agreeing to publish a book with my photographs. I think that would allow me to get the grant. I signed the paper, he got the grant.

He came back about three years later and showed me the photographs. He had his own idea for the book, but he did not have a mock-up prepared. He wanted a single photograph per double page. He said, "I don't like combining photos." I immediately subscribed to that point of view, and we did the mock-up in one afternoon, at my place, lining up the photographs on the floor.

There are some photographers who do not know how to choose their photos, but he did. And there was no problem in terms of the selection. As for the sequence, we did it just like that, intuitively. The number of photographs was not predetermined, it just happened, with us choosing one by one. A hundred and seventy-four pages, that's not even a multiple of eight [referring to the minimum number of pages in a folded press signature].

### **Getting Jack Kerouac to write the introduction**

For the introduction of his book, Frank was lucky enough to get the renowned Jack Kerouac (author of "On the

Road") to write it for him. How did Frank do it? To start off, when Frank first heard of the New York Times review of "On the Road", he met Jack Kerouac at a party where he asked him to write the introduction. Joyce Johnson, who was Kerouac's girlfriend at the time, shared her recollection of the event:

Robert Frank walked in with a couple of boxes of his work. For several years he'd been going around the country taking photos for a book he planned to call *The Americans*. He was hoping to convince Jack to write an introduction. He asked me if I'd like to look at the pictures. The first one I saw was of a road somewhere out west—blacktop gleaming under headlights with a white stripe down the middle that went on and toward an outlying darkness. Jack's road! I thought immediately."

From that moment Jack Kerouac agreed and wrote one of the finest and jazzy introductions that has ever been written for a book.

## **Conclusion**

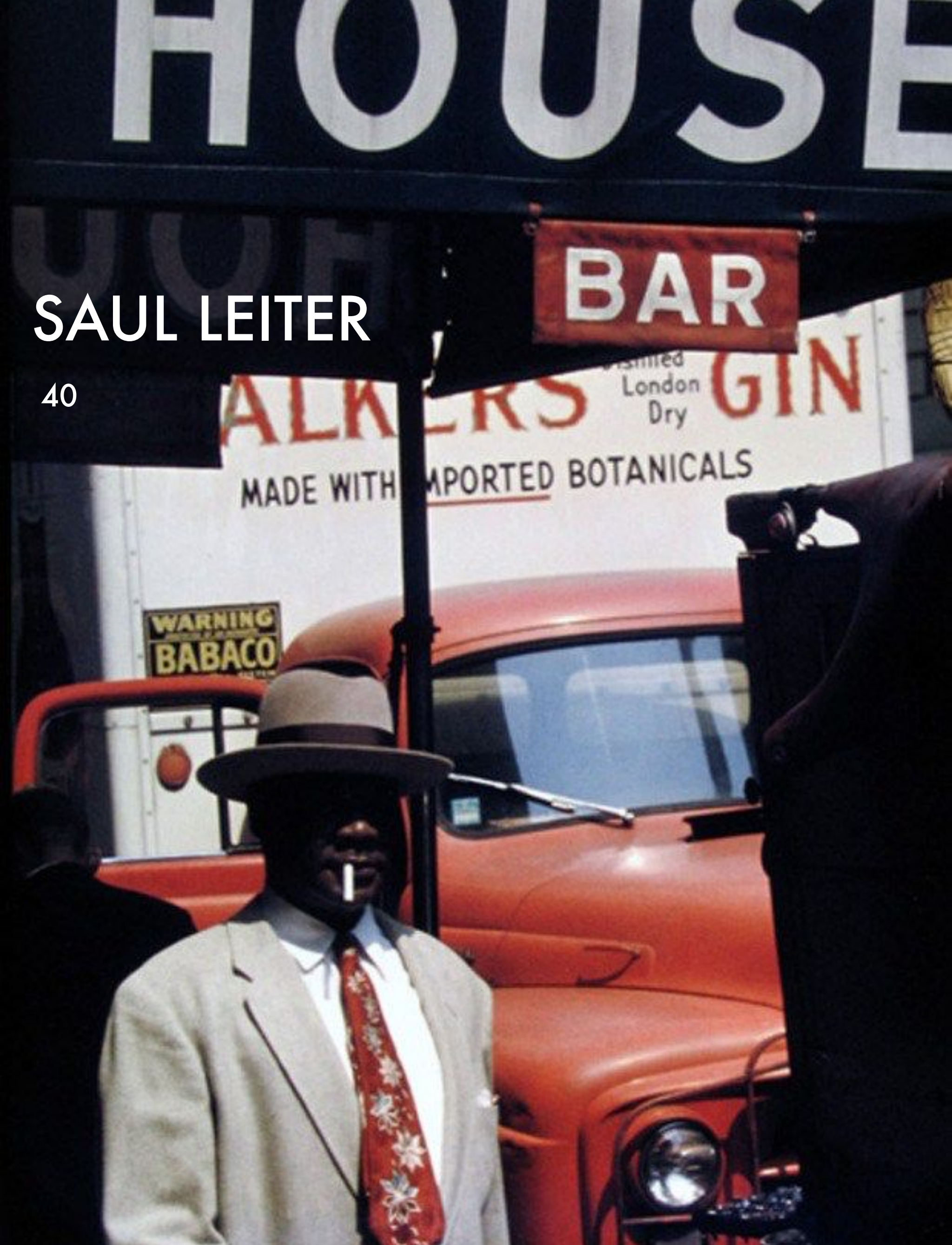


Robert Frank's "The Americans" was one of the most influential photography books created of all time. However remember that it is interesting to note that at the time it wasn't an original project at all. Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson already covered America, but Frank went ahead, followed his own gut, and created a project that broke all sort of standards. Instead of being straightforward "documentary", Frank expressed his own alienated feelings of America. Dark, gloomy, and unjust.

In going against the prevailing transparent-styled photography of the time, he had a ton of critics of his work that ostracized him from every angle. However his work has now inspired countless photographers and has left its marks for generations to come. Although I doubt that Frank would call himself a "street photographer" — his way of working was very similar. He traveled across the country, took most of his photos candidly and worked with speed, elegance, and a sense of fluidity.

As street photographers we can learn so much from Frank — in terms of

his imagery, how he put together his book, and also how he went against conventions. This article on Frank isn't comprehensive and I'm sure there are many holes that I failed to fill. However I still hope that you took away something meaningful from this article.



SAUL LEITER

40



I can't remember the exact moment that I discovered the work of Saul Leiter. I think I remember seeing some link on the internet about the discovery of one of the earliest "pioneers" in color street photography. But upon hearing this, I didn't dig into it too deeply.

About a year ago when I was in Marseille, I re-discovered Saul's work through a good friend of mine, Yves Vernin. When I left Marseille back to America, he gave me a beautiful Saul Leiter book. When I flipped through the pages, I was overwhelmed by the beautiful colors, reflections, and abstractions of Leiter. It was unlike any street photography I had seen before. It was much more romantic, poetic, and full of expression.

I then started to research more on Saul Leiter -- and have not only appreciated his images, but his philosophy of life. At his late eighties, he is very down-to-earth, and has no interest in legacy or fame. He lived a simple life and even now with his sudden rise in fame, his ego hasn't inflated one bit.

## 1. Compress your images

I have never been a fan of using telephoto lenses in street photography. Generally I find them to be impersonal, and a bit sneaky when taking photos of strangers.

However my opinions have changed once I started seeing the work of Leiter. His images aren't sneaky at all. They focus on shapes, lights, shadows, abstractions, and the colors of everyday life. Much of his street photography is shot with a relatively long lens-- which compresses his scenes. I feel the compression of the scenes with the long lens creates a distinctive geometric look, which I very much enjoy.

In an interview with Time Leiter shares his experiences using a telephoto lens to compress his scenes:

Q: Many of your images have a compressed spatial perspective. Was the telephoto your preferred lens?

Leiter: I liked different lenses for different times. I am fond of the telephoto lens, as I am of the normal 50 mm lens. I

had at one point a 150 mm lens and I was very fond of it. I liked what it did. I experimented a lot. Sometimes I worked with a lens that I had when I might have preferred another lens. I think Picasso once said that he wanted to use green in a painting but since he didn't have it he used red. Perfection is not something I admire. [Laughs]. A touch of confusion is a desirable ingredient.

As you see in the transcript above, Leiter was a huge fan of experimentation and used different focal lengths to discover his visual language and imagery. At a time when using wide angle lenses were suitable for street photography-- he went against the grain and used telephoto lenses to compress his images. And through this compression, he could simplify his images and create more distinct geometric shapes.

### **Takeaway point:**

I am not encouraging everyone to go out and buy a 500mm lens for street photography-- but I do encourage everyone to experiment with different focal lengths.

Personally I still prefer street photography with wider lenses (35mm, 28mm) -- but if you are going for a certain look and perspective-- you need to use different focal lengths.

So if you are into compression and geometric shapes (Henri Cartier-Bresson used a 50mm most of his entire life) -- try using a longer lens. Discover your visual imagery through experimentation.

## **2. Don't worry about fame**

One of the things I find most admirable about Leiter is that he lived a simple life without worrying about fame or recognition for his work. Very similar to Vivian Maier -- he shot mostly for himself and stored his color slide shots in a box. It wasn't until the 90's when he started to print his images did he start getting recognized for his work.

Even though now he is immensely popular and being written into the canon of the "Masters" of street photography, he is still humble about his work and life.



Leiter never cared to be famous for his work, as he shares:

“I’ve never been overwhelmed with a desire to become famous. It’s not that I didn’t want to have my work appreciated, but for some reason — maybe it’s because my father disapproved of almost everything I did — in some secret place in my being was a desire to avoid success.

My friend Henry [Wolf] once said that I had a talent for being indifferent to opportunities. He felt that I could have built more of a career, but instead I went home and drank coffee and looked out the window.”

In an interview by David Gibson from In-Public, Leiter shares how even great talent can be ignored in history:

Gibson: Do you consider recognition as a somewhat random occurrence or do you think that true creativity will eventually be given the respect it deserves?

Leiter: The cream does not always rise to the surface. The history of art is a history of great things neglected and ignored and bad and mediocre things be-

ing admired. As someone once said “life is unfair.” In the 19th Century someone was very lucky. He or she acquired a Vermeer for \$ 12. There are always changes and revisions of the appreciation of art, artists, and photography and writers and on and on. The late art of Picasso is no good but then a revision takes place and then it becomes very good as the art records indicate. Things come and go.

So you could essentially be the most talented photographer, but if history doesn't play out in your favor-- you can easily go ignored.

In a similar vein, he mentions how he believes that to be ignored is a privilege:

“I spent a great deal of my life being ignored. I was always very happy that way. Being ignored is a great privilege. That is how I think I learnt to see what others do not see and to react to situations differently. I simply looked at the world, not really prepared for anything.”

**Takeaway point:**

In the west, to become rich, powerful, and famous are desirable traits. I can definitely agree that in photography, everyone wants to become a celebrity and have hundreds of thousands of followers, to have exhibitions all around the world, and make a ton of money.

However for Leiter he didn't care for any of that. Rather, he avoided fame--and lived a simple life for himself. He shot what he enjoyed, not needing external recognition or affirmation from others. He was happy and enjoyed his photography.

At times I wish I could be more recognized and famous for my photography. However a great lesson I learned from Leiter is to not worry about the fame and recognition- and simply shoot for yourself, and be happy.

### 3. Search for beauty

One of the traits I love about Leiter's work is that it is very elegant. The soft pastels in his color photography as well as sometimes the intensity highlights the beauty of everyday life. Leiter isn't a photographer who is looking for the pain

and suffering of everyday life. Rather, he looks for the positive and uplifting moments and images of the world:

Q: Color is obviously a big part of your aesthetic, yet I think it sometimes obscures other concerns. For example, the people in your photographs are often hemmed in, fragmented or isolated from one another. Do you see the urban environment as a kind of alienating or isolating entity?

Leiter: I never thought of the urban environment as isolating. I leave these speculations to others. It's quite possible that my work represents a search for beauty in the most prosaic and ordinary places. One doesn't have to be in some faraway dreamland in order to find beauty. I realize that the search for beauty is not highly popular these days. Agony, misery and wretchedness, now these are worth perusing.

#### Takeaway point:

I think as street photographers it is easy to be lured into taking dark, gritty, and gloomy photos. After all, there is a sense of romanticism to the darkness of

everyday life-- and many photographers in history have been attracted to photographing the homeless, destitute, those addicted to drugs or alcohol, or in depressing situations.

As important as it is to capture the negative aspects of society-- it is equally as important to capture the beautiful and positive moments in life.

Leiter with his upbeat and positive attitude certainly shows his life philosophy through his work. His photos are colorful, bright, and joyful. They make the viewer reflect on the wonderful parts of life-- in the everyday.

So realize that when you are shooting street photography you don't need to be in some "faraway dreamland to find beauty." Look at the life you live, and photograph the beautiful things in your everyday life. Photograph your family, your kids, your friends, your co-workers, the neighborhood you live in, your workplace, around your workplace-- and find the positivity and beauty that permeates around you.

## 4. Learn to see

Nowadays we are often obsessed about cameras, equipment, and lenses when it comes to capturing more compelling images. However the most important aspect we need to nurture and develop is our eyes.

Leiter shares the importance of noticing things you would not normally pay attention to (in order to make a great photograph):

" I think I've said this before many times—that photography allows you to learn to look and see. You begin to see things you had never paid any attention to. And as you photograph, one of the benefits is that the world becomes a much richer, juicier, visual place. Sometimes it is almost unbearable—it is too interesting. And it isn't always just the photos you take that matters. It is looking at the world and seeing things that you never photograph that could be photographs if you had the energy to keep taking pictures every second of your life."

**Takeaway point:**

I feel that the best street photographers are the ones who are the most observant. The best street photographers notice small details that other photographers tend to look. The best street photographers tend to be curious and inquisitive about the world-- and see the world in a unique way.

Know that no matter how boring you think your neighborhood, city, or life is-- there is a lot of interesting things to photograph. Even if you live in a suburb, taking photos of the banality of suburban living is fascinating.

Realize how blessed we are with vision and being able to see the world in the richness that we do.

A great way to motivate yourself to shooting more: imagine that you learned that you had a rare eye disease and that by the end of the year you would become totally blind. Would you appreciate seeing the details of your world and life differently? How would you photograph differently? And what would you photograph? What do you find most visually

interesting in your life-- that you often overlook? Keep this in mind and shoot!

## 5. Don't have a philosophy

While I believe that it is important to have a vision and a philosophy when it comes to photography-- Leiter would tell me otherwise. Leiter doesn't have a grand philosophy when it comes to capturing the world around him. He takes a more pragmatic approach: he just goes out and photographs what he finds interesting:

Q: Is it fair to say that you were more interested in evoking the character of New York City's people rather than its architecture?

Leiter: I didn't photograph people as an example of New York urban something or other. I don't have a philosophy. I have a camera. I look into the camera and take pictures. My photographs are the tiniest part of what I see that could be photographed. They are fragments of endless possibilities.



Q: Is there a philosophy or outlook that you have tried to communicate in your work?

Leiter: I didn't try to communicate any kind of philosophy since I am not a philosopher. I am a photographer. That's it.

Takeaway point:

I think when it comes to street photography-- you should follow your personality. If you live in the world of theories and concepts-- embrace your philosophy of photography. But if you find yourself more of a pragmatist -- don't feel obliged to have a philosophy when it comes to your photography.

Regardless if you have a philosophy or not when it comes to your street photography-- the most important thing is to simply have a camera, go out, and capture the world around you. Having a philosophy comes second.

## 6. Be humble

One of the reasons why I think that Leiter is so greatly admired (besides his photographs) is that he is humble. He

doesn't boast of his accomplishments nor put himself on a pedestal. He lives an ordinary life and doesn't think of himself as particularly important. He explains by saying:

"I'm sometimes mystified by people who keep diaries. I never thought of my existence as being that important."

When it comes to ambition, he prefers to be much more low-key as well:

"I have a deep-seated distrust and even contempt for people who are driven by ambition to conquer the world ... those who cannot control themselves and produce vast amounts of crap that no one cares about. I find it unattractive. I like the Zen artists: they'd do some work, and then they'd stop for a while."

Leiter encourages all of us to be a lot less serious when it comes to our photography and lives:

"In order to build a career and to be successful, one has to be determined. One has to be ambitious. I much prefer to drink coffee, listen to music and to paint when I feel like it... Maybe I was irresponsible. But part of the pleasure of

being alive is that I didn't take everything as seriously as one should."

My favorite quote about not worrying about self-admiration involves music and spaghetti:

"I am not immersed in self-admiration. When I am listening to Vivaldi or Japanese music or making spaghetti at three in the morning and realize that I don't have the proper sauce for it, fame is of no use. The other way to put it is that I don't have a talent for narcissism. Or, to put it yet another way, the mirror is not my best friend."

#### **Takeaway point:**

I think we all should become much more humble in our pursuits and expectations out of life (myself included). We should be humble when we are admired for our work-- and not strive to become "successful" but the standards of others.

When I shoot street photography of course I have a strong ambition to capture memorable and meaningful images. However as my buddy Jack Simon says, the thing he always enjoys when shooting on the street is to simply walk

around, enjoy the street art, have some nice parties and coffee.

So remember that street photography isn't a competition -- in where there are winners and losers. It isn't a zero-sum game. Rather, be humble in your pursuits-- collaborate with other street photographers, and enjoy the experience of shooting on the streets.

## **7. Be inspired by paintings**

One thing that I found fascinating about Leiter is that not only did he photograph his entire life, he also painted quite a bit as well.

When I look at his street photography, I would say it is far less inspired by photography-- and more inspired by abstract, surreal, and expressionist painters. In interviews Leiter shares that he does gain a great deal of inspiration from painters - and I think it shows very clearly through his work.

#### **Takeaway point:**

As Richard Bram says, don't simply look at photographers for inspiration. Rather, study art history. See the great

work that has been done before photography-- and become inspired by that as well as photography. Develop your visual literacy by studying the master painters, and see how you can apply those same elements to your street photography. Composition, framing, use of light and colors are all aspects you can learn from painting.

So along with photography books, buy books on art. Visit museums, galleries, and exhibitions. Visit your local library and borrow as many books on art history that you can. I can guarantee you that this will help improve your photographic vision.

## Conclusion

Saul Leiter is inspirational not only through his street photography but his zen-like philosophies of life. We should all learn from him to embrace color, light, and abstractions in our photography-- as well as embrace simplicity, humbleness, and detachment from our work and fame.



41

SERGIO LARRAIN



Sergio Larrain is a figure in photographic history who isn't well-known, and is a bit of a mystery. He barely shot for more than a decade, and then decided to pursue a more "mystical" path in life— focusing on yoga, meditation, and secluded himself from society.

What inspires me the most about Sergio's photos is his sense of grace and poetry in his images.

I first discovered Sergio Larrain's work from my buddy Yves Vernin; he had a beautiful retrospective book on him— full of poetic images and also some of Sergio's personal letters.

## Sergio's history

According to Sergio, he first studied forestry at UC Berkeley (at the age of 17). His first hope was to live in the south of Chile, in the most beautiful regions.

While he was in Berkeley, he worked part-time jobs (washing dishes), and finally bought his first Leica and according to him:

"I saved my first money...and bought my first Leica, not because I wanted to do photos, but because it was the most beautiful object that one could buy (also a typewriter)... for the first time in my life I had money to buy what I wanted." - Sergio Larrain, in a letter to Agnes Sire, who was the desk editor of Magnum (Paris) for 20 years.

When he went to Ann Arbor, Michigan (at age 19) he was "confused" and "...decided to search for truth" like a vagabond. While he was there, he was lent a photographic lab, and on weekends he would enlarge, develop, and learn the craft of photography.

From there, he traveled with his family to the East and Europe, and took photos for a year. In Italy, he discovered the "visual arts" and discovered "another dimension in photography." His biggest inspiration was in Florence, from a photographer named Cavalli.

When he went back to Chile, he lived in a peasant's home (which he rented for a year at age 21) in order to be alone and "...find myself."

During that period, he had his lab in Valparaiso, made photos, and he described that, “Miracles started to happen, and my photography became magic.”

As time started to continue, he started to feel more dissatisfied with society, and struggled in terms of trying to find a way to make a living with photography.

So one day in desperation, he sent a collection of his black-and-white photos to the New York Museum of Modern Art, and Edward Steichen offered to buy 2 of the photos for the museum collection (Sergio describes this as, “Like a visit from the Virgin Mary”).

This led Sergio to start doing exhibitions, and eventually he was accepted into Magnum (when Henri Cartier-Bresson saw his photos of street kids, and suggested that he work for Magnum). He spent 2 years in Paris, worked for intentional publications, and built up his self-esteem.

However around age 28, he got married, felt trapped, and wanted to live

alone. This led him to move to the country, and retired to his “...island of peace.”

For the rest of his life, he focused on his black-and-white photography, painting (which he said that kept his “eye as a photographer”), and writing. He focused on Yoga, eastern “mysticism”, and sent loving letters to some of his friends at Magnum.

Sergio Larrain passed away on February, 2012, at age 80.

## 1. Remove the veil of illusion from reality

“Photography is a walk alone in the universe...The conventional world veils your vision, for photography you have to find a way to remove the veil.” - Sergio Larrain

I love this deep and philosophical view from Sergio Larrain. I find for me as well, photography is a tool to gain a deeper understanding of reality. Not only that, but photography helps me better notice things in the world, rather than just being another distracted smart-

phone user (constantly plugged in, with headphones and all).

I also find one of the best ways to think and meditate is through “walking meditation” — when you unplug your headphones, and just enjoy a walk around a city or a neighborhood. This is when I start to get my best ideas, and also have a very (rare) opportunity to be alone.

I also feel that photography is all about self-expression and self-discovery. The more I make photos, the more I learn about my own personality.

For example, I discovered that I was interested in “street photography” because I loved society, people, and interacting with others. And more specifically— I found out that “street portraits” was my favorite genre of photography; because I am an extrovert at heart.

### **Takeaway point:**

So for you, how can you use a camera as a tool to gain a deeper understanding of your world and your own reality? Does photography help you notice things in your daily life more? When

you’re riding the subway, are you distracted by your smartphone, or do you like to “Zen” out, observe others, and think about life?

## **2. Free yourself from conventions**

“A good image is created by a state of grace. Grace expresses itself when it has been freed from conventions, free like a child in his early discovery of the reality. The game is then to organize the rectangle.” - Sergio Larrain

In photography, one of the ways to stay fresh is to embrace “Beginner’s mind.”

Do you remember when you first picked up a camera? Do you remember how excited you were? Do you remember how everything was so interesting to photograph?

But as time goes on and we gain expertise in a field, our vision becomes less pure, less curious, and less insightful. We let our “expert mind” cloud our vision, and we become suckered into conventions. We learn the “rules” of photog-

raphy, and therefore our creative abilities become diminished.

**Takeaway point:**

So let's take a note from Sergio Larrain and "free ourselves from conventions."

Let photography be a personal journey to you. You don't need to listen to anything people tell you about photography. No rules exist. Only listen to your own inner-voice.

### 3. Start your adventure

"The game [of photography] is to let go, to let the adventure begin. Like a sailboat dropping sails." - Sergio Larrain

Photography should excite you. Every time you go out and hit the streets, it is an opportunity for you to explore reality, meet new people, and make images that excite you.

Often a lot of people plan their lives in the future— how they will "one day" travel the world and explore. But unfortunately, time creeps up quickly, and most people never have the chance to fulfill their dreams and travel and see the world.

In photography we often make plans for the future as well. We make plans of all the places we will travel to, we make plans of certain photography projects we want to pursue.

However the hardest thing in photography is to just start— and just to take photographs. We let self-doubt creep in, we feel that our camera gear isn't good enough, and we are afraid to take photos of strangers without permission (or with permission).

But even the most experienced sailors know that every time they drop the sails, the sea is uncertain. They don't know if they will go into a storm, and what perils lie in front of them. A great sailor can't control the water, waves, or sea— but they can steer their ship to the best of their extent. And they know a general direction they want to head— but the path is always uncertain.

**Takeaway point:**

Instead of dropping your sails, turn on your camera. Turn on the camera, look around yourself, and make photography an exciting opportunity.



You don't need to travel to make interesting photographs. It is all about exploring your everyday life and making your ordinary life interesting and exciting.

Regardless if you live in a suburb or a boring city—there are always interesting things for you to photograph.

Don't think too much, just go out and make photos.

## 4. Don't force things / follow your own taste

“Don't ever force things, otherwise the image would lose its poetry. Follow your own taste and nothing else. You are life and life is what you choose. What you do not like, don't look at it, it's no good. You're the only criterion, but still look at everyone else.” - Sergio Larrain

I see it everywhere—that us photographers don't feel “inspired” and we pick up these 365-take-a-photo-everyday project. Or we think that buying a new camera will “re-inspire” us to make photographs.

Trust me, I find it hard to stay “inspired” and to make photos. But the irony is the more I try to force myself to take photos, the less inspired I feel.

I think my favorite photos are when I'm not stressed, and not being forced to make photos. Poetry shouldn't be forced—or else it won't be from the soul, and it won't be as authentic.

### Takeaway point:

The point of photography is to enhance your everyday life. To be a great photographer isn't the point of life—the point is to enjoy your life.

So if photography is adding stress to your life, why are you doing it?

Photography should be a joyful and enjoyable experience. And you don't need to always be making photos.

If you enjoy reading books, reading poetry, or writing—know that photography is just another tool to enjoy life.

And ultimately if you enjoy the photos you make, why do you care what anybody else thinks?

## 5. On trying to fit to the commercial world

One of the things that Sergio Larrain struggled with is how to make a “living” from photography. Not only that, but he struggled in terms of figuring out whether he wanted to do commercial work.

It is still an issue that many of us face today: should we quit our jobs and pursue photography full-time? And if we decide to do photography full-time, should we only take photos we love? Or should we take the more commercial route and shoot weddings and do commercial portrait shoots?

In a letter addressed to Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1960, Sergio Larrain writes a letter with his doubts (a year after he became a full-member of Magnum):

*Dear Henri,*

*Thank you for your little note. I am always happy to hear from you. Here I am, mostly writing...doing [few] photographs. I am puzzled...*

*I love photography as a visual art...as a painter loves painting, and [I] like to practice it in that way...work that sales [easy to sale] is an adaptation for me. It is like doing posters for a painter....at least I feel I lose my time.*

*Good photography is hard to do and takes much time for doing it. I [tried to adapt] myself since I entered your group in order to learn and get [published]...but I want to get serious again...there is the problem of markets...of getting published, of earning money...I am puzzled as I tell you and would like to find a way out of working in a level vital for me...I can't adapt myself longer...so I write...So I think and meditate...waiting for a clear direction to grow in me...*

*Good bye, my love for you*

*Sergio*

Three years later, Sergio Larrain wrote Henri Cartier-Bresson another letter, in which he shares that the only photography he loves doing is the non-commercial, and in a style he loves:

“I try to do only work that I really care for. It is the only way for keeping me alive photographically, and I take as much time as I [need]. I keep myself in a

slow peace, with much time for myself and doing other things, and see how photography develops...if it continues to develop... I do what I want the way I want, I feel that the rushing of journalism – being ready to jump on any story, all the time – destroy my love and concentration for work.”

### **Takeaway point:**

If you have a full-time day job; consider it a blessing. Why? It means the photography you do on the side is your passion. If you aren't dependent on photography to make a living, you don't need to make photos you don't want to make.

I know a lot of friends who are full-time wedding or commercial photographers who are so burnt out from their commercial work, that they have no energy or passion left for their personal projects.

Consider the job of a 9-5 worker—you have time before work, during your lunch break, and after work to make photos you are passionate about. And you can take photos on the weekends— and

you don't need to waste any time to do commercial work you don't care about.

### **Counter-point:**

But then again on the other hand, as a commercial or wedding photographer—you can still stay true to your values.

I know some commercial photographers who are a lot more stubborn and only shoot their commercial or wedding work the way they want to shoot. And of course this costs them some jobs, but ultimately they feel more authentic to themselves. And some of the most successful photographers (Dan Winters comes to mind) work in this manner. They only deliver photos they are proud of. They don't seek to please their customer—they seek to make photos that please them, and only finds customers that will appreciate their work.

One of the big philosophical debates people have is: should I make commercial work that pleases my clients, or please myself? And not only that, but there is the ever-going nagging question: “Is the customer always right?”

Steve Jobs was a creative genius who was a stubborn asshole. He had a very strong singular vision for technological devices— and he made others adapt to his vision (rather than adapting to the world). And that worked for him.

I think it works both ways: you can either be stubborn and make the world adapt to you, or you can adapt to the world. It comes down to what is your personal style.

- If you are more stubborn and hard-headed; perhaps the best route is to let others adapt to you.
- If you are more flexible; perhaps the best route is to adapt to your clients and the world around you.

Nobody has the answers; just find out what works for you. Do what feels authentic to you, and disregard what others tell you.

## 6. Isolate yourself creatively

How does an individual stay creative, and not become “corrupted” by the outside world?

These are some questions that puzzled Sergio Larrain. He believed that many creatives had to isolate themselves, and stay true to themselves:

“...People that do creative work, have to isolate themselves, they are all hermits, one way or another...Picasso would live in a world of happiness, with his children and women as you have seen...far from ugliness, sadness...”

He also believed that at times, creativity was born from periods when society was opened to novelty and new things:

“There are periods when the whole of society opens to novelty, as did happen in the Renaissance, in Italy, and maybe, some period of harmony, where society works with grace and inspiration, like in classic Greece.”

Sergio brings up a case of Bruce Davidson; who he believes lost a bit of his creative magic after he started to do commercial work:

“In Magnum we have seen, with Bruce, for example. When he just came, it was pure poetry, his N.Y. gang, and



what he did at that time. He got, from there, a contract with Vogue, NY., as I remember, to do 4 stories, in the year, he got money, and the miracle was gone, forever... sometimes it came back, but never as in the beginning...then how do you keep the light alive?”

Sergio also believed that the greatest creative geniuses were the ones who were able to continue to create their craft, to benefit society:

“Verlaine used to live drunkard, in hotels, in misery, but kept being a poet...has given us poetry, like a permanent sunshine...well trained pianists, keep quality all of their lives, with complete dedication, and living in the creations of composers, that preserve them from falling...”

Sergio concludes by believing that artists who stayed happy and pure were the ones to escape conventions that led others astray:

“It is not easy to keep life alive, not degrade it to convinces, to conventions, to adaption [...] The art is to live in happiness, with love, with truth, with pu-

rity, not swallowed by mechanization...Henri did preserve that for many years, probably because he was exploring, was the discoverer of the 35mm cameras, and was well formed visually (in the tradition of French painters). He gave so much...he did open photography for everyone..Weston did the same with his big format, and stable subjects...those are moments of coincidence, in society, when a new form appears, and is manifested through someone.”

Also, it means to believe in miracles and magic in photography— and how we have to be open to inspiration (the muse), and not try to control the artistic process:

“You see, that in our work, of hunters of miracles, we have the happiness of the magic, but also the impossibility to control it... we have to be open to the muse... I suppose it has always been like this, when the kayak hunters went to the sea, they never knew if they were going to find the whale, or a storm..when we try to control things completely, boredom establish its reign, and we de-

grade... and at the same time life has to be kept going, always... that is why to make a good use of the hunt is wisdom... To keep this miracle of life, in happiness, in tenderness, forming children, preserving elders, listening to elders... the eternal moment, which is reality.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I do believe that being an artist is finding a balance— to learn from your contemporaries, peers, and colleagues, but staying true to your own vision.

The way I’ve been able to balance the two is only trusting the opinion of my close friends and photographers I respect. If I respect the work of a certain artist or photographer, I respect his/her opinion a lot more than a random person on the internet.

Furthermore, I do believe that is important to creatively isolate yourself for certain periods. If you disconnect from social media and take a hiatus from uploading photos online, I think you better discover your true voice. Sometimes quietness and stillness are required for you to not be distracted by the work others

are doing, and to focus on your own personal work.

## **7. Avoid fame**

“The photographer’s tragedy is that once he achieves a certain level of quality or fame, he wants to continue and he gets completely lost.” - Sergio Larrain

There is a Roman saying: “The higher we’re placed, the more humbly we should walk.”

You see it happen all the time— with actors, singers, rappers, and artists; the more famous they become, the bigger their ego becomes, and in trying to stay famous, they ruin themselves. They call this the “fame monster” — look at all the famous and rich people who have gone bankrupt, who have become addicted to drugs and alcohol, and have ruined their lives.

The antidote is to always stay humble— and to know the higher you climb, the more humble you need to become.

I’ve faced this myself— the more famous I’ve become, I’ve let my head and ego swell. The more ego-centric I be-

come, the less receptive I am to constructive criticism, and the more my photography stagnates.

However one of the things I've learned from my mom is to always stay humble, and not to forget where I've come from.

So honestly nowadays I try to treat myself just like another blogger, another photographer who is trying to make photos to enjoy himself, and to enjoy life.

Honestly—the more “internet famous” you become, the more stressful it can become. You feel like you need (even more) followers, likes, and “influence.” You start to compare yourself to other (more famous) photographers, and you become even more dissatisfied than when you were just an amateur taking photos for fun.

Never lose your child-like enthusiasm for photography. Use social media as a tool to connect yourself with other like-minded individuals; don't let it ruin your life.

Thank you Sergio

I think what I ultimately love about Sergio Larrain is how contemplative and meditative he was with his photography and life. He combined his interests in Eastern philosophy to guide his artistic life.

At the height of his fame, he retired to a small humble cabin, and pursued a path genuine to himself. When he felt like he started to “sell out”, he took a break, took a step back, and re-assessed what was most important to him in life (meditation, yoga, painting, and photography for himself).

Photography is a tool for self-examination, and a tool to understand the world around yourself. The more I think about it, photography helps me to philosophize more about life.

As I'm getting more experienced in photography—I am less interested in how to make better photos. I am more interested in how to create more meaning and purpose in my photography. And these are personal questions we ask ourselves once we get off the “social media treadmill” of likes/followers.

So thank you Sergio for all of your beautiful letters, and encouraging us photographers to contemplate why we make photos. You demonstrated through the way you lived your life that you can be authentic, happy, and live a meaningful and creative life. Rest in peace.





42

## SEBASTIÃO SALGADO

I recently saw Sebastião Salgado's "Genesis" exhibition in Toronto about a year ago, and was blown away by the body of work. It was the most ambitious project I had ever seen—essentially Salgado aimed to photograph the entire world. He photographed people, landscapes, and nature— and did so over 8 years and all around the globe.

When I was in Mumbai (about 3–4 years ago) with my buddy Kaushal Parikh, I stumbled upon his book: "Workers" and was absolutely blown away by the power of

the images, the socio-economic/political undertones, as well as the stark black and whites.

I think Sebastião Salgado is one of the most fascinating photographers out there. He started off as an economist, and then turned to photography when he realized that photography had more power than papers to inform people about the world, its issues, and to inspire people to make a difference.

## How Sebastião Salgado got started in photography

When he was a university student, Sebastião Salgado studied economics in Brazil and got heavily immersed into politics. This was a dangerous time— as there was a military coup in 1964 and another coup in 1968. Students were being tortured and killed, and he was able to leave Brazil for France with Lélia (his wife).

In France he studied for his Ph.D. and worked for a coffee organization that brought him to travel to Africa. On one of his trips to Africa, his wife Lélia gave

him a camera (Pentax Spotmatic with a 50mm lens) and it changed his life.

This is what Salgado said how photography transformed his life:

“My pictures gave me 10 times more pleasure than the reports I was working on. To be a photographer was, for me, an incredible way to express myself, an incredible way to see the world from another point.”

Fortunately through the generous support of Lélia and some of his savings, he returned to Paris in 1973 and took a year to become a professional photographer. He was fortunately able to get assignments from prestigious photo agencies such as Magnum, Sigma, and Gamma.

Since then, he started his own photo agency with his wife (entirely dedicated to his work) titled: “Amazonas Images”. He has produced many books and projects since then, including “The Other Americas”, “Sahel”, “Workers”, “Migrations” and his latest epic work is “Genesis”. For his work, he has traveled to 100+ countries.

Below are some lessons I've learned from him:

## 1. You photograph with all your ideology

“Photography is not objective. It is deeply subjective – my photography is consistent ideologically and ethically with the person I am.” – Sebastião Salgado

One of the fascinating things about Sebastião Salgado's work is that his work is deeply political, social, and economic in nature. In his project, “Workers” – he photographed all the different horrible working conditions of workers all around the world. For “Genesis” he tried to document the beauty of the planet, in order to inspire people to become informed about the importance of preserving the planet.

To sum up, Sebastião Salgado said:

“You photograph with all your ideology.”

Therefore know that your photography is deeply influenced by your personal history, the subjects you studied in

school, your family, relationships, and the way you see the world.

Sebastião Salgado also encourages photographers to study fields outside of photography to make better-informed images about society:

“You should have a good knowledge of history, of geopolitics, of sociology and anthropology to understand the society that we're part of and to understand yourself and where you're from in order to make choices. A lack of this knowledge will be much more limiting than any technical ability.”

When you study topics like history, geopolitics, sociology, and anthropology—you can get a better understanding about society, how humans interact, and therefore end up making deeper images.

Furthermore, Sebastião Salgado doesn't really believe in “style” in photography. He thinks that a photographer's “style” is essentially what is inside them:

“I don't believe a person has a style. What people have is a way of photo-

graphing what is inside them. What is there comes out.”

To continue this point, Sebastião Salgado shares the importance of how photography isn’t just about making images— but for him, it is a way of life:

“...my way of photographing is my way of life. I photograph from my experience, my way of seeing things, and it is very difficult to tell you whether I photograph in one style or another.”

He also expands on how you utilize your own background into your photography— and how photographers can see a scene totally differently (even if they are looking at the same thing):

“But I tell you, for me, each photographer brings his own light from when he was a kid — in this fraction of a second when you freeze reality, you also freeze all this background. You materialize who you are.”

“This is why if you give the same camera to two different people and ask them to shoot the same scene, something different will always emerge. Per-

sonality seeps into the mechanism. Magical thinking maybe, but true.”

Ultimately what Sebastião Salgado is trying to do as a photographer isn’t trying to make pretty photographs. Rather, he wants to provoke social change. He wants people to start having discussions about nature and the globe. He describes his purpose below:

“What I want is the world to remember the problems and the people I photograph. What I want is to create a discussion about what is happening around the world and to provoke some debate with these pictures. Nothing more than this. I don’t want people to look at them and appreciate the light and the palate of tones. I want them to look inside and see what the pictures represent, and the kind of people I photograph.”

### **Takeaway point:**

As a street photographer, your primary job is to document people, society, and humanity. You are drawn to people and street photography for one reason or another. But I can bet that you are a humanist. You are interested in people and



humanity. You care for people. You are empathetic. You are interested in the lives of others. And you want to tell stories, capture emotions, and connect with these people on the streets.

The ideology or “style” you have in photography should be less about the camera you shoot with, the subject matter you photograph, or whether your shots are in black and white. Your photography should be how you see the world, what is important to you, and what you are trying to say about society through your images.

I think a lot of photographers get discouraged after a while of shooting because they feel that their shooting is purposeless. I know that personally I encounter this feeling all the time. I start to question myself. I ask myself, “What is the purpose of my photography? Why do I shoot? Does this all really matter at the end of the day?”

In university I studied sociology, and that has informed my photography the most. I see myself less as a photographer and more of a sociologist with a camera.

The camera is my research tool, and I want to make social commentary and critique through my images.

For example in my “Suits” project, I want to make socio-economic commentary/critique about the stress, anxiety, and pain of working corporate to just make more money, to earn more prestige, and to get more power. I also try to make the project personal, as that is how I felt when I worked corporate.

For my newer “Only in America” project, I want to also touch upon issues of identity, economic decline, and race. I don’t want to just make pretty photographs that people will “like” on social media. I want to make photographs that have meaning and purpose.

So what purpose do you have in your photography? How do you bring your own personal ideology to the table? What did you study in school, and how has it influenced your life? What types of arts, music, or books do you read on the side?

If you studied literature, how does that inform your photography? If you

studied economics, how does that inform your photography? If you studied computer-science, how does that inform your photography? If you love music or history, how does that inform your photography?

Think less about making photos—think more about making meaning.

## 2. Leave your house

“You can sit in your house and be a great writer. But with photography the story is outside the door. You have to go and you have to go far.” – Sebastião Salgado

I have a problem in photography. I get too comfortable at home (when not traveling). I like the comfort of my desk, I like the comfort of the internet, and I like the comfort of not being subjected to the elements (cold and heat).

I also go through dips in motivation. I start looking at cameras online. I feel that buying a new camera will “inspire” me to make better images.

But then I slap myself in the face, and just go outside for a walk. I might

drive to an unknown part of town, park, and walk around and shoot. I might jump on the subway and go into the city and explore and shoot.

Then when I start exploring outside of my home, I feel inspired. I then start making images based on what I see—what I react to.

### a) Inspiration and shooting

I talk about this a lot, but I don’t think that you should wait until you have “inspiration” before you go out and shoot. Rather, you should go out, and then you will become inspired, then you will shoot.

### b) Exploring

As humans, we are thrill-seekers. We hate the monotony of everyday life, and doing the same thing over and over, day in and day out.

We seek adventure. We want to explore. This is why for millennia we have been interested in traveling, and exploring new lands. If it weren’t for our thirst for adventure, we may have never “dis-

covered” all of the beautiful places in the world.

### **c) Add variety to your schedule**

Sebastião Salgado has the convenience of traveling full-time, and seeing hundreds of countries around the world.

Not all of us have that luxury.

But I think regardless of how busy we are, or how much we have to work—there is always ways we can inject randomness and adventure into our everyday lives.

If you drive to work, perhaps take another route that is unfamiliar. If you walk to work, walk another route. Take your camera with you, and photograph what you find interesting along the way.

Rather than just going to work and leaving at the same time each day, perhaps on certain days you will get into work a bit earlier and leave a bit earlier (and shoot after work). Or perhaps you can go into work later, and then leave later (and do some night time street photography).

### **d) Travel**

One of the best investments in terms of money I have made in life is traveling a lot. Traveling has helped me meet some fascinating people, whom have helped open up the world to me.

I have experienced new cultures, which have also informed me to see the world in a unique way.

While I do believe that you can still travel close to home (even an hour car drive from your house can be “exotic”) – travel if you can.

I know I can speak for most Americans— we don’t travel enough. Rather than spending money on traveling, we get suckered by advertising into buying new gadgets, new cameras, new lenses, and new smart devices.

Rather, try to save that money to travel. Studies have shown that happiness can only be “bought” if you spend it on experiences, not stuff.

“The big privilege of photography is to go where you like; you are a free bird, you are alone in this trance. When you really get inside something, that is part

of the trance. It is total joy.” – Sebastião Salgado

### 3. Pursue projects

I feel if you want to become truly fulfilled as a photographer, it is important to work on some sort of “project” in your photography. To simply work on snapping single-images can become a dead-end.

Sebastião Salgado is interested in making stories and narratives, not just single images. He shares his philosophy in the difference between the ways he photographed from single-image shooters (like Henri Cartier-Bresson):

“It is a great honor for me to be compared to Henri Cartier-Bresson, but I believe there is a very big difference in the way we put ourselves inside the stories we photograph. He always strove for the decisive moment as being the most important. I always work for a group of pictures, to tell a story. If you ask which picture in a story I like most, it is impossible for me to tell you this. I don’t work for an individual picture. If I must select

one individual picture for a client, it is very difficult for me.”

Sebastião Salgado continues by talking about the importance of working on long-term projects, as they allow you to get to better understand your subjects, a place, and go more in-depth:

“I very much like to work on long-term projects. There is time for the photographer and the people in front of the camera to understand each other. There is time to go to a place and understand what is happening there. When you spend more time on a project, you learn to understand your subjects. There comes a time when it is not you who is taking the pictures. Something special happens between the photographer and the people he is photographing. He realizes that they are giving the pictures to him.”

#### **Takeaway point:**

When you’re working on a long-term project, it allows you to have more time to get to know a topic or a subject in-depth.



I think a good way of thinking about a photography project is like a friendship or relationship. If you met a person once, could you really get to know the depth of their character, their soul, their personality, and their life story? I doubt it.

Similarly with photography projects— let’s say you want to get to know an area of your town really well. You need to visit that place over and over again, before you start to really understand the place. And the more time you spend in a place, the more time and opportunity you have to get to know the individuals there. You can better understand the light, what time the shadows are the longest, and where the people walk the most.

One of my good friends Rinzi Ruiz prowls Downtown LA like it belongs to him. He constantly prowls the street there, and has gotten to know Downtown LA like the back of his hand. He knows exactly where the light is good, the best neighborhoods to shoot, and when the best time to shoot is.

Sebastião Salgado puts all of his soul, energy, and effort into the projects he pursues. For example, in his last project: “Genesis” – he worked and traveled for 8 years (when he was in his 60’s). He really devoted his entire life to his project.

At the end of the day, the amount of dedication and time you put into your project is personal preference. We all have different goals, ambitions, and hopes for our photography.

## 4. On having a relationship with your subjects

“If you take a picture of a human that does not make him noble, there is no reason to take this picture. That is my way of seeing things.” – Sebastião Salgado

I think every photograph you take is a self-portrait of yourself. You end up photographing others how you would like to be photographed.

There is a lot of discussion about “ethics” when it comes to street photography. It is a discussion that doesn’t have

a real “right” or “wrong”. Ultimately as a photographer, you need to photograph others in a way that makes you feel comfortable and honest.

When we photograph people, there is a hidden connection between us (the photographer) and people on the streets (the subject). If it weren’t for this relationship, a photograph couldn’t be made.

For Sebastião Salgado, photography is a two-way street, in which there is an intimate and almost spiritual connection between the photographer and subject. Salgado says poetically:

“It’s not the photographer who makes the picture, but the person being photographed.”

Often as photographers, we put too much emphasis on ourselves. We see ourselves as the principle character, and the subjects as the docile and passive.

Sebastião Salgado says more in-depth about the importance of the relationship you need to have with your subjects:

“The picture is not made by the photographer, the picture is more good or less good in function of the relationship that you have with the people you photograph.”

Therefore realize that your photographs will show your relationships with your subjects. If you shoot your subjects from a distance, they will feel distant and cold. If you get close to your subjects, interact with them, and photograph them that way— they will feel more emotionally close and connected.

For his projects, Salgado always tries to live with his subjects and hear their life stories:

“I tell a little bit of my life to them, and they tell a little of theirs to me. The picture itself is just the tip of the iceberg.

### **Takeaway point:**

The way you shoot street photography is personal. Some of us like not to interact with our subjects. Some of us like to interact with our subjects.

I am not going to say one is “right” or “wrong”. They are just different.

Ultimately we all have different goals in our photography. For me, I am interested more in interacting with people and hearing their life stories than taking good photographs. Of course if I could get both (a good interaction and a good photograph) that is ideal. But if I have a great interaction with my subject but a boring photograph, I don’t mind so much.

But if you want your photographs to feel more intimate— you have to make yourself more vulnerable to your subjects. Photographers who don’t open up to their subjects end up taking emotionally cold images.

I think as street photographers, we generally play the “distant observer” — and prefer not to interact with our subjects.

If you want to make more emotional photographs, and become more confident as a photographer— strive to make deeper connections with your subjects. Start off by just approaching strangers

and asking how their day is going. If you have nothing to talk about, you can always talk about the weather. Try to hear their life story. Try to hear what their hobbies are. Try to talk to strangers whenever you can, and the more you do— the more interesting stories you will hear from them, which can lead to interesting opportunities for you to photograph them.

## 5. Keep shooting until you drop

Sebastião Salgado shows no signs up giving up photography at all. He shares how “old age” hasn’t stopped his photography:

“When I started Genesis I was 59 and I thought I was an old man,” he says. “But now I am going to be 70 and I feel fine so I am ready to start again. Life is a bicycle: you must keep going forward and you pedal until you drop.”

I know a lot of photographers who regret not having started earlier, and other photographers who wished they

photographed more when they were younger.

But I think being “old” is more of a state of mind and more of an attitude than your objective age.

For example, one of my good friends Jack Simon started shooting street photography in his 60’s. He recently turned 70, and he still prowls the streets of SF like he was in his 20’s. He still has a joyful, jovial, and fun attitude— and pursues his photography both seriously and without too much stress. In the last decade of his shooting, he has created a strong body of work, and a particular vision in color, which is unique.

No matter how “accomplished” you become as a photographer, never stop. Never fall to complacency. Don’t let your ego get to your head, as Salgado explains:

“The biggest danger for a photographer is if they start thinking they are important”.

**Takeaway point:**

It is uncertain how long we will live. Who knows, maybe tomorrow we might get hit by a bus, we might find out we have some incurable form of cancer, or we might get into a car accident. Life is short and uncertain.

## Conclusion

Don’t waste time. Go out and pursue your photography now. Go shoot, and shoot until you drop. There is so much to photograph in the world. Don’t let anything get in your way, and shoot with all of your heart, soul, and being.





43

## SHOMEI TOMATSU

I recently did a workshop at the studio of my friend Bil Brown, and was blown away with his awesome collection of Japanese photo-books.

In the West, we know all the American and European photographers, but the Eastern photographers are relatively unknown (except perhaps Daido Moriyama and Araki).

I've seen many images of Shomei Tomatsu before, and was intrigued by his mysterious, surrealistic, and extreme compositions. His photographs had a sense of darkness to them, longing, and a bitter-sweet nostalgia of the past.

Wanting to learn more about Shomei Tomatsu and his work, I started to scour the web for interviews, quotes, and his images. I couldn't find much—but consider this article as a brief accumulation of what I have learned personally.

## Initial impressions of Shomei Tomatsu

Shomei Tomatsu was a photographer born in 1930, and passed away in 2012. He is generally considered one of the fore-fathers of the Japanese photography movement, inspiring other contemporaries such as Daido Moriyama.

Tomatsu was also one of the founding members of the “Provoke” movement in Japan—which started off as a small experimental Japanese photography magazine (co-founded by photographers Yutaka Takanashi and Takuma Nakahira, critic Koji Taki, and writer Takahiko Okada in 1968).

The magazine would try to provoke new ideas—and did so not only with photography, but with poetry, criticism,

and new concepts. Below is the founding statement of intent from co-founder Koji Taki:

”We photographers must use our own eyes to grasp fragments of reality far beyond the reach of pre-existing language, presenting materials that actively oppose words and ideas ... materials to provoke thought.”

The work of Shomei Tomatsu and the other co-founders of the “Provoke” movement deeply influenced Japanese photography in the 70s and 80s (Daido Moriyama joined in the second issue).

Shomei Tomatsu is best known for his surrealistic street photography and documentation of post-war Japan (especially documenting the tragedy of the atomic bomb). The work I was most drawn to was his book: “Chewing Gum and Chocolate” in which he wrote:

”In 1945, its cities devastated, Japan was inundated with American soldiers,” he wrote. “We were starving, and they threw us chocolate and chewing gum. That was America. For better or worse, that's how I encountered America.”

“Chewing Gum and Chocolate” was a critical view on American culture—and the profound influence it had on Japanese society. His photographs are critical, sad, and devastating to the viewer.

Shomei’s work is relatively unknown, and I find deep inspiration in his dark and surrealistic work. Not only did he use photography as a socio-political statement, but he also used it as a way to better navigate himself through the post-war Japanese society.

Below are some excerpts of his thoughts and philosophies on photography—which have personally touched me:

## 1. Never stop watching

As a photographer, we are observers. We observe other people, we observe society, and whenever we find something that is personally meaningful—we click the shutter.

What Shomei Tomatsu said is that in photography, we are constantly watching. However what makes us different

from others is that we don’t analyze or interpret the scene (like other professionals):

“Sometimes a photographer is a passenger, sometimes a person who stays in one place. What he watches changes constantly, but his watching never changes. He doesn’t examine like a doctor, defend like a lawyer, analyze like a scholar, support like a priest, make people laugh like a comedian, or intoxicate like a singer. He only watches. This is enough. No, this is all I can do. All a photographer can do is watch. Therefore, a photographer has to watch all the time. He must face the object and make his entire body an eye. A photographer is someone who wagers everything on seeing.” - Shomei Tomatsu

When I look at Shomei Tomatsu’s work, his work does have a deep criticism of American influence on Japan, and the atrocities of war.

However I think what Tomatsu is trying to say is that as photographers, our strongest asset is our eyes. As photographers, we must learn how to see. We



must learn how to record, and while we don't have the power and influence as other professionals, we can still make an impact through our images.

## 2. Distill your experiences

"A single photograph is a mere fragment of an experience and, simultaneously, the distillation of the entire body of one's experience." - Shomei Tomatsu

Moments are fleeting. Experiences come and go. But photographs stay forever.

What makes photography unique from other forms of art is that it is the most instantaneous way of capturing a moment, expression, or feeling.

Photography is also incredibly personal. How can you distill your life experiences into a single frame?

## 3. Affirm your subject

"Sometimes when I face an object I feel revulsion. If that happens, I don't release the shutter. Whatever one believes, the act of taking a picture implies the af-

firmation of the subject, whether consciously or not." - Shomei Tomatsu

Photograph how you would like to be photographed. Shomei Tomatsu only photographs when he wants to affirm his subject. He doesn't take photos when he feels revulsion.

When I'm out shooting on the streets, I want to document beauty and positivity in the world. I generally try to not take photos of homeless, the destitute, and those struggling.

However at the same time, we need to document the horrors and tragedies of the world. If nobody ever documented famine, violence, or war—how would future generations know what to avoid?

My practical advice in photography—follow your heart. If you feel that taking a photograph of a certain scene or person feels unethical to you; don't click the shutter. Photograph what feels authentic to you.

## 4. The dream camera

As photographers we often are overly-obsessed with the gear. In my per-



sonal experience, I've found that small, unobtrusive cameras work the best. These cameras allow us to connect deeper with our subjects, without having any sort of barrier.

Shomei Tomatsu talks about his dream camera below (which strangely enough, sounds like a smartphone):

"I dream of a new kind of camera connected directly to the cerebral cortex. It should be no bigger than a pair of eyeglasses and no heavier than a hat. It would work continuously, automatically adjusting its shutter speed, aperture, and focus, zooming in a moment from extreme close-up to extreme long shot. The photographer would only have to think that he wants to take a photograph of a thing. The film would wind automatically, and you would be able to take a thousand photographs without changing it. It would be both black-and-white and color. Recording one's position might be impossible, but the date and time of each photograph would show on the edges of the film—automatically, as on a calendar watch. With this new camera attached to my body, I would just

shoot and shoot and shoot..." - Shomei Tomatsu (1968)

If you have the "photographic impulse" to shoot, scratch that itch. Use a small, compact, and unobtrusive camera. It might be your smartphone, or a compact point-and-shoot. It might be a bigger camera. It doesn't matter— as long as you are able to focus on making images and experiencing life.

It doesn't matter how many megapixels or detail you have in your images. What is most important is that you are a keen observer of reality, that you interpret the scene from your perspective, and that your photos provoke a certain emotional response to the viewer.

## 5. Contemplate

"In short, [photography] is a matter of turning loneliness into thoughts." - Shomei Tomatsu

For me, I find photography is a way to take a more "zen" approach to life. Photography help me slow down, and better notice and appreciate the things around me.

A lot of photographers are lonely, and use the camera as a tool to keep them company. And when we make photographs, we think about what we are doing, why we are taking photos, and meditate upon our thoughts.

When you are shooting, are you in a contemplative or meditative mood? Does your photography cause you to think more, or less? When you shoot, are you in the “zone” or do you enter into a “flow state”?

What I think Shomei Tomatsu is trying to say is this: use your camera as a tool to document the world around you, to contemplate on society and the world, and provoke an emotional response in your viewer.

## Conclusion

There is still a lot I don’t know about Shomei Tomatsu— I recommend you to pick up his books, and see the emotional response you get from his images. Read the features below to learn more about him, and also read some more of his quotes to get more into his mind:

- “Photography means releasing oneself from one type of gravity and placing oneself in a space where a different force is trying to move you.”
- “In this, photography is the same thing as love. When my gaze, diving into the sea as my subject, converges with the act of photography, hot sparks fly at the point of intersection.”
- “A photographer looks at everything, which is why he must look from beginning to end. Face the subject head-on, stay fixed, turn the entire body into an eye and face the world.”
- “Let’s say that I sleep an average of six hours a day—that leaves eighteen hours: 64,800 seconds. If I take a photograph in 1/1000th of a second, then the slice of time represented by that picture is 1/64, 800,000th of one day...”





44

## STEPHEN SHORE

While in Amsterdam I checked out the FOAM photography museum and picked up a book on Stephen Shore. For those of you who may not know, he is one of the early color pioneers in photography in America. Although his style is classified more as documentary and urban landscape, I think there is a lot of things we can learn from him as street photographers. If you are interested in learning more about color and street photography, read on:

# 1. Create A Visual Diary

Street photography doesn't only need to be shots of other people walking about on the streets. It can be a deep self-reflection of yourself – and how you see society through your photographs.

When Stephen Shore worked on his “American Surfaces” project, he took a road trip across America and took photos of the following things:

1. People he met
2. Meals he ate
3. Beds he slept in
4. Art on walls
5. Store windows
6. Residential architecture
7. Television sets watched

He also took all of these photos on a cheap Rollei 35mm camera, and traveled all across America.

Through these images you don't see the images as they are, but as a reflection of how Stephen Shore saw the places he visited. For example, when he

took a photograph of four chicken bones (he just ate at a diner) he did so because he thought the food was awful, and couldn't understand why anyone would cook or eat that kind of stuff in America.

Therefore when you're out shooting street photography, try to add your own personality and view of the world in your shots. Don't feel that all of your shots have to be of crazy-extraordinary “decisive moments” – look for the “boring” and mundane things around you to capture. Think about how a series of images can create your own “visual diary”.

# 2. Shoot Color For Visual Accuracy And Realism

In the book there was a quote by Peter Schjeldahl:

“Black and white can show how something is. Color adds how it is, imbued with temperatures and humidities of experience”.

Former curator of MOMA, John Szarkowski wrote eloquently on these things as well saying:



“Most color photography, in short, has been either formless or pretty. In the first case the meanings of color have been ignored; in the second they have been at the expense of allusive meanings. While editing directly from life, photographers found it difficult to see simultaneously both the blue and the sky” – John Szarkowski 1976.

Therefore when it comes presenting your work, consider why you decide to present it in color vs black and white. Consider color as a way to see the world in a descriptive and “real” way, and black and white to see the world in a more conceptual and imaginary way (we don’t see the world in black and white).

I also recommend for people to go out shooting thinking in either black and white or color. This is because when you are shooting in the streets, you will see the world differently (depending on how you approach it).

For example, when I’m shooting in black and white film, I see the world as abstractions in terms of lines, shapes, reflections and shadows etc. However

when shooting in color I see things like clothes, juxtaposition of colors, logos, etc.

### 3. Date Your Images

We often look back at the old photos of Paris in the 1920s and feel nostalgia. We tell ourselves, “Man, the world was so much more interesting back then. Why can’t the world we live in be as interesting?”

However consider that people living in the 1920s didn’t find anything interesting about Paris the way we do. Sure in the old photos we see women wearing extravagant outfits and hats, and men with old-school suits. But back then, everyone wore that. It’s kinda like how nowadays when we see someone on their iPhone we think it’s boring. A hundred years from now, I’m sure people will find it fascinating (then they will probably have the iPhone 38s or something).

In his book Shore mentions Specifically adding cars or telephone booths to his photos saying,

“I remember thinking that it’s important to put cars in photographs because they are like time seeds. And I learned this from looking at Evans”

So when you are out shooting on the streets, realize that a hundred years from now your photos will be a part of history. Don’t romanticize the past, think about today as tomorrow’s yesterday.

## 4. Experiment With Different Formats

When Stephen Shore was working on his “American Surfaces” project, he used 35mm small format film on a Rollei 35 camera, and took images as “purposeful snapshots”.

However for his next project he embarked on, “Uncommon Places” he decided to switch to a 8×10 large-format view camera (similar to what Ansel Adams used) for more clarity and detail in the urban landscapes he shot.

Also when shooting with his view camera, he could see exactly how his photos would look through the glass plate,

which allowed him to create tighter, and better composed images.

Stephen Shore experimented two sides of the spectrum in terms of equipment (a tiny and compact 35mm camera vs a cumbersome view camera on a tripod). By shooting with different cameras, his approach to photographing his subjects changed.

Although I believe in the importance of staying consistent with equipment, I don’t want to restrict your creativity by experimenting. Therefore depending on what project you are working on, try to experiment with different cameras, formats, or equipment. If you shot film all your life, try using an iPhone. If you have only shot digital, try film.

## 5. Go Against The Grain

When Shore was doing his photography projects With his 8×10 view camera, he was going against small or medium format shooters like Frank, Winogrand, Friedlander, and Arbus. But at the same time, he was going against the f64 group (Ansel Adams group) by shooting color.

Therefore don't feel like you always have to fit under conventions. Shoot street photography with hipstamatic and add crazy filters if you want. If you like HDR, go ahead and do that.

Although I personally don't agree with crazy effects or over-processing, once again make yourself happy and try to experiment. To be creative, it is necessary to break out of the typical "boundaries of photography". However if you are going to break the boundaries in terms of how you present your images, do it consistently and purposefully. Don't do it for the sake of doing it, but have a real reason why you want to try something differently.

## Conclusion

I feel some of the best insights we can get about street photography isn't always by street photographers (by definition). Rather, gaining inspiration from other photographers similar to street photographers (and even completely opposite from street photographers) can help us become more creative, to break boundaries, as well as push the limits.







I have really loved the “Photography Workshop Series” that Aperture has been publishing. They recently did a book with Alex Webb on Street Photography, and also another book with Larry Fink on Composition.

The other day I was browsing Amazon, and Todd’s Hido’s new book (published by Aperture) titled: “Todd Hido on Landscapes, Interiors, and the Nude” popped up. I had heard about Todd Hido from a few good friends, loved his work (landscapes and portraits), his use of colors, and the down-to-earth nature he had in his interviews on YouTube.

I instinctively ordered the book (it is very affordable at only around \$20)—and have been absolutely blown away by the book. It is quite possibly one of the most educational, helpful, and inspiring photography books I have ever invested in. I can easily say that it is probably one of my 3 favorite “photography-educational” books, alongside Magnum Contact Sheets and Dan Winter’s “Road to Seeing.”

I learned a lot from the book and highly recommend everyone purchase a copy. The printing quality is incredible (color photographs pop out with so much emotion), the feeling and texture of the book, the size, and also the information inside.

Even though Todd Hido isn’t a street photographer—I have learned a lot of lessons from him that I personally have applied to my street photography. Let’s delve in and see what we can learn together:

## 1. Make your photos “All killer; no filler”

In the introduction of “Todd Hido: on Landscapes, Interiors, and the Nude” Gregory Halpern (a former student of Todd Hido) shares how surprised he was that Todd’s books were quite short. He asked Todd about his editing process, and he shares this story below:

“[Todd’s] second book, ‘Outskirts,’ had just come out, and I spent a lot of time looking at it, as well as his first book, ‘House Hunting.’ Those books

were both short, and I wondered how they felt so complete and powerful with so few images. I wanted to know how he edited and asked him about his process one day. He smiled and said without missing a beat, ‘All killer; no filler.’ I still hear those words whenever I edit.”

I think in photography in general— we show too many images. Our edits tend to be too wide— we need to include more “killer” images— and edit out the “filler” images.

I remember when I used to watch TV shows and there would be all of these “filler” episodes to be there for the sake of being there. The episodes weren’t interesting; they didn’t advance the storyline, and actually took away from the entire series.

I think when you are editing your own photography— only show your killer photos.

Don’t just upload photos to social media for the sake of it. I think that many of us (myself included) have the fear of being forgotten or becoming ir-

relevant— so we constantly pump out images to just be seen.

I know that I personally have this fear when it comes to blogging— I feel that if I don’t blog every single day, people will stop visiting my blog, and then stop signing up for my workshops, and then I will become homeless, and then die on the streets.

I think most of us have the privilege of having stable jobs— and street photography is just a creative outlet for us— a passion. Very few of us make a living from photography, so don’t feel any pressure to upload “filler” images to the Internet.

### **Takeaway point:**

You are only as good as your weakest photo. Only show your best work on the Internet.

I make it a practice that every few months I go back to my Flickr (and website portfolio) and edit out my weaker shots. I have been on Flickr for around 5+ years, and have fewer than 100 images on it.

I used to have 8+ projects on my website portfolio, but I recently edited down my projects to just 3 (my most meaningful and my strongest work).

So think of how you can go back and edit down your own work. Perhaps go to your Flickr account and for the weaker photos, either delete them or mark them to private. Also when you plan on uploading photos online you can ask yourself, “Is this photograph killer, or is it just filler?”

Also when you’re putting together an exhibition, book, or series— don’t just put in filler images to make it bigger than it needs to be. Make sure that every image contributes to the series as a whole— but can also stand on its own as a single image.

## 2. Work hard

In the introduction of the book, Gregory Halpern also talks about Todd Hido’s epic work ethic:

“[Todd’s] work ethic was legendary. He never said ‘work harder.’ I just always saw him working, so I worked harder\*\*.

The best was if you could manager to print in the color (analog) darkroom on the days when Todd printed. He often did so late, and sometimes we would be there into the wee hours. Once, when he was leaving the darkroom, and I was proud to be printing still, he said, ‘Don’t print ’til 4:00am. Stop at midnight and get some sleep. I’m going home now so I’ll have more energy to come back and print tomorrow.”

I have wrote many articles on the masters of street photography (and studied a lot of “successful” people). One of the common traits that appear is having a strong work ethic. No matter how talented or gifted you are, if you don’t put in the work— you won’t make any great work. There are no shortcuts around working hard.

However there is a difference between working hard (the sake of working hard) versus “working smart.”

For example Todd Hido told Gregory Halpern to work hard at printing, but to end early so he could have enough en-

ergy to print the next day (and continue being productive).

### **Takeaway point:**

When you're out shooting street photography—I don't advise walking around for 12 hours a day, mindlessly taking images. Work hard, but shoot smart.

Alex Webb only shoots two times during the day: at sunrise and sunset. During the in-between times he will rest, scout for other locations, and perhaps take a nap. He only shoots when the light is good during “golden hour”—so he doesn't waste his time, energy, or effort when the light isn't good.

Joel Meyerowitz also shared in an interview that after prowling the streets of NYC like a hunter (looking for “decisive moments”) he learned a better strategy: finding a good street corner, and waiting for people to come to you. By staking out a street corner (with good light and action), he was able to conserve his energy. He also ended up making much more interesting street photos that were much more complex and multi-faceted.

So work hard in the streets, but also work smart. If you want to capture interesting scenes and people, go to where the people are. If you want good light in your photographs, only shoot when the light is good.

When you've walked an entire day and feel tired or burnt out, take a break. Sit down at a cafe, and have a coffee, and relax. You can't keep pushing yourself to shoot if you're tired.

But if you want to become a truly great photographer, you will need to put in the hours of “deliberate” practice. Malcolm Gladwell shared the idea that we need to contribute at least 10,000 hours to become a master in whatever we do.

In street photography, if you want to build up your courage—you just need to click more and interact with more people. If you want to make better street photos, you need to spend more time out on the streets making photographs. Create your own luck in the streets by working hard, always being prepared, and of course—always having your camera with you.



### 3. Don't hide your secrets

I have taken an “open source” approach to my photography and my blog in allowing people to download full-resolution images of mine for free on Flickr, for people to read all the content (and re-mix it as they like) on my blog, and by sharing all the information and ideas I know. I have all my e-books available for free downloads, and also distribute my street photography presets on Lightroom 5 for free.

Personally being open and free has helped me be more “successful” than simply hiding my secrets. Gregory Halpern also shared how Todd Hido's radical openness with his knowledge has lead to his success:

“I am struck that someone as successful as Todd can also be as generous. Artists can guard their secrets, but Todd doesn't hoard his. He really wants all of us to succeed. Much of that spirit and that advice is here in this book.”

**Takeaway point:**

If you want to be a more successful photographer or artist, be more helpful. Don't hide your secrets— be generous. The more generous you are with your time, information, and knowledge— the more people will trust you, the more people will respect you, and the more opportunities will open up for you.

If people are curious how you post-process your photos— share your techniques openly with them. Perhaps give away your presets for free.

If you don't make a living from photography, consider giving away your photos online for free (allowing free full-resolution downloads on Flickr).

If you want to become more “famous” and have more people follow you online— perhaps you can create your own blog and share your tips, tricks, and advice to other street photographers starting off.

The more open, generous, and free you are— the most “successful” you will be.

## 4. Have a reason to press the shutter

We all shoot street photography because we have a reason. Some of us have to click because it is an urge within us. Some of us click because it is a way for us to unwind after a long day of work. Some of us click because we need to share certain stories— and because we need to share our experiences.

It doesn't matter what reason we have to click the shutter. But we all need a reason to click the shutter. We shouldn't make photographs for the sake of it.

Todd Hido shares the impetus that drives his photography:

“I'm not a person who can just go and photograph anything. I've never been a street or documentary photographer, where the whole world is out there to be discovered and photographed. That's never compelled me. There has to be something that pulls me in; I have to have a reason to press the shutter. I don't take pictures just to take pictures.

There has to be something about a place or a person that I recognize, that I need to record or remember or think about again.”

### Takeaway point:

I think it is incredibly important for you to photograph first for yourself (and then for others).

By focusing on photographing for yourself— you follow your heart. This allows you to create images that are much more genuine and personal (rather than just mimicking other photographers).

I feel that as photographers, we all have something to say. We all have unique perspectives of the world— as we all have different backgrounds, life experiences, and cultures in which we grew up.

As a street photographer, you have something valuable to contribute to the rest of the world. You see the world in a way that is unique than anybody else out there.

I think it is important to explicate why you make photographs. Do you

make photos to record your memories? Do you make photos because it helps you step outside of your comfort zone? Do you make photos because you want to make a statement about society? Do you make photos because you would go insane if you didn't?

Write down the reasons why you take photographs— and perhaps put it as a sticky note on your desk, your laptop, or on the back of your camera. It will be a constant reminder why you make photos, and continue to help you stay inspired to keep clicking.

## 5. Harness your past

I think in photography, every photograph is a self-portrait. When we are shooting on the streets, we photograph what emotionally touches us.

For example, if you're feeling a bit down and depressed-- you're more likely to see lonely and isolated people on the streets. If you're in a more upbeat mood, you might photograph more happy street scenes. Of course, this could be the exact opposite as well (when you're in a shitty

mood, you might photograph happy scenes and vice-versa).

I think as street photographers we should empathize with our subjects-- and connect with them on an emotional level. Also what we could do is harness our past experiences when making photographs.

For example, Todd Hido photographs places that remind him of his personal past:

“The primary thing that draws me in is where I see something that reminds me of places that I’ve been before, that remind me of where I grew up in Ohio. Since I left home after high school, I’ve always been trying to find it again in some way. I looked at a map of my old neighborhood one day, just to look again in where I came from, and realized that almost everything on the map appeared in my work in some way.”

Furthermore, Todd searches his own past experiences and memories when it comes to making images:

“Sometimes, it’s important to explore the world that’s right in front of

you, but at other times, you need to travel and get away from your life in order to recognize it. For me, I keep finding and exploring the same place no matter where I go. I draw from within, from my own history, as the basis of my work. All of the memories and experiences from my past come together subconsciously and form a kind of fragmented narrative.”

### **Takeaway point:**

A great assignment as a street photographer is to go back to your old neighborhood and photograph it. It will undoubtedly be nostalgic and personal--and the photographs you make will be much more emotional.

I also think a great assignment is to photograph your own neighborhood. But when you're so used to your own environment, it is hard to find what is unique and interesting about your own backyard. Therefore in those circumstances, it is sometimes good to travel away from home for a while-- and go back home with fresh new eyes.

## **6. Measure twice, cut once**

One of the best pieces of advice from Todd came from the beginning of the book: "Measure twice, cut once." Todd elaborates below:

“I’ll give you my best advice here up-front: Measure twice, cut once. And if you ever pass something that you think you might want to photograph and say to yourself, ‘I’ll go back later and get that,’ stop now and photograph it, because you’ll never get back there, or if you do, it won’t be the same. You’ve got to take the photograph right away, when the impulse is there. Use whatever camera that you have with you, even if it’s only your phone.”

I found this to be one of the best pieces of advice in photography in general-- as there are a lot of times that I pass something (either when walking or in my car) when I think it might make an interesting photograph, but am too lazy to stop (or pull over) and photograph it.

I think as photographers we should try to live a life without regret. So when



you see a great scene, harness that initial impulse and photograph it.

Especially in street photography-- I'm sure you had many instances in which you saw a great street photograph, but hesitated or felt nervous to photograph it. In those circumstances, live without regrets. Take the photograph, and perhaps deal with the repercussions later.

Todd also encourages us to work hard to make a great photograph, encouraging us to try to get our photographs right "in-camera":

"This doesn't mean don't work to get a good picture. A lot of people think, 'I'll fix it in Photoshop, or I'll fix it in post.' You'll be ten times better as a photographer if you don't rely on those things. It's nice and handy that these tools exist, and it's true that you could fix the picture in Photoshop. However, I believe that we should all strive to get it right in the camera."

I think this happens to us street photographers a lot-- when we think to ourselves, "Oh-- I'll just crop the photograph

later." (when we are really far away from our subjects). Not to be anal, but I think cropping our street photographs too much causes us to get sloppy with our compositions.

Not only that, but be careful when framing your backgrounds. Try to eliminate distractions from your backgrounds when you're shooting on the streets (rather than thinking you can crop things out or even worse-- "Photoshop stuff out" later).

### **Takeaway point:**

Jeff Bezos lives his life by what he calls a "regret minimization framework." The concept is simple when making decisions: if you were 80 years old and on your deathbed, would you regret not having done certain actions?

I have missed hundreds (if not thousands) of potential great street photographs because I was either too lazy to pull over my car and make a photograph, or too nervous or scared to click the shutter.

So let us live without regrets and shoot anything that tickles our fancy-- or

anything that we find interesting. No matter how "boring" it may be.

Also try your best to get the photograph right "in-camera". If you want to improve your compositions and framing, try shooting street photography a year without cropping.

## 7. Make it emotional

A lot of photographers try to make interesting photographs with fancy compositions, intense lighting techniques, or with lots of bokeh.

However no matter how fancy our compositions or camera techniques are, our photographs will lack soul if they don't have any emotion in them.

Todd Hido emphasizes the importance of finding emotion in our work:

“In the first days of graduate school, we were presenting our work, and I remember how Larry Sultan noticed the picture [of a boy hanging off a tree] immediately. He was touched by the strain in the hands. He recognized something there and said, ‘That picture’s about the human condition and not about some-

body in a tree. It’s emotional.’ That’s one of the most important things I learned from Larry; he made it okay to make pictures that were emotional, and it was really important for me to open that door.”

### Takeaway point:

When it comes to your street photography, look for emotions. Look for subjects that you can empathize with. If you see a lonely old man in a cafe, reading a newspaper alone with a cup of coffee -- perhaps you can think of how lonely you are in your life, and your concern of dying alone.

If you see a guy in a business suit rushing around, with a look of panic in his eyes, and with a Starbucks cup in one hand (and his smartphone in his other hand)-- perhaps you can relate with his emotion of being rushed, overwhelmed and busy.

If you see a guy relaxing on the beach, passed out on the shore-- perhaps you can feel the emotion of relaxation, happiness, and joy.

Try to find more emotions when shooting in the streets-- and you will make more meaningful and memorable photographs.

## 8. Assume an “alter ego” of another photographer

I think there is a culture of "being original" in Western societies. We look down on people who are just "copy-cats"-- and plagiarism is also looked down in schools.

However one of the best ways to get inspired in photography is to mimic your idols. This is how most painters, photographers, and artists get their own start.

Todd Hido shares his personal experience of how he entered art school not to continue to do what he has always done-- but to try to do something different:

“Some people go to graduate school to get themselves organized and to professionalize their practice. I wanted to use the time in grad school to change up my work, to see what else I could do, to

make different pictures than I had in the past.”

Todd shares how he was given an "alter ego" assignment, which encouraged him to mimic another photographer. This assignment helped him greatly, as he was able to try out many new unique ideas (which helped him find his unique voice/vision in his photography):

“One of our first assignments was the ‘alter ego’ assignment, where you have to become another artist and make his or her work instead of your own. This is a great assignment since it frees you to try on different ideas. It is a chance to do or be anything you want, to recognize that you’re not married to your past or the path you’re on. Night photography, for me, evolved out of this assignment.”

Before doing this assignment, Todd Hido never thought of even trying out to take photos at night. However through the assignment -- he has now incorporated this night photography approach to his series in which he photographed houses at night.

### **Takeaway point:**

If you are a photographer starting off (or even more advanced) -- one of the great ways to learn and grow is to step outside of your comfort zone, and to try something new and fresh.

If you are a street photographer who likes to stay hidden and candid (like Cartier-Bresson), perhaps you can try to be more aggressive in your shooting (like Bruce Gilden). If you photograph mostly people, perhaps you can switch it up and shoot more urban landscapes (like Stephen Shore, William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander).

If you go to an exhibition or see a certain photography book that you like-- try to mimic that photographer. Assume an "alter ego" and see how it can help inform your own vision and help you grow and evolve.

## **9. Be minimalist**

I think the trend in street photography is to make images more complicated and complex (like Alex Webb). However some of the best street photography is

very simple and minimalist (like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Diane Arbus, Martine Franck).

One of the strengths of making minimalist images is that it helps you focus and isolate your subjects. Todd shares how he applies minimalism to his own work:

“You might not notice this about my work at first, but I’m a minimalist. I like for the frame to be neat and organized. At night, most of the frame is black, and that just works for me aesthetically. All of that darkness and negative space helps to focus and isolate the subject. It brings me (and the viewer) right to the subject.”

### **Takeaway point:**

If you have a hard time identifying a single subject in your photograph (or the main subject)-- you are in trouble. You want to make images that don't make it too difficult for your viewers to identify the main subjects.

Figure out also how to add more negative space to add more positive space to your subject. If you have too



much in your frame-- too much going on (too many subjects, elements, compositional forms) it will be hard for your viewer to identify what they should be looking at.

K.I.S.S.: (keep it simple stupid).

## 10. Focus on psychology and relationships

One of the best compositional techniques in street photography is "juxtaposition" (putting together two unrelated yet related objects/elements together in a frame). For example having a street photograph of a fat guy next to a skinny guy can be a juxtaposition. Having someone wearing all red step into a green background can be a good juxtaposition of colors. Having a frame full of all women and having one man in the center can also be a juxtaposition.

What makes juxtapositions so effective in street photography? It is simple: juxtapositions focus on relationships. The best juxtaposing scenes also dig into psychology as well.

Todd Hido shares how in his "house hunting" series he used the lights of windows as a metaphor for human relationships:

“Most of the time, I am interested in a certain light in a window— that’s what catches my attention. When you’re looking at a house at night with its lights on, you can’t help but imagine the people inside. The inside literally seeps into the outside through that light. Perhaps because I had a traumatic childhood, I’ve always looked at people’s houses and wondered what goes on in there. Is it like what happened at my house? In a strange way, I’m making a picture of a place that’s actually about people. Almost as soon as I made my first picture of a house with a lit-up window, I recognized this was not about the house. This was about psychology and relationships.”

### Takeaway point:

Street photography is about human beings, about society, and about relationships. If you want to make a strong street photograph (full of emotion)--

think of how you can add certain people or elements that juxtapose one another.

If you have more than one subject in a frame, ask yourself, "What relationship do these people have with one another? Are they interacting in a way which suggest some sort of story?"

Also think about the psychology of the scene. How does the photograph make you feel? Does the photograph make you feel happy, tense, scared, afraid, timid, excited, engaged, or enraged?

## 11. Photography is about position

One lesson I learned from David Hurn (Magnum photographer) is that in photography there are two main variables you control: where you stand and when you click the shutter.

This lesson is also mirrored by Todd Hido who shares the importance of position (where you stand) when you make images:

"Emmet Gowin once said to me, 'photography is about position.' I use

this diagonal perspective a lot. There's a vanishing point or a corner. In fact, I think there's only one photograph I've made of a building that is shot straight on like a Walker Evans. When photographing space, it is useful to use perspective to draw the viewer into the frame. The diagonal line creates depth, and depth often works well in describing an environment. The diagonal lines extend your photograph into infinity somehow."

### Takeaway point:

Position is absolutely critical in street photography. As a street photographer you want to constantly look into the future.

You see your subject walking towards you from half a block away. You need to anticipate where they will be in about 30 seconds, and how you want to position yourself in the street to photograph them in a certain way.

For example, if you see an interesting subject coming towards you, you might want to identify a good background to get them against. Based on

this information, you might stand near the curb and shoot them against a storefront or billboard.

If you want to fill the frame with your subjects, you need to position yourself in a way that does that. If you are too far away from your subjects, you need to step closer to your subjects. You need a closer position to them.

Also if you want to create intense images with a lot of energy and edginess, try to focus shooting head-on (instead of from the side). For inspiration, look at the work of Garry Winogrand or William Klein.

Furthermore, one of the strong compositional tools you can use to create a better perspective is diagonal composition.

## 12. Let your viewer fill in the blanks

One of the main places that Todd Hido gains inspiration from is cinema and film.

He describes when he is driving around the suburbs, he always sees scenes and dramas of imagined stories:

“When I’m driving around the suburbs, I see them as if they were a set where dramas are unfolding all the time. I’m setting the stage for an imagined story.”

I think as street photographers we can relate. We are trying to capture the beauty and drama of everyday life. The stories we capture aren’t factual nor are they “objective.” They are our own interpretations of reality— and we try to create this human drama through our street photography.

In Todd Hido’s “house hunting” project— he tries to create an imaginary sense of drama through the illuminated windows he captures. He describes the power of imagination— that the viewer fills in the blanks. This makes the images much more engaging:

“I haven’t shown anything actually taking place in the windows. Anything you think is happening is happening in your own imagination. The backlit cur-

tains simply trigger that. When I'm photographing, I start to fill in the gaps of the story in my mind even though the viewer may not sense that story in the finished picture. I exaggerate certain details in the scene to give a sense of something beyond what's seen."

Hido also shares the importance of leaving certain details out. By showing too much of the scene or the story, it becomes boring. You want to leave the final interpretation up to the viewer:

"I purposely leave things out so that people can bring their own stories into view, so that the meaning of the image ultimately resides with the viewer."

But is there an ultimate "objective" and singular interpretation? Definitely not. Each viewer will interpret your photos differently based on their personal life experiences, and how they see and experience the world. You don't want your photos to be too obvious to your viewers:

"What I enjoy most is making images that are suggestive in this way, that have potential for being read with differ-

ent meanings. I don't want the story to be entirely evident."

Often "not knowing" makes us more intrigued in images:

"When I don't understand what's happening, I'm more intrigued. Oftentimes what's not shown is of more interest. It activates the sense. There's a kind of pleasure in not knowing, in having to pay attention."

### **Takeaway point:**

Let your viewers fill in the blank for your images. Don't make the stories too obvious to them.

Perhaps you can incorporate the "decapitation" method to your photos by intentionally chopping off the heads of your subjects. This will make the images more mysterious in the sense that you don't entirely know the expression, mood, or the face of your subject.

Perhaps you can single out your subject, and photograph them against a background that has no context. This might make your viewer more intrigued by ask-



ing themselves, “I wonder where they are?”

Another way you can add more intrigue to your photos is to add shadows and silhouettes in your work. Photograph when there is harsh lighting (or during golden hour)— and try to photograph that obscures the face of the subject with the shadows.

Don’t make your street photos easy to interpret. Make it a puzzle— a riddle, which is ultimately more fun for the viewer.

## 13. Create ambiguity

Going along the previous point, create ambiguity in your photographs. Don’t offer too many answers in your images (suggest more questions). Todd Hido shares:

“Ambiguity is one of the finest tools for making art. In my way of thinking, images should raise more questions than they answer.”

Todd also mentions the importance of activating the desire of the viewer to know more:

“I want my photographs to make people wonder about what’s going on instead of giving it away. I’m not necessarily saying that when work tells you something directly, it’s a bad thing. But, I like when I have to ask, “What’s going on here?” As a photographer, I want to tell you just enough with the pictures to activate your desire to know more.”

### Takeaway point:

Curiosity is a strong tool in photography. Like a good story, you want to draw in your subject with intrigue— and you want them to keep flipping the pages to find out what happens next.

In good mystery and detective novels, the book usually starts with a murder scene. Then for the rest of the book, you are trying to figure out who did it. If the first chapter of the book explained who killed whom, the book would be quite boring.

Treat the same philosophy to your photographs. Make it like a murder mystery— have your viewers wonder what is going on in your scene. Have your viewers identify the main protagonists, the

drama, and have them try to uncover what is going on.

When I am looking through photographs, I love photographs that make me stop, pause, and wonder, “How did this photographer make this image? What is going on here?”

Additional ways to add intrigue to your photographs: shoot through windows, reflections, and add surrealism. Street photography isn’t about simply defining reality “objectively”— it is about creating your own subjective reality.

## 14. Add to the conversation

One of the major pains that I had in my photography for a long time (and still have) is identifying my own “style” or voice.

Ultimately I think everything we do is authentic and unique (we haven’t done it before)— but at the same time, we want to “add to the conversation.”

What do I mean by that? In academia— you need to do research in a field and create a thesis that hasn’t been done before. You don’t want to research

things that people have already solved. You want to work on novel problems and find novel solutions.

Similarly in photography— you want to study the work of the masters, see the work that was done before you, and see how you can contribute to the work that has already been done.

“Adding to the conversation” doesn’t mean that you have to create 100% entirely unique work. Rather, you can remix and tweak projects that have already been done before. However, you still want to add your own unique twist and perspective on things.

Todd Hido explains how in his “house hunting” series he added his own twist and “added to the conversation.” People have photographed houses at night before him— but he did it differently enough which made it meaningful and unique:

“As I began to realize that my pictures of houses were ultimately about relationships and home and family, I also realized that this is what makes them different from the work of those who have

photographed these kind of subjects before me. My more personal take makes my work very different than that of, say, Robert Adams or Henry Wessel. The three of us would make an interesting case study because we are all photographing houses at night but yielding completely different results.”

Hido shares how he differentiates his work from other photographers who photographed houses at night such as Robert Adams. The main difference? Hido’s work is much more subjective, while Adams’ work is much more objective:

“In ‘Summer Nights’ (1958), Robert Adams photographs the same style of neighborhood that I grew up in and that I still photograph. But somehow he can photograph a house at night and I can photograph a house at night and they’re not the same thing. They almost don’t even relate to each other in some odd way. Adams takes a more objective stance, while my pictures are more subjective. This goes to show that not everything has been done before. There’s always room to add to the conversation.”

The ultimate take-away from Hido is that “there’s always room to add to the conversation.” Don’t let the fact that certain photography projects have done before get in your way.

I have a friend named Charlie Kirk who is currently doing a long-term street photography project on Istanbul. Alex Webb has already photographed Istanbul— but Charlie decided he wanted to do it differently. Charlie opted for shooting it both in black and white and color (while Alex Webb shot it all in color). Charlie decided that he wanted to make it more socio-economic/political, while Alex Webb photographed mostly scenes in the streets. Charlie shoots with a 28mm, while Alex Webb shoots with a 35mm. It is different enough, yet Charlie is adding to the conversation (instead of just creating another color street photography series of Istanbul).

However even Todd Hido has to remind himself the importance of going out and doing work (and not getting discouraged):

“Sometimes I have to remind myself of this. There are a million ways to talk yourself out of making your work, and saying to yourself that it’s already been done, is a big one. Not everything has been done before. Go and do your work. You can see where it leads and how it fits once it’s made.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Whenever you decide to work on a project, don’t let the feedback “it’s already been done before” get in your way. However at the same time, don’t totally ignore it.

Rather, extensively study the work that has already been done before— and see how you can do it differently.

For example, one of my long-term projects is my “Suits” project. There have been tons of other projects photographed on suits before— but what makes mine different? I take a much more sympathetic view on guys wearing suits and working corporate (rather than other projects, which seem to be much more negative and condescending towards suits). I also am working mostly

with flash (haven’t seen other projects done in this way).

My advice to you when working on projects is this: stick with it, don’t give up, be persistent, become knowledgeable about the work done before you, and try to be you.

Don’t try to copy the work that has come from before you. Find inspiration in the work that has come before you, but photograph what you naturally are interested and drawn to. Don’t just make images because you think other people will like it.

Make a project that you would appreciate at the end of the day (and whether other people like it or not is up to them).

## **15. Harness repetition and variation**

One of the creative tensions a photographer faces is this: creating a unique body of work (that is easily identifiable and has a “style”) while also avoiding boredom.

So how do you combine both of these things?



Todd shares this dilemma he had of not always having new ideas, and stressing about the next projects he would work on:

“I used to get really freaked out when I didn’t have new ideas, thinking, ‘Oh my God, what am I going to do next?’ I thought I had to change everything, and of course, you can’t just go and do that because you can’t change yourself.”

However Hido remembered the insight that it is okay to keep doing what you are comfortable for a while. You don’t need to always do something new. He says in the end of this excerpt: “repetition is just part of the creative process”:

“I keep this list of rules for art students in my office, the same list that John Cage kept in his studio. They’re by Sister Corita Kent, and the first rule is, ‘Find a place you trust and then try trusting it for a while.’ It’s okay to stay in the same place for a while and to trust the desire to do so. I’d go to the same suburbs and make pictures of houses at

night with lights on. I’d see that a picture was really good and then make another one to see what happened. I’d go back again and again, making pictures in the same places. Slowly but surely the work evolved. I don’t think our human nature lets us truly repeat ourselves. Repetition is just part of the creative process.”

Todd continues by saying in photography—there are times it is important to repeat yourself over and over and have consistency with your work:

“Frederick Sommer used to say a lot that ‘variation is change.’ That’s the thing about photography that’s so curious. There’s something essential in doing the same set of actions over and over again. It’s a kind of ruminating.”

However he does mention the importance of avoiding too much comfort—you want to avoid boredom. Sometimes small variations will do the trick:

“There’s a comfort and consistency in the repetition, but it’s not too comfortable. You’re not bored. There is still something sustaining your interest, pull-

ing you along. You have to trust that you will come up with something different, arrive somewhere new in the process. It may start with making a picture of a house that is orange instead of blue.”

Todd continues by sharing the dangers of repetition— and how it can be harmful to us:

“Repetition is your friend and also your enemy. While you want your work to be consistent, to have a style, you’ve got to strike the right balance between consistency and monotony once you’ve been working on a project for a while. I remember when I was heavily into photographing the houses at night, there came a point when I was really conscious that the pictures could not all be taken on foggy nights; I couldn’t rely on the fog to be the seductive part.”

Todd shares the importance of adding variation and variety to his project”

“I already had a number of those shots and needed to introduce more variation. I had to go out on clear nights also. I needed to go out to the outskirts of the suburbs and take pictures. When

I’d hit a critical mass of pictures of houses, I would go out and shoot apartments. I wasn’t making huge changes. This type of attentiveness to repetition and variation brings me change.”

### **Takeaway point:**

When you get bored on working on a certain project, you often don’t need to make huge changes. Sometimes all you need are small and subtle variations to get you feeling creative again.

So for example— let’s say you are interested in shooting “street portraits.” But after a while, shooting portraits of people’s faces on the streets don’t interest you. This might not necessarily be a sign that you stop shooting portraits all together. Perhaps you just need to switch it up.

Perhaps you can start off by shooting different types of faces. If you are mostly drawn to old people, you can start photographing more young faces. If you shoot most of your portraits in black and white, perhaps try to switch it up by shooting in color.

One of my favorite street portrait series is by Bruce Gilden. His compositions, framing, use of color and the flash is consistent, and his subjects are all quite grungy and gritty characters. But there is still a variety in the faces and expressions that he gets.

So there are many ways you can incorporate variety and consistency to your work. You can perhaps use a variety of cameras in shooting similar subject matter. Or vice-versa: you can use just one camera and one lens to photograph different types of subject matter.

Ultimately the key is this: you want to avoid boredom. Try to stay as consistent as you can with your work, and follow your curiosity.

## 16. Don't follow what is popular

Trends come and go. The funny thing about trends is that when you try to follow a trend, it seems to go away quite quickly. As soon as you try to jump on the bandwagon, it has already left.

So rather than looking at what is popular and trying to imitate it— just follow your own intuition. Todd Hido encourages us to avoid what is popular below:

“You can't look at what's popular at the moment and then simply go and repeat it. That's a recipe for disaster. You'll make empty art if you try that approach or only care about success. You'll always be chasing something, because trends change constantly. One minute, cold, crisp and conceptual German photography is the bee's knees, and then the next minute, emotional documentary work is hot.”

Todd shares his own personal experience— that while Todd is personally drawn to shooting more subjective subject matter (with emotion), he was encouraged to take a more objective and cold stance. This didn't jive well with him:

“When I started my career it was very much the era of theory and post-modernism. Subjective emotion and beauty were not on the radar. It was a cli-

ché' to have anything to do with that, I was encouraged to shoot from a uniform distance, to use a more neutral color palette, to work more conceptually, and take a more objective stance— basically to work like I had worked with the Bechers in Dusseldorf.”

Todd shares how he ignored that advice— and followed by making the types of photographs that he wanted to make:

“But that advice, well meaning as it was, didn’t sit right with me. Those weren’t the kinds of pictures that I wanted to make, and I knew better than to follow that path. There are always going to be way too many people giving you their opinion. When you do get advice, it’s important that you, as an artist, know what to leave and what to take on and consider. You can’t become somebody you’re not.”

Todd Hido doesn’t tell us to simply discount all the feedback and advice we get from others. Rather, listen with an open heart— and know what to take (and know what to ignore).

What is Todd’s ultimate advice in finding your own vision (and not just imitating others, and what is popular?) Follow your instincts:

“It has served me well throughout my career to follow my own instincts. I learned early on that I should just do what I really wanted to do, and I wanted to keep my work emotional and subjective. Really, I couldn’t do anything other than that. I can honestly say that even if I had not achieved any level of success with my work, I would still make it because I need and want to make it.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Follow your own instincts. Photograph what you really want to photograph. If you want to make subjective and emotional street photographs— follow that path. If you prefer more visual composition and geometry— follow that path.

Another piece of advice: only make the type of photos that ultimately make you happy. Don’t worry about making photos that are “popular” or which you can sell.



You never know what kind of photos will please others. But you know what kinds of photos please you.

Aim to please yourself above everything else with your photography. The rest will follow.

## 17. The color of emotion

What I really love about Todd's work is the emotion, color, and mood of his images. But Todd doesn't just shoot color for the sake of it—he is very conscious about the emotions that arise from colors:

“Another primary thing that conveys feeling in photographs is color. Blue will almost always be read as cold to us, especially in landscape. Green represents growth or sickness, depending on the hue. Colors bring their own meanings and moods to a picture.”

Also when it came to his photography, Todd Hido wasn't interested in capturing an objective view of the world. Rather, he wanted to create an imaginary world:

“When I first started photographing I was shooting black-and-white. I'd never really shot in color because I didn't have access to a color darkroom and whenever I had worked in color, I sent the negatives to a lab, and they would always create a neutral print. I wasn't interested in that; I found the print to be too real. There was something about it that too closely referenced the real world instead of this imaginary world that I was trying to create.”

Todd also shares a story when he took a black-and-white darkroom printing class with Roy DeCarava. Funny enough, Todd initially wanted to do a color darkroom printing class (but there were scheduling conflicts) and he ended up getting stuck with Roy DeCarava instead:

“I would bring my print out of the darkroom in the wet tray and show it to Roy. Each time he said, ‘Make it darker. Make it darker.’ I saw that though pictures turn out a certain way in their raw negative form, you can push them in a whole different direction in the printing.

That's largely what I've done in the dark-room for years."

A lot of photographers tell you that you have to get the photos entirely in-camera. While I do encourage street photographers to try to get as good as a composition in-camera (without cropping)—ultimately you don't want to only post raw JPEG's to the internet. There is a certain amount of post-processing you need to do to your photos to convey a certain emotion or feeling.

Todd also doesn't get his photos straight out of his camera—a lot of emotion is created afterwards in the dark-room:

"My pictures don't materialize into form straight from the camera; I choose the way they look and feel afterward. Taking the picture is just the starting point. Often my contact sheets look nothing like the final print. I'm very manipulative in the darkroom, and now, on the computer."

Todd shares the importance that he learned in the darkroom printing class

with Roy DeCarava—that the way you make a print is totally subjective:

"That one-week workshop completely influenced my whole career—learning that a print can be interpreted to look any way you want it to look. There is no right way. It's totally subjective."

Todd also shared another thought when he first started experimenting printing in color—"What would Roy DeCarava say?"

"When I started experimenting with printing in color, I thought about what it would be like if Roy DeCarava was standing outside the darkroom giving me advice. He might say, 'Make the color totally gone.' Or, 'Make the color super blue.'"

Ansel Adams once famously said, "You don't take a photograph, you make it." Adams spent tons of time in the darkroom, manipulating his negative to achieve the tonality in the black and white landscapes he captured.

Todd Hido also does this in color—he makes the photos feel the way he

wants them to feel (by adjusting the colors in a certain way):

“I was never really instructed in how to print in color, so I adjusted the colors in my photographs to be whatever I felt they should look like or convey. The way I use color is very subjective.”

What kind of colors does Todd Hido ultimately like? He shares the emotional thoughts behind his colors below:

“I like colors that are more muted and softer than in reality. I’m not married to reality; I don’t feel I have to faithfully describe a place. I add my own emotional content in the choices I make in the printing process. Color absolutely sets a mood. There’s no question about it.”

However at the same time— he wants to make his colors not too crazy or wacky— he wants to make them “believable”:

“When I’m choosing the colors, anything goes, but I still want the picture to feel like it could be real, like it could have happened.”

### **Takeaway point:**

When it comes to street photography and color— don’t just photograph colorful things for the sake of it. Think about how color adds a certain mood.

If you want your photographs to convey a more subdued and neutral tone— perhaps stick with cooler colors (blue, green, violet). If you want your photographs to feel more intense and energetic— embrace colors like red, orange, and yellow.

Also know that the colors don’t have to be exactly how you saw it. When you are shooting with color film— the film doesn’t exactly look like how you captured it in reality. The film interprets the scene differently and processes the colors in a certain way.

So when you are post-processing your photographs in color, make your photos look the way you want them to look.

However I do encourage you to try to stay consistent with the way you process your colors (at least within a certain project). If the majority of your photo-

graphs are a warm tone, perhaps try to make them all warm. Try to stick with one type of film for a project.

If you are working in digital, perhaps you can create a certain preset for your photographs. Then try to stay consistent with that process.

## 18. Make lots of small decisions

When you are working as a photographer, there are many decisions you are going to face. Below, Todd Hido shares some of the challenges you might face:

“Making decisions is one of the most critical things in art making. You’re always in a state of deciding. What camera am I going to use? Am I going to shoot this in black and white or color? Horizontal or vertical? Am I going to print this in Inkjet or Lightjet?”

Todd Hido shares the importance of making lots of small decisions in order to create art:

“Larry Sultan used to say that the act of making art is the act of making many, many, many small decisions. Each

question you encounter can lead you down a particular path.”

But how can we be sure that the small decisions we make are leading us in the right direction? We need to have faith— and work forward in small steps:

“If you can be decisive and move forward through the decisions step by step, you’ll be more successful. The real question is: What’s right for you right now? And realizing what’s right for you changes over time.”

### Takeaway point:

Your photography will change and evolve over time. Don’t feel pressured or stressed to make huge long-term decisions regarding your photography or projects.

Plan your projects to take years, but try to stay present-oriented and make the small day-to-day decisions that affect you.

For example, you might have a grand image in your mind to do a street photography project of America. But instead of worrying about all the long-term



details like getting an exhibition, getting a book, or marketing your project— focus on the small details (in the present moment). Figure out what camera and lens you are going to use. Figure out if you want to shoot it in black and white (or both). Figure out what cities or states you would like to visit.

Keep moving forward with these small decisions — and keep your eyes focused on your long-term goals.

## 19. Create parameters

I believe that creativity needs restrictions. Sometimes by creating parameters, you will become more creative. Todd Hido explains:

“There are no rules. But sometimes you need parameters. They could be conceptual. Sometimes, there’s value in just naming what you’re doing at the moment as a concept: “I photograph houses at night.” You can then add to the concept, like, “I also create a mood. I look for moody things at night.” Or, “I only photograph on cloudy days.” The concept can change and evolve. You can al-

ways modify it at any point because it’s yours.”

### Takeaway point:

If people ask what kind of photos you make, perhaps you can start off by saying “I shoot street photographs.” This is creating a parameter— by saying you shoot “street photographs” it means that you aren’t as interested in photographing landscapes.

Over time your photography will probably become more specific. So instead of saying that “I shoot street photographs”, you might say “I shoot street photographs of people which are visually complex and multi-layered.” Or you might say “I shoot street photographs of mostly people’s faces.”

Know how to define yourself as a photographer— but know that your personal definition of your own photography can (and will) change and evolve over time.

## 20. Shoot whatever moves you

When you're out shooting— you want to photograph what excites and moves you. Don't photograph what you think others will think is interesting. Photograph what genuinely excites you. Todd Hido shares some of these lessons:

“Your parameters should be flexible enough, though, that you can still just shoot whatever moves you. Photograph whatever catches your eye, whatever gets your ass out of the chair to go photograph.”

Often we have a self-critic in our head that tell us not to take a certain photograph (because it might be boring or stupid). Ignore that voice. Take the photograph anyways, because you never know how the photograph will look (unless you try photographing it):

“Take the picture and see what happens, because you never know. Sometimes the world looks different in photographs. Like Garry Winogrand said, “I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed.” This leaves the door open for surprise. Often with

the unexpected, with contradiction, there's growth.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I think when you're out shooting street photography, you should follow your gut. Photograph what personally makes you happy, excited, or scared. Channel your emotions into your shooting process.

Also don't have regrets when you're out on the streets. It is better to photograph something (and edit it out later) than never taking the shot. The worst-case scenario is you have a boring shot. The best-case scenario is that you will make a brilliant shot.

## **21. Take short trips**

Many of us get bored and lose creativity when we spend too much time at home. What is Todd's advice to this problem? Just take a shot trip out of town:

“I also started making shorter trips out of town— to Ohio when I could and also to places closer by that spoke to me. A two-hour plane ride could take me to eastern Washington, for instance. I love

working this way because sometimes it's hard for me to focus on my work at home; there's too much going on. I may want to leave the house at 10:00, but I end up leaving at 12:30 because I answer the phone and get pulled into other things. I'm a single father of twins. It's not always possible to be creative whenever I want. That's not real life. If I can get away for a short trip, I am not only transported to a different location but a different mental space; and I know my time there will be dedicated to taking pictures."

**Takeaway point:**

Sometimes you need a small little change of scenery to re-inspire you. And it doesn't have to be far. That little trip can just be a 30-minute or an hour drive from your home. It can be a part of town that you normally don't go to.

Try to inject novelty and variety into the locations you shoot street photography— and it will be enough inspiration you need to get into a new mental and creative space.

## 22. Knowing when to stop

Todd Hido focuses on projects. But many of us photographer face this dilemma: how do we know when to end a project? Todd Hido shares his own opinions on this matter:

"How do you know when you're doing with a project? I kept on making the landscape pictures because I was still captivated by the subject. I wasn't making them for art's sake; I was making them because I needed to make them."

Todd gives us this advice: make photos because there is a part of your soul, which forces you to make them. Don't photograph for the sake of it— photograph because it scratches that itch within your soul.

Todd also gives us further practical advice: when you're too lazy to make photographs of a project (and have lost the passion for it)— you should stop:

"And so I'd say you're done with something when you stop getting out of your car to photograph it, or when you stop getting your camera out of your bag

to take a picture. That's when you're done: when you're not compelled to shoot the subject anymore."

### **Takeaway point:**

When you shoot street photography, you should enjoy the process. Don't photograph because someone forces you to do it. Photograph what excites and stimulates you.

If you are working on a project, you do it because there is something that compels you to do so. You don't need to force yourself to work on a project. It is effortless (like the Taoist concept of "wu-wei"— action without action).

So when you are shooting a certain project or subject matter, follow your heart. If you fall out of love with a project, perhaps you should discontinue the project (or figure out how to work on it in a different way).

## **23. Shoot subconsciously**

One of the great quotes I got from the Swedish photographer Anders Petersen is: "Shoot from the gut, edit with your brain."

What does Anders Petersen mean by that? He means the following: when you're out shooting on the streets, shoot with your intuition and guts. But when you're at home in front of your computer, edit with the more analytical side of your brain.

Todd Hido mirrors the same philosophy— he doesn't over-analyze his photographs when he's out making images:

"I don't analyze my photographs like this while I'm shooting. Making and analyzing are completely different processes."

Hido does admit that you need some analysis when you're shooting— but not that much:

"You do have to examine things a little bit when you're making— there is some conscious recognition in wanting to take a picture— but as much as you can you should just make. See, respond, and click. And the more you click, probably the better."

Hido also shares the importance of harnessing your subconscious when you're working:



“Much of what happens in a picture is subconscious at the time I make it. I’m really seeing what’s there later, when a picture is done. Joan Didion puts it this way, ‘I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I see, and what it means. What I want and what I fear.’ I feel the same way about photography. I learn things from my work about what I’m thinking. My mind is way more sophisticated than I realize. Sometimes, I pull things out of my hat while I’m working and later I think, ‘Whoa, where did that come from?’”

Sometimes the best thing of photography is that the results are totally unexpected (in a good way). When we make photos, we never 100% sure know how they are going to turn out. That is the fun, mystery, and excitement of photography:

“The act of photographing can bring inner things to the surface. I’ll look at my pictures when they’re finished and realize they are really touching on something deeper. One of the great pleasures of making photographs is being surprised by the results.”

### **Takeaway point:**

When you’re out shooting on the streets— don’t overanalyze your compositions, frames, or instincts. Shoot from the gut— do what feels right. If you spend too much time over-composing your scenes, you will probably not get any shots at all. I try to avoid being a perfectionist when I’m out shooting. I just try to get the shot.

However I am much more anal and perfectionistic when I’m editing (choosing my best images) on my laptop.

We have very little control when we’re out shooting in the streets. All we can control is where we stand and when we click the shutter. We only have control over position and timing in street photography. We can’t control the light, the clothes people are wearing, or what the buildings look like.

However what you ultimately have control over is whether to keep or ditch a shot. The editing process lies 100% in your control.

## 24. People don't have to see all your photos

My friend Charlie Kirk recently wrote a list of 101 things he learned from street photography on it he says, “If you shoot film you’re a photographer, if you shoot digital you’re an editor.”

It is a great quote— because it identifies the problem that many of us digital photographers have: we take so many photographs and have a hard time deciding which images to keep (and which to ditch).

But remember this: we don't have to show all of our photos to the public. It is okay to let some of our photos die on our hard drive (or rolls of film). Not every image needs to be shown.

Todd Hido shares this concept below:

“Just because I take a picture doesn't mean that somebody has to see it. Much of the time, the whole idea is to make pictures that nobody will see.”

How will we know if we get a good photograph that is worth showing? For

Todd Hido, good images have “a certain power or electricity to them” and are generally personally meaningful to him (and others):

“There are so many pictures that when you snap the shutter, that's the end of their existence. It's done. It never comes to life. You see it on a contact sheet, and you don't even look twice. The good pictures all have a certain power or electricity to them. For a picture to have a long life it has to speak to me, have some meaning for me. And then, of course, I hope it contains enough space to hold a range of meanings for others. You might have to take 10,000 frames to produce 500 really good pictures.”

But does every photograph we take have to be for a project or have to be “serious?” Not exactly.

Todd Hido takes a lot of random photos in his daily life — but his organization comes mostly through editing them afterwards:

“When you see my work in a book or an exhibition or a presentation it may

seem tightly organized and rigorously consistent. But that's not representative of my day-to-day life as a working artist. If you look at my contact sheets, I am all over the place, as are most photographers really. If I see something I like, I take a picture, and that takes me down many different paths at the same time. The organization of one's work comes later. You have to just shoot and you know you'll figure how it all comes together later."

**Takeaway point:**

In your daily life, you will often take a lot of random photos that nobody will ever see. Don't feel anxious or self-conscious about this. It happens to all of us as photographers.

I think we should also work hard to be stringent self-editors of our work. Only show your best, and create good edits of your work. Less is more.

And it is okay to take photos that are just personally for yourself (that nobody else will ever take). Take fun family snapshots, photos of your food, or that HDR photo of a sunset. Enjoy the proc-

ess for yourself— and also work hard to make images that will please others too.

## 25. On simple gestures

Todd Hido is famous for photographing houses at night, dreamy landscapes, and also emotional nudes.

What does Todd Hido look for when he's shooting portraits of people? He looks for subtle hand, eye, and body gestures:

"Any time you're working with a person as a subject, be it a portrait or a nude, very simple gestures become fascinating. You don't need to go for grand poses; subtle hand gestures and expressions of the eyes and mouth say it all. We are such complex communicators with our bodies that the slightest movement can alter the meaning of a picture. If a picture lowers or raises their eyes, it changes everything."

**Takeaway point:**

In street photography, I feel that the most powerful images are the ones with strong emotions. How do you convey

emotions in street photographs? Just look for the subtle gestures.

The gesture can be the position of a subject's eyes, the gesture can be a hand or leg gesture, or it can be a facial gesture.

Don't just photograph people with blank expressions and their hands by their side. Wait until they have those subtle gestures— then try to capture it.

## 26. Making pictures that speak to you

When you're making photos of others— you're really making portraits of yourself.

I think as street photographers we don't have some sort of moral obligation to show “the truth” in our images (like documentary and photojournalists do). We create our own “truths” through our photographs. We create our own subjective realities.

Todd Hido shares his perspective:

“When I'm photographing people, the kind of person that they are in reality

isn't relevant. It doesn't matter if they are a nice or mean or funny or cool for the picture. They're an actor, a stand-in for a person or situation from my history. So I'm immediately able to divorce myself from any need to record them as they are. I'm not like Bruce Davidson in East 100th Street, photographing people to whom I might have some responsibility to tell their story faithfully. I don't need to do that. What I'm interested in is making a picture that speaks to me, that tells me my own story in a new way.”

### Takeaway point:

When you're photographing people, try to tell your own story (through them).

## 27. On creating fiction

Another analogy when creating images is to think about “creating fiction.” Todd Hido shares the importance of crafting imaginary stories:

“You can create a fiction, but maybe you're telling a story that's real in the end.”



Sometimes fiction is a more accurate representation of reality (than non-fiction):

“Picasso once famously said, ‘Give a man a mask, and he’ll tell you the truth.’ I think that happens with my work. These are real stories: mine, a friend’s, or a model’s. Sometimes they are stories that I hear on the news.”

Todd Hido also shows how although the camera is supposed to capture reality in a factual way— it tells lies:

“That’s one of the gifts of the medium. The camera is a magical machine that can record something that’s completely true, and at the same time, a total lie— simply by stopping at the wrong moment. Subjects might look like they’re crying when they’re laughing, or look drunk when they just have their eyes closed. The point is, photography can describe everything in the frame in great detail, but the meaning of what’s described is ambiguous.”

The ultimate question that matters is what you are trying to say as an artist:

“Whether the photograph is true or not doesn’t matter. What matters is what you want to say as an artist to the world, even if the meaning eludes you too. It’s engaging to purposely make a picture in which the truth is slippery, that resists a definitive meaning, that stays in the zone of ‘is it real, is it not real?’ I like to work in that zone.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Ask yourself, “What am I trying to say as a photographer and an artist? What makes my subjective view of the world unique from others? What kind of fictitious stories am I trying to tell through my images? How can the viewer learn more about who I am as a person through the people I photograph?”

To get inspired to make better stories in your photos— don’t just look at photographs. Watch films, read novels, and study stories. Figure out what kind of fictions turn you on, and try to replicate that through your photography.

## **28. The details are crucial**

There is a saying: “The devil is in the details.” The details matter.

In street photography, I am always looking for a “cherry on top” for certain images. It is often the small details, which make a good street photograph into a great street photograph.

Todd Hido shares the importance of small details in photography. The details can be the place, the background, or small elements in the frame:

“You can have an amazing story to tell, but you have to get the setting right. Location is everything. The place is part of the story, and the details are crucial. If the place isn’t right, it doesn’t matter what’s going on in the picture. When you’re shooting a portrait of somebody, if you don’t have the right background, or if you haven’t moved the stuff out of the way that isn’t part of the story, the photograph is not going to convey what you’re trying to say. When I’m shooting, all I see at first are the potential errors in the background; I can’t even see the person until I fix all that.”

**Takeaway point:**

When you’re editing your own images— ask yourself, “What are the small details which make this a truly great photograph?”

A small detail or “cherry on top” can be someone’s facial gesture, their hand gesture, a certain person in the frame, a certain color in the frame, or a certain “happening” in the frame.

Search for these small details both when you’re shooting (and also in the editing phase).

## 29. Let randomness occur

You can’t predict everything when you’re out on the streets. Street photography is one of the most random and unpredictable genres of photography out there. We never know what we’re going to get until we actually go outside and hit the streets.

Therefore learn how to embrace randomness in street photography— it often makes a photograph much better. Todd Hido shares how he embraces randomness in his photographs to make

them more interesting, unique, and “believable”:

“One of the things I learned from Frederick Sommer is that if you’re trying to make a still life and you arrange every part of it, it’s not going to be any good. The same could be said about a portrait. You have to create an environment where random things can still occur and then recognize when to take the picture. Things can very easily look contrived or self-conscious within a photograph. If you predetermine everything that will happen in front of you, the photograph will look too particular.”

This is why we often hate staged photographs. They feel too fake. Too artificial. Not interesting. Boring. Stiff.

However as a street photographer you can stage your scene. You can choose a certain background you find interesting, or shoot during a certain time of day when the light looks a certain way. But then what happens with the subjects is totally unexpected.

Similarly when you’re shooting street portraits (and asking for permis-

sion)— the gestures and ways people react to your camera is often unpredictable.

So embrace this randomness. Todd Hido continues:

“So you set the stage so something natural and unanticipated can occur. Then the picture will have an authenticity to it and that is really important. I don’t like things that look super-staged. I find images more compelling when things are more gritty and realistic. I don’t care if you stage it, just don’t make it look staged.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I personally don’t care if a street photograph is staged. I am more interested in how I interpret an image, and if it excites me (than if it were truly “candid.”)

I also don’t feel that just because a photograph is candid that it is intrinsically “better” than a staged photograph. Some of my favorite photos are either staged or manufactured (like the work of Philip-Lorca diCorcia who stages his subjects to pose and look a certain way).

Ultimately you want to make interesting images. So embrace randomness on the streets and avoid making boring photographs. If you're going to stage your street photos, at least make them look "unposed." Furthermore if someone ever asks if your images are staged, don't lie—tell the truth. Many of my street photographs are shot with permission and staged, but don't necessarily look so. Therefore I have no problems telling the stories and the "truth" about my images if anybody asks.

## 30. Photograph the in-between moments

We all generally think that a posed photograph of someone is cliché. We hate it when people put up the "peace" sign or put on their "Facebook profile face." We are striving to capture "authenticity" in our subjects, and one of the way to do this is to photograph the "in-between moments."

Geoffrey Dyer calls this the "un-guarded moment" -- when the subject of a photographer drops his/her guard. In these "in-between moments"-- you get an

inner glimmer or glimpse into the mind and psychology of the subject.

Todd Hido talks about a photograph of Marilyn Monroe during one of these "in-between moments" and when Richard Avedon was able to capture something deeper about her psyche:

"There's a really wonderful Avedon photograph of Marilyn Monroe taken in one of these in-between moments. It's one of my favorite photos of all time. The story behind the picture is that when Monroe said, 'Are we on?' Avedon said, 'No.' And that's when Avedon snapped the picture. In that moments he doesn't have her guard up— she doesn't have her happy face on, she isn't being an actress, she is just a person who is lost inside her soul."

### Takeaway point:

When you're shooting street photography-- you are striving to capture those "in-between moments" and those "un-guarded moments."

I often ask to take a photograph of my subjects, and ask them to look straight into my lens. However the prob-



lem with this approach is that the subjects often come off as really stiff and awkward-- and they generally don't have interesting expressions or looks.

One strategy I will employ to have them loosen up is to just start chatting with them. I will ask them how their day is going, where they are from, or anything about their background or personality. Then the moments that the subjects start talking, they drop their guard (totally become unaware of the camera) and then some inner glimpse of their character comes out.

Another strategy I use if I am either caught trying to take a candid shot (or when I'm asking for permission) is to tell my subject, "Pretend like I'm not here-- just keep doing what you were doing before I was here." Funny enough, most people will laugh it off and then actually begin to ignore you-- and continue to do what they were doing (before you saw them and wanted to photograph them).

## 31. On pairing images

One of Todd Hido's great skills is book making. In this excerpt below, he

talks about the magic of pairing images in a book-- and how you can create new meanings through this process:

"One of the most magical things about photography happens when you place one picture next to another picture to create new meanings. When you see a picture of a person and another of a place your mind automatically fills in gaps as if they're connected."

Hido continues by sharing how our minds follow a plotline or a story like in cinema:

"In a classic cinematic approach, you would go down a road, meet a character and understand that's where he lives. And then in the next scene, you understand that the interior is inside that house. If I put a picture of the outside of a hotel with a picture of a woman on a bed— boom— I've given you enough material to create a story. If you take a picture of a rainy cold, dark moment, and then you put that picture next to a portrait, it will impact how that person is understood and will set the tone for understanding the situation."

When it comes to telling a story, it isn't the pictures themselves that make the story. Rather, it is in the spaces in-between the photographs that create a lot of the meaning:

"Something happens in the space between pictures when you string them together. They automatically set a narrative in motion in our minds."

**Takeaway point:**

When you are putting together a book or a project (and want to create a narrative)-- think about how your images play out like a movie or a story.

Therefore think carefully about the sequence of images in your project (which image is the leading image, which image follows that, and what images to end the project with) as well as the edit of the project (which images to keep and which images not to keep).

Also the secret to creating a narrative is creating some sort of space or ambiguity in-between the pictures. Let your imagination play in the in-between moments; don't feel the need to explain every single scene.

## 32. On creating narratives

Todd Hido shares with us more information in terms of how to create a narrative and the importance of person, place, and emotion:

"It really doesn't take too many different components to create a narrative. There are three basic elements: person, place, emotion. Sometimes I'll supply actions or the aftermath of actions in my work."

We don't always need to make uber-complicated stories. Sometimes the most honest and direct stories are the best. But in Todd's work-- he is looking to create complicated stories full of meaning, nuance, and mystery. By adding the perfect mix of people, places, and emotion-- he creates projects that allow complex stories to emerge:

"You can do almost anything with these few fundamental components. You can tell a really complicated story, and that's what I'm after. I've loaded the deck for meaning to occur."

**Takeaway point:**

In street photography, think of how you can incorporate the three elements of creating a story: people, places, and emotion to your work.

**People:** Identify the right subjects you want to photograph. What kind of subjects do you want to photograph? Why do you want to photograph them? Are you looking for plain and ordinary people on the streets? Or are you looking for "characters?" Are you trying to photograph a certain type of people (for example people in business suits) or a certain demographic of people (old people, young people, or Asian people?) How will the people you select play into your story and narrative-- who is going to be your protagonist, their supporting actor, and the enemy?

**Place:** If you want to create a story, where do you want the story to take place? Are you doing a project in the suburbs of California, the streets of New York City, the back alleys of Paris, or the mountains of Tibet? The location is absolutely critical-- because it transports the viewer to a certain place they can identify with, and imagine the actors interact-

ing at that place. So when you are working on a project, don't only take photographs of people-- try to do "environmental portraits" (photographing people with the background they are in) or just photograph landscapes of the setting in which you want your viewer to be transported to. So if you're doing a project on Tokyo, perhaps take some photos of the skyline of Tokyo to give people a sense of place where the action is happening (don't just take close-ups of the people).

**Emotion:** Probably the most important puzzle-piece of making a great story or narrative is having strong emotion. A street photograph without emotion is dead. As human beings, we are highly social and emotional creatures. When we are watching a movie, reading a book, or watching a play-- we crave drama and emotion. We want action, twists, turns, surprises, and plot twists. What kind of stories do people hate the most? Boring ones. So think of how you can inject more emotion, drama, and suspense into your images. Look for facial gestures, hand gestures, juxtapositions. Shoot with your heart when you're on the

streets and empathize with your subjects.

### 33. Master the basics; eliminate variables

The problem that a lot of beginner photographers make is that they try to do too much in the beginning. For example, they try every single camera, every single lens, every single film, every single setting, every single genre of photography, etc.

However one of the best ways to get really good in photography is to eliminate variables-- and master the basics. Todd Hido explains this concept below:

“If you’re still learning your way around, you have to master one thing at a time, eliminate the variables, before you can branch out. Otherwise you’re just wasting time. You find a film that works and you keep using it until you’ve mastered it. You find a lens that works and you continue to use it until you no longer have to think about it.”

**Takeaway point:**

I don't think you need to only pursue one type of photography or use one camera/one lens for the rest of your life.

However I do agree with Todd-- you should try to master one setup or genre before you move onto the next (or at least feel comfortable).

So for example if you're new to street photography (or intermediate) -- stick with one camera and one lens and perfect it before moving onto the next thing. It took me about 3 years or so to get really comfortable shooting with a Leica rangefinder (especially shooting on film)-- and now that I am quite comfortable with it, I have moved onto experimenting with new things (like medium-format on a Hasselblad).

However one thing I have kept quite consistent is using the same film (Kodak Portra 400) and getting to know the film speed really well via exposure. I always keep my aperture set at f/8 (during the day) and the ISO is consistent (always 400 on film), and the only variable I need to change/remember is the shutter speed. So over time, I have memorized



my shutter speeds quite well. For example, if I'm shooting at f/8 with ISO 400, I will use these settings below:

- 1/1000th on a super sunny day
- 1/500th on a sunny day
- 1/250th during sunset
- 1/125th in open shade (that is pretty bright)
- 1/60th in open shade (that is pretty dark)
- 1/30th when the sun is setting

When it is nighttime (or I am shooting indoors) I will default to shooting wide-open (f/2) at 30th of a second. Also as a rule of thumb I always over-expose my film (it is better to over-expose because it is easier to bring back highlights in film, it is very hard to bring back shadows in film).

So try to simplify your variables. If you shoot with a rangefinder and a DSLR-- you will find a hard time really mastering both at the same time. Try to focus on one camera system or lens before moving onto the next one. If you are shooting black and white, try to master

it before moving onto color. If you like 35mm film, try to master that before moving onto medium-format. If you like 35mm as a focal length, try to master that before moving onto something wider like a 28mm.

## 34. Broaden your palette

Like I wrote in the prior section-- you don't want to just shoot with one camera and one lens for the rest of your life. There is a point when you want to experiment more and "broaden your palette" as Hido points out below:

"Sometimes now, I'll use two or three cameras. I understand why one would want to use multiple cameras, have a broader palette. Every camera makes a different kind of picture. Every camera is like a different paintbrush. They record scenes in different ways."

Hido is an artist and doesn't want to limit his creativity or his vision. Therefore by using different mediums (35mm, medium-format, etc.) he creates a multifaceted view of the reality he wants to convey:

“Using multiple cameras and formats has added new layers of richness to my work.”

### **Takeaway point:**

So essentially once you have mastered a certain medium, a certain camera system, etc.-- try to work towards "broadening your palette."

Picasso didn't just paint one style for his entire life, Andy Warhol experimented a lot with different printing processes, and Josef Koudelka evolved from shooting 35mm black-and-white film to shooting with a panoramic camera.

As a photographer you are also an artist. You want to show the world and reality in a certain way-- and therefore use the right set of tools or paintbrushes to convey this reality.

## **35. On putting together photobooks**

In this section, Hido shares a lot of useful advice on how to put together photo books.

To start off, he shares the importance of a photo book-- of creating a permanent body of work, and the importance of having a structure:

“What I’m really talking about here is putting together pictures sequences that will be collected together into a book. The book can lead you to synthesize ideas and can become your permanent record of a body of work. When you pick up a book, you expect something from it. It has a structure: a beginning, a middle, an end. It’s an enclosed medium that you can come close to perfecting.”

Hido begins the book-making process by pairing individual photographs, and then onto making chains of images that create the structure of his project:

“A lot of times, I’ll just start by pairing individual photographs, keeping in mind that each image should become stronger out of coming together. And when you have a number of pairs, you start to pair the pairs. And then all of a sudden you have these chains of pictures that start to show the shape and structure of the story.”

Although Hido embraces digital technology, he believes the best way is to take the analog approach-- to print out little pictures, put them on walls, or on the table. To him, the physicality of objects is important-- and they also allow for randomness and serendipity to occur:

"I find it really helpful to work with pictures on paper, little printouts that you can move around on a table or on a wall. I've never found a fabulous pairing or a great sequence on a computer screen. For me, things start happening when I work with physical objects. I've accidentally sequenced some really great and surprising pairs of images because I had the ability to move paper around. The pictures scatter in a way that you can't control or plan. You set a couple of photos down and realize they work together. As you start placing things together and they start to form chains you can move whole sections. It's like making a paper movie."

Another analogy that Todd shares is thinking of music. If you are listening to a good song, there is a certain tempo,

rhythm, and cadence to the music that keeps you going along:

"When you're putting together photographs for a book, it's helpful to think of music. There may be motifs that appear and repeat themselves in different iterations in a long sequence. You can create a rhythm by being consistent from image to image and by paying attention to how the images hang together."

However sometimes music is boring when it repeats itself. In those cases, it is sometimes good to mix it up-- and surprise or shock the listener (or viewer):

"But once you've established a pattern, once the rhythm becomes familiar, break it. The viewer should be led along and then surprised. Just when the viewer knows what's coming, do something different. When they've just seen a number of houses at night, introduce a landscape from the daytime. The reader will think, 'Where'd this come from, and why is it so blurry?' That picture is there specifically to keep the reader engaged, to be the wrong picture at the right time. In a way, it contaminates the rhythm and

spoils the sequence, but in the right way.”

**Takeaway point:**

Think again about movies-- some of the best movies are the ones which shock and surprise you in the middle of it. They call it a "plot-twist."

Think of how you can add "plot-twists" to your own photography series. What images can you add to a certain sequence that will shock or surprise your viewer?

But up until that moment of shock-- think about music and how you can have your subject go with the rhythm and the flow.

So strive for both: consistency in the flow of images and sequence, but also breaking the chain with something totally out of the blue -- an image that doesn't belong. Do this on purpose, and then show the sequence to a friend or another photographer in-person and judge their reactions via their facial expressions or when they pause on certain images. Be a great storyteller, with lots of shock and awe.

## 36. The importance of making objects

In this section, Todd Hido shares more about the importance of making physical objects (instead of purely digital).

I think this is a very important thing to note-- especially as our world is becoming more and more digital. With digital cameras, we shoot digitally, upload them to the internet, but never see them printed out in "reality."

Especially when you're making a photography book-- a digital photography book isn't enough. The physicality of turning pages is an incredible experience-- and something you need to do in the object-world (not just on a computer):

“Once you’ve made the paper movie, then you have to convert it into page-turning; there’s nothing like page-turning. When I’m working on a book, I have to have a dummy. Simulating one on a computer is not acceptable. You



have to print it and hold it in your hands.”

So if you're working on a book project, make several different dummies or maquettes. You can do it very simply-- I know some photographers who make small 4x6 prints and just paste them into a notebook or a moleskine book. You can make cheap Xerox copies from your home printer, and put them together with glue or staples. Just make it physical-- Todd explains more below:

“You’re making an object. Therefore, you have to bring it into the object world of paper and ink. Even if you make a rough dummy in black and white that is printed like crap and taped together with duct tape or whatever, you’ve got to be able to turn the pages.”

It doesn't matter if you shoot in film or digital-- you just need to make a physical object in photography. This physical object can be prints, a book, or an experience (like an exhibition):

“Making an object is crucial to photography. Everyone who is just shooting jpegs, they’re in trouble. They’ve got to

learn how to make an object, whether it’s an image in a book or a print on the wall.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Think of how you can make your photography more physical. If you have always shot digitally, perhaps you can try experimenting with film. Learn how to shoot film, load it into your camera, and process it by hand afterwards. Perhaps even take a darkroom-printing course, and learn how to make prints by hand (I learned this recently and it is an absolutely sublime and almost spiritual experience).

If you shoot digitally, perhaps all you need to do is just print more of your work. Print them at home, or send them to a lab to get them printed for you. Make small 4x6 prints when you're editing or sequencing your work, or make larger prints to give away as presents. Frame your work. Print out your photos and make book dummies. Print out books via print-on-demand services like Blurb. Think of having an exhibition and put prints on a wall.

Try to think of how you can make your photography a more physical experience-- and you will find more joy, novelty, and wonderment with your photography.

## 37. Take your time

With the digital age-- we are focused and obsessed with speed. We feel like we need to shoot more, edit more quickly, and publish more work.

But remember-- you can take your time. Don't feel a rush to get your work out there. It is better to make fewer projects (and have them all be strong) than have a lot of work that is mediocre.

Todd Hido shares this same philosophy-- he has been shooting for 25+ years and he only has a handful of projects he has worked on over the years. He explains more:

“One thing I often see with young photographers is this rush to get their work out there. I’m very ambitious, but I also know that it's okay to wait until you’re really ready to show a body of work. People have these different tabs on

their websites that show the portfolios of ten or fifteen projects. I don’t have ten projects, and I’m 25-years into this.”

Part of the pressure to share a lot of work is the fact that the internet has made sharing easy. But remember-- take your time, and also remember to enjoy the process of making photographs. Slow down:

"Sharing your work with the public is easier and quicker than ever— but just because you can, doesn’t mean you should. Photographers also think that they need to have a book or a show right away. You don’t. When the time is right things will come together. In the meantime, try to enjoy making the pictures. Slow down and think about your craft.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't feel like you need to be in a rush with your photography. If you're not a full-time photographer making a living from photography-- why the rush? You're not paying the bills with your personal photography projects. You are working on your photography because it is a passion and a love.

I personally don't know anybody who makes a living from their street photography purely off of prints and book sales. So you don't need to constantly pursue pumping out images to sell.

Slow down, and enjoy the process. I often find the process of making photos, editing them, and sequencing them more enjoyable than looking at the final and completed project.

Remember, the journey in photography is the reward.

## 38. Know what motivates you

We all have different motivations and reasons for why we make photographs. But often we don't put these motivations and reasons onto paper. But by identifying what drives and moves us-- we can stay inspired.

Todd Hido shares the difficulty of staying motivated and inspired in photography. We will constantly make excuses why we shouldn't make photographs-- and become dissatisfied and frustrated as a result:

“Once a book is printed and the show has come down, you have to stay motivated to go onto the next thing and make art for your own for the long haul. This is one of the biggest challenges for a working artist. There are all kinds of ways to get distracted. Like all of us, I’ve got stuff that I have to do most days that is not creative. You’re not allowed to use the business of living or your job as an excuse to not make photographs.”

Todd digs deep by sharing the importance of knowing what motivates us:

“Knowing what motivates you is key. Once you’re out of school, you’re on your own. There are no deadlines. No one’s expecting work from you each week. You’ve got to figure out some method, whatever it is, that keeps you on track to make artwork. For some people, taking a class or meeting with a group on a regular basis is motivation enough. Some of us just need someone to say, ‘Hey, I want to see what you’re doing.’”

Some of us are intrinsically motivated (driven from within) and some of

us are extrinsically motivated (motivated by other people). One isn't necessarily better than the other-- they are just different. Know what drives you. If you are more extrinsically motivated, perhaps you need some sort of support group, photography club, or friend to keep you on-track in your photography.

Sometimes having expectations or schedules is a good way to stay motivated in your photography (or being in a class) as Todd explains through this story:

“My friend Paul takes this introductory screen printing class every semester at a local community college. He’s taken it so many times that they eventually told him he couldn’t sign up for it again. So now he signs up as Todd Hido, with my credit card— all so he can continue to take this class. The fact that every Wednesday he knows that he is supposed to go down there and screen print is what keeps him working.”

### **Takeaway point:**

What ultimately drives you as a photographer? Is making photographs a way

for you to escape the monotony of everyday life? Is making photographs a way to capture your reality and share it with the world? Is making photographs an excuse to meet others and socialize? Is photography a way for you to stay creative? Is photography a way for you to become recognized at something you are good at?

Does shooting by yourself, or with other people motivate you? Do you need to stay in a photography class to keep moving forward? Do you ultimately want to publish or print your work in a book? Who is your intended audience? Yourself, or other people? Ponder some of these questions to keep you motivated and inspired in your photography.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, I think there are so many valuable lessons that we can learn from Todd Hido in our photography. I have personally learned the importance of adding emotion, story telling, drama, and mystery into my images. I have learned how to better sequence images (thinking of films or music), how to better edit (less is more; all killer no filler),



and the importance of taking my time (not needing to rush my work).

What you personally take from Todd Hido is up to you. And once again, even though he isn't a street photographer-- I think we as street photographers can learn a lot from his philosophies and way of working.

## Recommended reading/ looking/listening from Todd Hido

Below are some recommended sources of inspiration from Todd Hido:

- Robert Adams: "Los Angeles Spring"
- Nobuyoshi Araki: "Femme de Mouche"
- Lewis Baltz: "Park City"
- Jean Baudrillard: "Cool Memories"
- Bernd and Hilla Becher: "Water Towers"
- Richard Billingham: "Ray's a Laugh"
- Italo Calvino: "Difficult loves"

- Raymond Carver: "Short Cuts: Selected Stories"

- Larry Clark: "Teenage Lust"
- Walker Evans: "First and Last"
- Robert Frank: "Moving Out"
- Nan Goldin: "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency"

- Emmet Gowin: "Photographs"
- Craigie Horsfield: "Craigie Horsfield"

- Edward T. Linenthal: "Preserving Memory"

- Richard Prince: "Girlfriends"
- Sophie Ristelhueber: "Aftermath, Kuwait"
- Jo Spence and Patricia Holland: "Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography"
- Larry Sultan: "Pictures from Home"

# TONY RAY-JONES

46

BE MORE AGGRESSIVE

GET MORE INVOLVED (TALK TO PEOPLE)

STAY WITH THE SUBJECT MATTER  
(BE PATIENT)

TAKE SIMPLER PICTURES

SEE IF EVERYTHING IN BACKGROUND  
RELATES TO SUBJECT MATTER

VARY COMPOSITION AGAIN  
MORE.

BE MORE AWARE OF COMPOSITION

DON'T TAKE BORING PICTURES

GET IN CLOSER (USE PHONE LENS)

WATCH CAMERA SHAKE  
(shoot 250mm or above)

DON'T SHOOT TOO MUCH

NOT ALL EYE LEVEL



In the late 1960's, photographer Tony Ray-Jones wrote a hand-written note on his "approach" when he took photographs:

1. Be more aggressive
2. Get more involved (Talk to people)
3. Stay with the subject matter (Be patient)
4. Take simpler pictures
5. See if everything in the background relates to subject matter
6. Vary composition and angles more
7. Be more aware of composition
8. Don't take boring pictures
9. Get in closer (Use 50mm lens)
10. Watch camera shake (shoot 250 sec or above)
11. Don't shoot too much
12. Not all eye level
13. No middle distance





47

## TRENT PARKE

Trent Parke is one of the most phenomenal contemporary photographers around. What I love about his work is the strong emotional and personal connection he has in his photographs, as well as his fanatical passion to street photography:

### 1. Look for the light

“I am forever chasing light. Light turns the ordinary into the magical.” – Trent Parke



One of the most stirring things you see about Parke's work is the breathtaking light he captures. In his earlier works: "Dream/Life" and "Minutes to Midnight", light is what makes his images come to life. Parke is able to masterfully play with light to craft his images to look like his signature monochromatic images: deep contrast and brilliant light.

And it is certainly light what makes ordinary photographs extraordinary. Even the definition of photography is "painting with light."

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the mistakes I see a lot of street photographers starting off is that they don't pay enough attention to the light. Parke's images truly come alive with light-- whether he is shooting in the rain, during sunset creating long shadows, or creating surreal images with a flash.

So when you are out shooting in the streets, don't just think about your subjects and the background. Remember the importance of light-- and how it can

transform one of your images from average to extraordinary.

I also suggest trying to avoid shooting with the light is poor. Meaning, try to avoid shooting around mid-day, when you have harsh light and shadows-- which creates tons of blown highlights. Try to shoot when the light is pristine, like during sunrise or sunset.

Another solution is to shoot with a flash (even during mid-day light). Martin Parr does this really well-- by exposing his camera to the ambient light and using his flash to fill in his subjects.

## **2. Shoot a lot of shit**

"You shoot a lot of shit and you're bound to come up with a few good ones." - Trent Parke

Trent Parke is fanatical in his photography, and is constantly shooting. I think his philosophy is that by going out and shooting a lot, that hard work will pay off with some good photos.

Parke explains the hard work it took him to get a certain image in particular:

"I went each evening, for about 15 minutes, when the light came in between two buildings. It happens only at a certain time of the year: you've just got that little window of opportunity. I was relying so much on chance - on the number of people coming out of the offices, on the sun being in the right spot, and on a bus coming along at the right time to get that long, blurred streak of movement. If I didn't get the picture, then I was back again the next day. I stood there probably three or four times a week for about a month. I used an old Nikon press camera that you could pull the top off and look straight down into, because I was shooting from a tiny tripod that was only about 8cm high. I had tried to lie on the ground, but people wouldn't stand anywhere near me. I finally got this picture after about three or four attempts. I shot a hundred rolls of film, but once I'd got that image I just couldn't get anywhere near it again. That's always a good sign: you know you've got something special."

"The fact that the images of the people on the bus have stayed sharp, and

that you can see through them, is something that still baffles me. People can't understand what the image is, or how I was able to obtain it, and I can't work it out myself. It's something that the eye can't see when you're walking along. It's something that only photography can capture."

To get this one image, Parke admits having to take a hundred rolls of film (~3600 images) to get it exactly how he wanted it to be.

### **Takeaway point:**

Street photography is hard, and to get a good single image takes enormous amounts of work (and tons of bad photos).

When we go out on the streets, it is very unlikely we will get a good photograph in one day. Or even one month. Or even one year. There is so much chance and serendipity in street photography that we can't predict. Even the small little details can either make or break an image.

So realize to become better photographers (and to create great images)-- we

need to (in Trent Parke's words) -- "shoot a lot of shit."

So whenever you look at your images and you feel depressed that your images are shit, I think that is the first step to becoming a better photographer. That means that your standard for your photography is high. But by taking enough bad photos and being vigilant of always being on the streets, you will sooner or later get some good photos.

Street photography can often be a numbers game at the end of the day. Like what Seneca says, "Luck is when preparation meets opportunity." So create your own luck by shooting more, and creating more opportunities for yourself.

### 3. Channel your emotions into your images

For me, the most memorable and meaningful images I see from other photographers are the ones that elicit a strong emotional reaction.

One of the things I love about Trent Parke's work is the raw emotions I feel from his images. His photos show a

sense of loneliness, wandering, anxiety, as well as hope.

Parke shares his personal story and how unfortunate events in his life lead him to using photography as a way to channel his emotion into his photography:

"My mum died when I was 10 and it changed everything about me. It made me question everything around me. Photography is a discovery of life which makes you look at things you've never looked at before. It's about discovering yourself and your place in the world."

Parke further explains how he was able to use photography as a form of self-expression and self-discovery:

"I grew up on the outskirts of Newcastle where the suburbs meet the bush. When I came to Sydney at the age of 21 I left everything behind – all my childhood friends and my best mate – at first I just felt this sense of complete loneliness in the big city. So, I did what I always do: I went out and used my Leica to channel those personal emotions into images."

Parke expands on this concept by explaining how photography isn't about capturing an "objective reality." Rather, he wants photography to be personal to him. And he always shoots for himself:

"I'm always trying to channel those personal emotions into my work. That is very different from a lot of documentary photographers who want to depict the city more objectively. For me it is very personal – it's about what is inside me. I don't think about what other people will make of it. I shoot for myself."

#### **Takeaway point:**

At the end of the day, nobody is going to care how well-composed your images are if they don't elicit some sort of human emotion. Emotions stick, fancy compositions and geometry don't.

Granted you need strong compositions and strong emotions to make a great photograph-- but let us always remember how we want to also make our images personal.

All of us have certain life experiences that influence or affect us in a fundamental type of way. Not only that, but

sometimes we have really tragic (or happy moments) in our life-- and photography is sometimes the best way to channel those feelings and emotions.

So as a photographer, think about the emotions you are creating in your work-- and how your work is a self-portrait of yourself. How do you express yourself through your images? How does photography better help you understand the world? How personal is your photography? These are some questions you can ask yourself to better channel your emotions into your images.

## **4. Don't settle for mediocrity; Give it your 100%**

One of the things that drives Parke in his photography is to avoid mediocrity and to give his image-making his 100%. Initially Parke started off as a professional cricket player, before transitioning into focusing on photography full-time. Parke shares his story:

"When I was offered a job on The Daily Telegraph and made the move to Sydney I thought I would still be able to



train and play on weekends. I realised after my first week at work that my sporting career was over – the paper demanded so much. And if I can't go 100 per cent at something, it's over. I need to live what I do from the moment I get up to the moment I fall asleep (and then to dream about it some more). I didn't play sport to be average I played to be the best that I could be. It's not about winning or losing, it's about making sure you are giving it your best shot with the abilities you have been granted..."

Parke knew that he couldn't give cricket and photography his 100%. So he made the difficult decision of leaving cricket behind, and giving his full energy and attention to photography.

Furthermore, he brings up a great point how sports (and photography) isn't about winning or losing -- but achieving the best you possibly can, "with the abilities you have been granted."

Parke explains in another interview how he is constantly trying to push his boundaries of making great images:

"There's definitely that point where you know you've got something special, but it's when [you're doing something such as] using the camera with movement or where you take a chance on something. You think, "that's a great picture, but how do I make an even greater picture?" Often it'll be something that I've been trying for maybe weeks before, that I'll be working up to in technique, that might all of a sudden come to fruition in that particular picture. But I'll push something, and push something and push something, until I get it."

Parke never gives up and never relents in his photography. He doesn't want to create second-rate work-- he wants to achieve the best he possibly can. And he knows by constantly pushing himself-- he can achieve it.

Not only that, but Parke has greater ambitions to push the genre of photography forward too:

"It's not enough for me just to be out on the street and shooting people – I need to be trying to push medium of photography as well. I want to create new

and interesting pictures rather than stuff that has been seen before. It's a multi-layered thing. I don't feel I'm clever enough to be able to set images up. I'd rather see them happening around me, grab them and let chance play a part in it ... And when the photograph works it has a kind of epic quality."

### **Takeaway point:**

To become a great photographer is to simply avoid mediocrity.

Parke lets his personal vision drive him in his photography-- and is constantly driven to create greater work. He doesn't settle for second-best for himself. He wants to achieve the best he can possibly do in his photography.

I would say have the same philosophy for yourself. Sure you might not become the next Henri Cartier-Bresson or Robert Frank, but you can become the best photographer you possibly can. The same goes in sports-- if you are only 5 feet tall, you will never make it into the NBA. But you can become the best damn basketball player of your own ability.

I think it can be dangerous to see photography as some sort of competition or sport-- in which there are clearly defined winners and losers. We can easily fall into this "sport" of photography by comparing ourselves to others by the number of favorites, likes, followers, comments, exhibitions, books, or awards we have.

But don't compete with others in your photography. Compete with yourself. Have the inner-struggle that drives you to create the best possible work that you can. The most important person to impress is yourself. And don't disappoint yourself in your photography, keep pushing forward.

## **5. Don't stand still**

I've never met Trent Parke, but based on interviews I've read and photographers who have met him in person-- they all describe him as not being able to sit still-- and is constantly wired. Parke himself describes himself as the following:

"I'm always 'wired', always awake, things are always rattling through my

mind. I suppose I've started to calm down a little bit, but in that first ten-year period that I was on the streets of Sydney I was just manic. Insane."

Parke shares how he channels this energy into his street photography:

"That's how I approach street photography: watching everything. If I think something might happen, then I will hang around. But most of the time I'm rushing from one corner of the city to another, just looking for stuff."

Another reason why Parke describes why he doesn't like to stand still when he is shooting is to not draw too much attention to himself:

"I also don't like to stand still because you attract attention to yourself. I've never been pulled up on the street and it is simply because nobody ever sees me. I'm there and I'm gone. If you spend too much time in a place you tend to start affecting what's happening around you. And I just want to capture things as they are without influencing the action in any way."

Even when he isn't taking photos, Parke constantly sees potential photographs:

"You can be standing there and you're just seeing stuff. All the time [I'm seeing] compositions coming together. The whole time I'm looking, everything is stopping and forming into still frames. Like people walking across the street and all that sort of stuff. Every tiny little thing... I find it very difficult to turn it off. If I've been out shooting for a couple of days, I can't sleep for days on end because my mind is still going a hundred miles an hour."

Photography is deeply embedded into his body and soul, and keeps him going:

"The fabricated world is what interests me most: the mass of people, the dramatic light from the buildings. It mesmerizes me; gets my blood racing. There is so much happening on the street. You cannot possibly know what will come along next."

**Takeaway point:**

Trent Parke is a photographer who is always thinking about photography, always shooting, and can never stand still. He embodies the soul of photography-- and it isn't just his passion, it is who he is as a person.

Not all of us have the personality trait of Trent Parke -- to always be constantly wired. Some of us are more low-key.

We don't all need to imitate Trent Parke in terms of his mannerisms and shooting style. But I think what I personally learned from him is that you can't become a great photographer just by sitting down. You need to constantly be thinking about photography, and out there shooting to create great images.

I used to fall victim to spending too much time on the computer and not spending enough time outside taking photographs. I made excuses about my gear not being good enough, or not having enough time. But those were all excuses-- I just needed to go out and shoot. By standing still, you will never

achieve greatness-- certainly not in life and photography.

## 6. Simplify your scenes

One of the most difficult things in street photography is to make sense of all the chaos out there. Parke too, identifies this problem-- and shares how he solves it. He simplifies his scenes, with the use of his light, shadows, and contrasts:

"Dream/Life was really about finding myself and my place in life. I wanted to present a truer version of Sydney -- with lots of rain and thunderstorms, and the darker qualities that inhabit the city -- not the picture-postcard views the rest of the world sees. But I also wanted to make images that were poetic. Trouble was the city was actually quite ugly in terms of the amount of advertising and visual crap that clutters the streets. I found I could clarify the image by using the harsh Australian sunlight to create deep shadow areas. That searing light that is very much part of Sydney -- it just rattles down the streets. So, I used these strong shadows to obliterate a lot of the



advertising and make the scenes blacker and more dramatic. I wanted to suggest a dream world. Light does that, changing something everyday into something magical."

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the common mistakes of street photographers starting off is that their scenes are too busy and cluttered. There are too many random heads in the shot, busy backgrounds, ugly cars, etc.

A good way to simplify your scenes is by using light to your advantage: shooting and creating strong shadows by exposing for your highlights (something you can easily do with spot-metering). You can also shoot your subjects against simpler backgrounds, and frame tighter to remove clutter in your shots. Also by using a flash, you can draw more focus to your primary subject-- and darken the background which may be distracting as well.

## **7. Ignore single-image images; focus on making books**

What drives Trent Parke in his works? It certainly isn't single images that might get him a lot of love on social media. Rather, it is making books. He shares his passion for books in the excerpt below:

"Everything I do is working towards the next book. Books are what drive my work. I am not interested in single photographs. From the moment I started Dream/Life I knew that it had to be a book in order to get across my feelings for the city. Making books teaches you a lot about your own work. Every trip I do I make a one-off book from the work just to see where it's going and what might still be missing to make it work as a whole.

He also shares why he published his first body of work: "Dream/Life" -- even though it was extremely expensive:

"I self-published Dream/Life because, in the end, I wanted complete control of the finished product. It would have been almost impossible to find anyone in Australia to publish a book like that. It cost me about \$65,000 and, even

though I am never going to make a lot of that money back, I couldn't begin to place a value on how much it has helped my career."

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the things that I love about the internet is how social media has helped us connect with other photographers from all around the globe. Not only that, but it has created an outlet for us to share our images with millions of people from around the globe.

However the downside of social media is that it sometimes becomes a contest of who can get the most favorites/likes/comments on their images. And it ends up being very single-image driven. Very few photographers I know who are active on social media work on books, which often take a lot of time focusing on a single project.

I used to be a more single-image driven photographer as well. I wanted lots of social media love on my images to have a sense of validation.

However, at the end of the day-- I think that single-images aren't nearly as

strong or powerful as books, projects, and bodies of work. A single image can't tell a story -- whereas photography books can. And single images can't create narratives-- whereas photography books allow you to go deeper into your subject matter.

Therefore I am currently working towards publishing my first photography books, hopefully on my "Suits" project or my "Colors" project. I have gotten only about 10 good images (each) after 2 years of working on each project. That is about 5 good photos a year. Assuming that I want my book to be around 50 images, I have around 8 more years to go.

It is a bit frustrating how long it can take to work on a photography book or a project-- but I think at the end of the day, it is far more meaningful. After you die, will your Flickr or Facebook still be around? Probably not. But I'm certain your photography book will still remain.

The great thing about technology nowadays is that you don't even need to get a book publisher anymore. Great services like Blurb or Magcloud allow

you to create professional-looking books without having to invest tens of thousands of dollars. Granted they aren't as good as what a traditional publisher might make-- but I think the tradeoff in terms of price and availability are definitely worth it.

So consider focusing more on photography projects, and even publishing your first book.

## 8. Create social commentary

Another aspect I love about Parke's work is how his images and projects focus on social issues. They aren't just pretty images-- he is trying to say something greater about Australian society as a whole. Parke explains:

"My work always grows out of what is affecting my life right now. I see myself as an average Australian and the issues that affect me are usually the issues that are affecting a lot of other people too. I want my work to comment on what it was like to live in this country during my lifetime."

Parke explains also what statement he was trying to make through "Minutes to midnight":

"The book is almost a fiction where I'm creating a story from these documentary pictures. It's basically making a statement that the world's going crazy."

### Takeaway point:

When you create projects or bodies of work-- think about what kind of statement you are trying to make through your images. Think about the deeper meaning that your project can say about yourself or about society. Make it personal, and make it meaningful.

## 9. Be influenced by outside arts

When asked about Parke's influences-- he shares how some of the melancholy in bands like Nine Inch Nails and Radiohead affected his work:

"Those sorts of bands and their music videos have been a great influence. There is this Icelandic group called Sigur-Ros and their music is just very sad and melodramatic. They have this

kind of dark dreamy quality and I suppose that is what I am trying to evoke in my photographs, although I am not really conscious of these influences when I am taking pictures.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't just let other photographers influence you in your work. Think of how other channels of arts such as music, sculpture, painting, film, humanities, social science, etc can influence your work. Don't limit yourself-- visit museums, exhibitions, and talk to other artists. Let them influence you and open up your world.

## **10. Have a sense of urgency**

One of the philosophies I have in life is: "Live everyday like it were your last." After all, we never know when we will die. Even though we are young and healthy, we might get in a car accident tomorrow. I want to live without regrets. Even Steve Jobs used this as his life's mantra:

"When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: "If you live each

day as if it was your last, some day you'll most certainly be right." It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "no" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something." Steve Jobs, Stanford University, 2005

Trent Parke also has a similar sense of urgency in his life and his work, which was drawn from a personal tragedy in his life:

“[My] mum died quite suddenly one night from an asthma attack. That was it. It was all over. It was the turning point in my life that left me desperate to grab hold of everything while I can. There is no certainty of tomorrow.”

The uncertainty of life is certainly what drives his street photography:

“I went out shooting every day – it became like a drug to me. I loved the ‘rush’ of getting out amongst all the peo-



ple and I just needed to get the images on film.”

### **Takeaway point:**

It is always difficult to make time for us to pursue our passions. We are all busy. Busy with work, busy with our families, busy with other obligations. Busy, busy, busy.

When it comes to street photography, it is the most democratic and easily accessible types of photography. Regardless of how busy we are, I think we can all make at least 15 minutes a day to just go out and take photos. You can do it from a quick lunch break at the office-- or on the way to the grocery store.

Don't put your passion on the back burner. If we keep delaying our passions because we are "too busy" -- we will one day end up being on our deathbeds and regretting not spending more time on what mattered to us the most.

## **11. On black and white vs color**

Trent Parke's images have a certain look to them. In his black and white

work, there is an epic and melancholy look to them. His color work also has a searing color that screams off the pages. Although Parke is mostly known for his black and white work, he has recently focused more on color. He shares why that is:

"With black and white, or colour, I have to be shooting one or the other and just pushing and working and working and trying to get it to another level. When you shoot colour, you've got to think colour. You're thinking great colours as well as great moments, getting that all to come together in one frame is awfully hard to do."

Parke also shares how he has switched from shooting his black and whites from 35mm on his Leica and moved up to shooting medium-format color on a Mamiya 7:

"The Minutes to Midnight pictures were lyrical and timeless, but there was nothing that really identifies Australia in a physical sense, so I wanted to do something that looked at urban Australia, that used signs and advertisement that would

date the country in a particular time. I wanted more detail so people can read signs. That was why I had to go up from 35 mm to medium format. At the same time, I started going through our family albums and I found all these old kodachromes and I was amazed by the colour. That was the main catalyst for going into colour.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Even though Parke was well-known for his black and white work and mastered the medium, he didn't let himself become complacent with his work. He could've easily stuck with black and white and kept making new work that looked like his old work.

But he continued to push forth-- taking his photography into new boundaries, which is working in color.

Parke also shares that by working in color-- you have to see the world differently. And one cannot focus on shooting both black and white and color at the same time. You need to focus on one or the other.

Personally I can attest to this as well. The first 5 years I shot street photography, it has all been in black and white. I swathe world differently. I saw the world in abstractions, in forms and shapes, in contrasts, shadows and light. But when I switched to shooting in color, I specifically looked for the color-- and the description and context color added to my images.

At the end of the day, black and white and color are different mediums. Neither is "better" than the other. But I would recommend sticking with one medium or another for a certain project. Because you will see the world differently. By trying to mix both, you won't have enough focus to create truly great work.

## **12. On being a photographer and parent**

I don't have any kids-- but I have heard how they change the way you live your life in a dramatic and profound way.

Trent Parke shares how having a child changed his life-- and especially his photography:

"I used to shoot pretty much every day or any spare moment. Narelle and I gave up any social life we had to be able to continue doing our personal work. Being a street photographer means you never really stop taking pictures. And when I'm not shooting, Narelle is shooting. When Jem came along it changed everything. Both our parents and families live in different states and as we don't have any friends with children here, there is no real day off (we can't afford the ridiculous prices of childcare)."

However even though Parke has a child, he still has been able to find ways to shoot:

"There was only one real option if I wanted to keep taking pictures and spend time with my son. Push a stroller as well as take pictures."

Over time, Parke has found how he has been able to balance having a family and child with his photography:

"Jem hates our two bedroom dogbox flat and loves being outside, so when the light gets right we head out. I spend an hour or so shooting and when the light

goes we head to the nearest park. He gets a tour and then gets to play somewhere different at the end of it so it works out ok. I've missed some great pictures along the way, but I have also managed to knock a few good ones off that I wouldn't have had any chance of taking had we been at home. It has completely changed the way I work. But I actually think it's for the better."

### **Takeaway point:**

If you have a child and find it difficult to make time to go out and take photos, incorporate your lifestyle as a parent into your photography. Don't think of your child as preventing you from creating great work. Go out with your kid and explore the world together-- camera in hand.

## **Conclusion**

I admire Trent Parke greatly both for his phenomenal work and his infectious passion for photography. He has truly helped push the genre of street photography forward with his relentless goal of making exceptional images.

Personally Parke has challenged me in my photography-- to focus more on making books, to creating more emotionally-driven images, as well as not settling for mediocrity.

I think if we all follow his lead by never quitting in our work and striving to be the best we possibly can be in our photography -- we will die without regrets.





48

VIVIAN MAIER

One street photographer whose work and life I hugely admire is that of Vivian Maier. For those of you who haven't heard her story, she worked and lived as a nanny her entire adult life-- and shot street photography on the side for herself. She created incredible black and white and color work through the 1950's all the way through the late 1990's. She shot an incredible amount of images-- that amount to over 100,000 negatives.

Recently the documentary: "Discovering Vivian Maier" on the mystery behind her life and discovery came out. I realized I haven't written an article on her yet-- so I wanted to use the opportunity to do so.

## Vivian Maier's Discovery

One of the incredible things about Vivian Maier (besides her captivating images) is her story.

She was first discovered by John Maloof, who happened to find Vivian's negatives while at a furniture and antique auction while researching a history book he was writing on Chicago's north-west

side. Vivian's belongings were being auctioned off from a storage locker (due to non-payments). When he first found her work, he didn't know what he had.

Maloof acquired more than 100,000 negatives from her, 20-30,000 negatives were still in rolls, undeveloped from the 1960's-1970's. Slowly but steadily he started to develop the rolls himself, and started scanning them with an Epson V700-series by himself. Fortunately most of her negatives that were developed in sleeves had the date and location penciled in French.

Maloof tried to Google her, and discovered that she passed away just a few days before in an obituary. This is the death tribute he read of Vivian Maier who passed away at age 83:

“Vivian Maier, proud native of France and Chicago resident for the last 50 years died peacefully on Monday. Second mother to John, Lane and Matthew. A free and kindred spirit who magically touched the lives of all who knew her. Always ready to give her advice, opinion or a helping hand. Movie critic and photog-

rapher extraordinaire. A truly special person who will be sorely missed but whose long and wonderful life we all celebrate and will always remember.”

## Vivian's History

Vivian Maier came to the states from France in the early 1930's and worked in a sweat shop in New York when she was about 11 or 12. She was described as a Socialist, Feminist, a movie critic, and a tell-it-like-it-is type of person. She picked up her English by watching films, and also wore a men's jacket, men's shoes and a large hat most of the time. She took photos everywhere she went, without showing them to anybody.

Maier first discovered photography around 1949, while still in France. Her first camera was a Kodak Brownie box camera, which is an amateur camera with only one shutter speed, no focus control, and no aperture dial.

In 1951, Maier went to New York and joined a family in Southampton as a nanny.

In 1952, Vivian Maier purchased a Rolleiflex camera and started to become more prolific with her photography. She stayed with her original New York family until 1956, when she moved to the North Shore suburbs of Chicago. In Chicago, she got employed by the Gensburgs family, who employed Vivian as a nanny for 3 boys. They soon became Vivian's closest family for the rest of her life.

In 1956, Vivian Maier Maier moved to Chicago, where she built a darkroom in her private bathroom. This allowed her to develop and print her own black and white film. In the early 1970's once the children she was nannying grew up, she had to abandon her home in Chicago. This forced her to stop developing her own film. As she jumped from new family to new family, her rolls of undeveloped, unprinted work began to collect.

In the 1970's Vivian started to shoot more color street photography, using mostly Kodak Ektachrome 35mm film. Some of the cameras she used was a Leica IIIfc, and various German SLR cameras. Her color work was much more ab-

stract than her earlier black and white street photography. She started to photograph less people, and focused more on "found objects", newspapers, and graffiti.

In the 1980's Vivian started to have financial instabilities. This caused her processing to be put on hold, and her color Ektachrome rolls began to pile up.

Between the late 1990's and early 2000's, Vivian had to put down her camera and keep her belongings in storage while she tried to stay afloat financially. She was temporarily homeless, until she was given a small studio apartment which the family of the kids she took care of in Chicago (the Gensburgs) helped pay for. Her photographs in storage then were sold off in an auction due to non-payment of rent in 2007. The negatives were auctioned off by the storage company, where John Maloof discovered her work.

In 2008, Vivian fell on a patch of ice and hit her head in downtown Chicago. Although she was expected to make a full recovery, her health began to deteriorate, forcing Vivian into a nursing home.

She passed away a short time later in April of 2009.

## **Cameras**

Vivian Maier's first camera was a Kodak Brownie box camera. In 1952 she purchased her first Rolleiflex camera. Over the course of her career she used Rolleiflex 3.5T, Rolleiflex 3.5F, Rolleiflex 2.8C, Rolleiflex Automat and others. She later also used a Leica IIc, an Ihagee Exakta, a Zeiss Contarex and various other SLR cameras.

## **Film**

During her life Vivian Maier shot mostly Kodak Tri-X and Ektachrome film.

## **Vivian Maier's Working Style**

One thing I am particularly interested in is Vivian Maier's working style. Based on her contact sheets (with her black and white Rolleiflex work), you can see that she was quite conservative. Most of the photos she took were just one shot of a scene. Sometimes when she thought the scene was really interesting, she would work the scenes and



shoot up to 8 shots (more than half the roll of 12 shots in a medium-format film).

Shooting with her Rolleiflex, many of her shots shows she was unnoticed by her subjects. However some of the photos, you can see that her subjects look at her curiously (showing that her subjects at least had some idea she was photographing them).

Some of the photos she took also looks like they were photographed with consent by her subjects. She might have briefly chatted with her subjects before taking their shot-- as some of her subjects simply smile and look straight at Vivian.

She also zone-focused while shooting (pre-focusing her lens to a certain distance and shooting with a relatively small aperture). She photographed people who were stationary-- and also people who she found interesting as they walked by her.

In terms of her working distance, Vivian shot at different distances. Some of her photos are intimate portraits shot

at a close distance (less than a meter away). She wasn't shy to get close to her subjects to fill the frame. Other photos are shot more at a distance to show more of the environment and of an interesting scene.

Regarding subject matter, Vivian Maier photographed street scenes, portraits of people, interesting architecture, self-portraits, as well as random objects in the streets.

Most of Vivian's work was shot in New York and Chicago, but she also did take some photos while traveling in India and Egypt.

Her color work differs much from her black and white work. First of all, her color work looks more like the classic "street photography" you would see by the likes of Garry Winogrand and Joel Meyerowitz. It is much more spontaneous and has a specific focus on colorful scenes. She also shot most of her color work on 35mm, which creates more dynamic framing in her shots. Most of her black and white work was on her Rollei-

flex, which wasn't as quick and nimble as her Leica and 35mm SLR cameras.

## 1. Shoot for yourself

One of the most important lessons I've personally learned from Vivian Maier is the importance of shooting for yourself. Maier never really showed her work to anybody else while she was still alive and shooting. It wasn't until John Maloof discovered her work in a storage auction did her work reach a huge audience.

Nobody still really knows her motivations in her street photography because she never really talked to anybody about her work. Not only that, but she never left behind any written records regarding her motivations in street photography.

Regardless, it is clear that she shot street photography to satisfy something inside herself. She shot prolifically- at every chance that she got. Even though she did work full-time as a nanny, she used her time in-between chores and on the weekends to create her breathtaking images.

### Takeaway point:

Sometimes we forget the most important person to impress with our photography is ourselves. With the proliferation of social media, we always feel the need to impress others. We want to get tons of followers, likes, favorites and admiration from others.

If Vivian Maier started shooting street photography nowadays, she would have probably stayed off social media. She would have shot purely to satisfy herself-- and not worry or care what others thought of her work.

I think the beauty of street photography is sharing it with others. Even with Vivian Maier-- I think it would have been a shame if nobody ever discovered her work. Her images inspire, in their simplicity and beauty of everyday life.

While it is admirable to create images to inspire other people-- don't forget that you want to impress and satisfy yourself. First shoot for yourself, and if others happen to enjoy your work-- that is an extra plus.

## 2. Be prolific

Vivian Maier left behind 100,000+ negatives, much of which was undeveloped. When John Maloof first discovered her work, about 20-30,000 negatives were still in rolls, undeveloped from the 1960's-1970's.

Why did she have so much undeveloped work? Part of the reason was the fact that she was always moving and didn't have much stability. Not only that, but she had financial issues her entire life-- and she passed away nearly penniless.

I also think a part of the reason is the fact that her primary goal was to just go out and document the world. She might have thought that she could just do all the shooting while she was healthy, and could always end up developing and printing her work later.

Maier photographed constantly, over 50 years throughout mostly Chicago and New York. Her style changed and evolved over time, photographing street scenes in black and white, then working in color with more abstract scenes.

Letting her undeveloped work pile up is very similar to that of Garry Winogrand, who was also a prolific shooter. He was too busy shooting, that he didn't have enough time or energy to even develop his rolls.

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the best ways to become a great photographer is to simply take a lot of photos. The more photos you take, the more you improve your eye and skills. And the more photos you shoot in the street, the more likely you are to strike gold and capture phenomenal images.

Malcom Gladwell wrote in his book: "Outliers" that most experts had to dedicate at least 10,000 hours to their craft to master it. I think in photography the same idea applies. To become a truly great photographer, we need to spend a lot of time out shooting and creating images. The more time we spend photographing, the more hours we put towards those 10,000 hours to become a master.

Even though it is hard to make time to shoot in our everyday lives-- try to find time in-between your busy schedule. Always carry your camera with you, and photograph whenever you have a small break. Photograph in the morning before you go to work. Photograph on the subway or bus. Photograph during your lunch break. Photograph after work, on the way home. Photograph on the weekends. Photograph on the way to the store. Every opportunity is a photographic opportunity-- and let the images and hours of work pile up.

### 3. Embrace your day job

Vivian Maier had a day job. She was a nanny. She didn't work as a full-time photographer. She was simply a photography amateur and hobbyist. She didn't photograph to make money. She photographed to please herself, and capture everyday life.

When I used to have a day job, I used to always tell myself: "Man, if I didn't have this stupid day job -- I would have so much more time to photograph.

I wish I was a full-time photographer, so I could always be taking photographs."

Funny enough, soon after when I got laid off and did start pursuing my street photography full-time, I found out that I didn't have that much more time to photograph. Instead, I found myself busy writing articles for the blog, answering emails, planning workshops, putting together business proposals, working on finances, and other tasks on the computer. Many of my friends who are full-time photographers do commercial and wedding work-- and don't even have the energy to photograph for fun after their work-days are over.

I think there is a huge benefit of having a day job. A day job gives you the financial stability to shoot street photography for fun-- on the side, on your own terms. If you shot street photography for a living, the images you created had to please your clients. You wouldn't be just shooting for yourself.

So regardless if you have a day job, you can still create great images. Some of the best street photographers I know



are employed full-time and even have families. But they always carve out free time to shoot street photography either during their lunch breaks or on weekends. Plus having a day job gives them the financial stability to afford photography books, film, cameras, workshops, and money to travel.

**Takeaway point:**

If you have a day job, don't be fooled that by becoming a full-time photographer will give you more free time to shoot. You can still make incredible street photography with a day job (like Vivian Maier).

## 4. Photograph yourself

I love Vivian Maier's self-portraits. They are simple, seductive, humorous, and witty. She was quite creative in photographing herself-- and shot herself her entire life. She photographed her shadow, reflection through water, reflection in mirrors, and incorporated many different compositional elements in doing so.

**Takeaway point:**

Sometimes it is hard for us to find subjects to shoot on the street. But regardless-- we always have ourselves to photograph.

So photograph your own shadow, your own reflections, your own image. Superimpose yourself on your subjects, photograph mirrors, windows-- and push your creativity. Look at Vivian Maier's self-portraits for inspiration (also check out Lee Friedlander's self-portraits) and have fun.

## 5. Being "discovered" involves a lot of luck

When I started shooting street photography, I wanted to become "discovered" to have my work recognized and appreciated. I wanted to be in famous galleries, exhibitions, and museums. I wanted to be a photography household name.

But what I discovered through Vivian Maier is that being "discovered" is mostly luck. If Vivian Maier's work didn't happen to be found by John Maloof, her work would've disappeared into obscu-

rity. Even though she was incredibly talented, nobody would ever know her work.

Even for myself-- the popularity of this blog is a lot of luck. Granted that I have worked hard on the blog for the last 3 years-- but I was lucky in terms of the time I was born (having the internet), getting featured on other popular photography blogs, as well as building the right connections.

### **Takeaway point:**

You can be the most talented photographer in the world and never receive recognition for it. To gain recognition does involve a lot of luck, knowing the right people, and being in the right space at the right time.

So don't let your popularity dictate your self-worth in photography. There are tons of incredibly talented photographers out there who still haven't been "discovered" because they don't know how to market their work via the internet to the masses. I personally am not the best street photographer out there-- but the only reason why I'm well-known

is through this blog, and that I know how to effectively utilize social media.

Photograph for yourself, and if you happen to become "discovered" appreciate it. If you never do, don't worry. Just keep shooting for yourself.

## **Conclusion**

Vivian Maier has taught me the importance of shooting for myself, and not worrying so much about what others think about me and my work. I think she is a great reminder to all of us-- that the most people to impress with our work is ourselves.



49

## WALKER EVANS

I want to write about a photographer that most art and photography students know, but not that many street photographers know (or appreciate) online.

That photographer is Walker Evans, one of the most pivotal American photographer from the 20th century. He inspired a league of influential street photographers such as Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, and even Bruce Gilden. He is most famous for photographing the Great Depression with the FSA, his candid work of Subway riders in NYC, and his street photos and urban landscapes all around America (his most famous book being “American Photographs” which was the first

photography exhibition to be held at the New York MOMA. He was also a non-dogmatic photographer who often proclaimed that the camera didn't matter and experimented with the 35mm format of the Leica, the 2 1/4 format of the Rolleiflex, the cumbersome 8×10 large-format, and even using a Polaroid SX-90 more or less exclusively towards the end of his life.

There is a lot that I don't know about Walker Evans, so I made it a point to learn more about him through doing research for this article. I hope that you find his work to be as inspirational as it was to me.

Before I start this article, I want to share this excerpt that Robert Frank said about Evans and his influence on his famous project, "The Americans":

"When I first looked at Walker Evans' photographs, I thought of something Malraux wrote: 'To transform destiny into awareness.' One is embarrassed to want so much for oneself. But, how else are you going to justify your failure and your effort?" – Robert Frank

## 1. Make a living with a day job

Like many photographers and artists, Evans was always straddling the line between paying his bills and being dead broke. Not only that, but Evans resented and was very reluctant to take on commercial work. Starting off, Evans supplemented his photography by having a day job, which ultimately gave him the freedom to photograph on his own terms. He shares more in an interview:

L.K. How did you make a living?

Walker Evans: I had a night job on Wall Street in order to be free in the daytime. It paid for room and food. You didn't have to sleep or eat much. In those days I was rather ascetic; I didn't lead the bohemian life Crane led.

### Takeaway point:

Evans held a day job (or in this case, "night job") in order to pay his bills which also gave him the freedom to photograph during the day as he'd like. I think in life freedom to do what you want is one of the most valuable things,



more than material wealth or anything else. Many of us want more time to shoot on the streets, but we think that we need to work more to earn more money, which will give us more time to shoot on the streets. I used to believe this, but when I had my day job I actually found my job to suck way more physical and mental energy which could have been better used towards my photography.

Therefore realize that regardless of whatever your profession is, photography is your ultimate passion and whatever you do to pay the bills doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that you work as a photographer to pay the bills. Rather, I think it is a better strategy to hold a day job and work on your personal photography projects completely on your own terms (to prevent having professional photography gigs corrupt your personal photography work).

So remember at the end of the day, don't spend so much time at work (this means not staying in the office after 6pm) that it robs time from your photog-

raphy. Try to free up as much of your time to go out and shoot.

## 2. Give yourself a visual education

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did the camera appear? Was that through a friend? Or what happened?

WALKER EVANS: I really don't know very much about that. I just don't know. As a boy I had a cheap little camera and I had gone through the hobby photography experience developing film in the bathroom and so on. And I think it came from painters. Several of my friends were painters. And I had a visual education that I had just given myself.

One of the greatest things about photography is that it is the most democratic art form. Anyone can do it, even a five year old child or a chimpanzee. You just give them this magical box, have them aim it, click, and you will have them create an image.

However that is also exactly the downside of photography. Nowadays it is easy for anyone to make a technically per-

fect image with the technology we have today with auto exposure and ISO. But someone who has absolutely no training will have a harder time painting something that is technically perfect.

I also find that from the friends who I know who are painters— they have all had a “visual education” in terms of the great painters who came before them— giving them a clear understanding of what great art was.

I think the rise of the Internet and social media has been a great equalizer, but has also impoverished the visual education that many photographers receive. There are tons of great street photographers on Flickr, but they are only 1% of the 1%. 99.99% of the street photographs you see on the Internet are rubbish, but a lot of street photographers starting off see those poor images— and therefore have a poor “visual education.”

Walker Evans gained his eye for knowing what a great photograph was through the visual education of his painter friends. He undoubtedly became influenced by the great works of artists

that his friends would probably talk about, share, and aspire towards. Similarly, Adam Marelli says that photographers can often learn more about what makes a great image through the work of painters and other artists (not photographers).

### **Takeaway point:**

So how do you improve your own “visual education”? First of all, you must learn what a great image is. I would recommend not starting off looking at photography, but much further back. Photography as a serious art form has been less than 100 years, but painting, sculpture, and drawing go back thousands upon thousands of year. Study the classic painters from the Renaissance and see how they painted their subjects in which position and how they “composed” the frame. Look at the the direction of the light in the image, and where it falls upon. How many subjects are in the piece? Where are they looking? What makes the image feel balanced? How did they use color to add drama or attention?

Once you get your feet wet with the classic painters, then head towards the classic photographers. Buy their photo books, study their compositions, and feel the emotions that their images elicit. Always ask yourself: what did the photographer see when taking this image? Why did they think it was a significant event? How do they utilize and fill the frame? What makes it memorable?

By constantly asking yourself these questions you will embark on a rich and fulfilling visual education, and start to give your body the inspiration it deserves.

### 3. Go against the style of the time

When Evans first started to take photographs, he was first interested in it because it was the “forbidden fruit” – a medium which no artist took seriously. Part of him was a rebel – so he took up photography to rebel against the conventions of the time. When he is asked about his inspirations in photography, he answers:

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where do you think [your inspiration] came from? Through literature?

WALKER EVANS: I don’t know. No, no. I was just drawn to that. Partly I think added to it is the fact that I think I associated that with forbidden fruit, really. It was not the thing to do. So I would do it.

Even when Evans was serious about photographing in the late 1920’s he hated the contemporary style and aesthetic of the time which resembled more “fine art” than the rugged street life he would photograph:

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things did you photograph? What were you interested in doing with the camera at that point?

WALKER EVANS: I think I was photographing against the style of the time, against salon photography, against beauty photography, against art photography.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The whole elaborate business –

WALKER EVANS: Yes. Even including Stieglitz. I was doing non-artistic and non-commercial work. I felt – and it's true – I was on the right track. I sensed that I was turning new ground. At least I thought I was mining a new vein, sort of instinctively knowing it but not in any other way aware of it.

Cliches are also something that Evans tried his hardest to steer away from:

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think were the qualities of salon photography that aggravated you or that you reacted against?

WALKER EVANS: Oh, conventionality, cliché, unoriginality.

### **Takeaway point:**

Photography, like many other form of arts, has certain fads, contemporary styles, and phases. Whenever people talk about the work of Walker Evans they exclaim how much of a visionary he was, how he paved new roads, and broke new ground. He was able to do this not because he followed the conventions of the

time– but rebelled against them and took his own path.

I think when it comes to contemporary street photography, it is very different to have unique work from others and stand out. However photography has only been around for a hundred years or so– I still think there is a lot of uncharted territory in terms of aesthetic, compositions, subject matter, and approaches.

So whatever you see others doing online be inspired by it, but don't follow it blindly. Don't shoot with a flash because everyone else is doing it. Don't just try to add more multi-subject shots because very one else is doing it. Don't just work in high gritty contrast black and white because everyone else is doing it.

Rather, see what everyone else is doing– and do the opposite. That is where you will find your work to be different and unique.

## **4. Photograph reality (even if it is brutal)**



I think one of the things that draws me most to street photography is how honest and real it is. However at the same time, reality can be quite cruel and brutal. This is what first drew Evans to photography:

PAUL CUMMINGS: That you studied or looked at?

WALKER EVANS: No. Nothing. Well, I did get excited over one Paul Strand picture. I remember his famous Blind Woman excited me very much. I said that's the thing you do. That really charged me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember what the qualities were of that photograph?

WALKER EVANS: The Strand picture? Sure. It was strong and real it seemed to me. And a little bit shocking; brutal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, those were qualities then that you worked for – right?

WALKER EVANS: Well, that's what attracted me in art. I mean I would read

a book like Thompson's Hunger and that was a joy because I thought that was real. It really wasn't. But the lack of judgment of this particular youth – me – led me to believe that since I had a genteel upbringing that real life was starvation; so that it was honest to write about that. That's all wrong; but that's what I thought. I thought to photograph the Blind Woman was the thing to do.

### **Takeaway point:**

Street photography is both difficult in terms of the approach (having the guts to photograph stranger) but also difficult ethically (is it "right" for me to photograph this person?)

Know that reality is not pretty. There are a lot of things that are unfair, unjust, and cruel in society. However I feel when it comes to street photography, we shouldn't always turn a blind eye to what isn't pretty to look at. Street photography shouldn't only be pretty photos: I feel we have a moral obligation to show the wrongs in society.

Now I'm not saying just go out and start photographing every single home-

less person that you see on the streets. Rather, approach your photography in a holistic way, showing the positives and negatives of society in a humane and just way.

Nobody can really say what is the “right” way to approach what is and what’s isn’t ethical to shoot. I would say the important thing is consider your intent with your photography: are you taking a photograph that will ultimately help society for a greater good? If so, take the shot. If you feel it is a gratuitous photograph (only for yourself) I wouldn’t take the shot.

## 5. Work instinctively

I think when it comes to shooting on the streets, it is very difficult to do many things at once. It is hard to compose, frame, time the shot, have the right setting, communicate with your subject, and more in the course of just a few seconds.

Street photography is very instinctual– both in terms of the approach when you are on the streets and ultimately the type of photos that you take.

While I do believe there is value in having an ultimate purpose when it comes to photographing (we will talk more on that later) it is also important to work with your guts and instinct.

Evans shares his mindset when photographing in the 1930’s:

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the photographs you were taking during the thirties? Did you have a specific set of ideas or theory about them? Or did you just go out and kind of work and develop?

WALEKR EVANS: I was working by instinct but with a sense – not too clear – but a firm sense that I was on the right track, that I was doing something valuable and also pioneering aesthetically and artistically. I just knew it. And Kirstein helped me a lot. He used to tell me what I was doing. I really learned a lot from him. He was a very perceptive critic and esthete. Oh, yes.

### Takeaway point:

When it comes to working on the street– there are generally two ways you can work. First, you can work instinc-

tively (just photograph anything that interests you) or secondly, you can work more in a project-oriented approach (photograph with a project in mind).

However, I don't think it necessarily has to be one or the other. You can combine the two— and have more of a hybrid approach.

I think you can definitely work instinctively while working on a project-based approach. You can do this by simply surveying a certain neighborhood, city, or area and photographing whatever catches your eye (with having a book in mind). The benefit of working this way is that it gives you more freedom and prevents you from becoming too stuck and restricted.

I think that street photography should ultimately be fun and liberating. The moment that you feel trapped by your photography and it isn't what your heart is telling you to do – I would suggest to move on and try a more flexible approach.

## 6. Have a sense of purpose

One of the questions I often ask photographers (but they often have a hard time answering is): “Why do you photograph?”

This simple question is actually very difficult to answer. Going into the “why” of everyday life takes deep thought and consideration. It makes us consider why we were put on this earth, what our ultimate mission is— and what we want to achieve through our work.

In terms of street photography, I think it should be more than just snapping photos of random strangers. I think you should have a purpose in why you are doing it. Are you trying to make a societal critique? Are you trying to show the beauty of everyday life? Are you trying to document history of a certain place?

Evans shares his sense of purpose, and how it is less about finding acceptance from others:

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you kind of eliminated ideas or experience and developed other ones?

WALKER EVANS: No. The chief thing I've noticed is a solidifying of purpose and conviction and I've gained security about what I'm doing. But also part of me says: beware of this, don't accept acclaim; be careful about being established. There's this problem. How do you get around the Establishment when something is establishing you? You're established when you're in these big museums. I find that quite a challenge. That's why I'm going to do something with all these things, you find something else, establish that. Part of me doesn't want this to be established. It shouldn't be because it tames it. I think I'm doing something that is not acceptable. To find acceptance is quite a thing.

### **Takeaway point:**

Follow your heart when it comes to your photography- and dig deep on why you photograph. The more you ask yourself "Why do I shoot street photography?" the more clarity and purpose you will gain with your work.

## 7. Focus on words and letters

One of the most practical things I've learned from Walker Evans is that we don't always have to photograph people. In-fact, Evans was less interested in photographing people and more interested in incorporating them into the urban landscape.

Words, letters, signage, billboards are part of our everyday existence. Even back then, they were bombarded with advertising messages on huge boards that tried to convince to to try out a new toothpaste, watch a new show, or to drive a new car.

You especially see in Evans work- his fascination with signs and words. When he was photographing this during his era- it was considered something odd to do. But now we look at his images- and proclaim how "interesting" and "retro" things used to look back then. However for him- these signs were quite ordinary and boring- it is only now that we find it interesting (everything in



the past tends to seem more interesting).

Evans shares why he is so interested in signs:

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also a lot of them have signs. Are you interested in letters and in words?

WALKER EVANS: Yes. More and more that's coming to a head right now. Oh, yes, lettering and signs are very important to me. There are infinite possibilities both decorative in itself and as popular art, as folk art, and also as symbolism and meaning and surprise and double meaning. It's a very rich field.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It runs all the way from one kind of restaurant sign that has a menu in the window to very kind of precisely painted signs or billboards.

WALKER EVANS: Yes. Oh, they're very important to me. Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is the appeal for you? Do you know why they are important to you?

WALKER EVANS: No, I don't know why. I think in truth I'd like to be a letterer. And then broadly speaking I'm literary. The sign matters are just a visual symbol of writing.

What I also found fascinating about Evans was the fact that he was also very interested in writing, reading, and literature. I think that had a huge influence in his photography – how he was attracted to words as symbols and metaphors of life.

### **Takeaway point:**

When shooting on the streets, don't just focus on the people. Consider the urban landscape– and especially the signs, billboards, and advertisements you see.

Realize that all of these messages you see today seem quite uninteresting– but inevitably 50 years from now someone in the future will find them fascinating.

Signs, billboards, and advertisements say a lot about contemporary society– what we value (or what advertisers are trying to sell us). Therefore it is an important part of our social fabric.

So when photographing signs, don't just shoot them in a boring and standard head-on type of way. Try to incorporate them into what is around them, whether it be the buildings, the people interacting with them, or more.

Also try to steer clear of the cliché of random people walking by billboards which don't say much. Try to create a juxtaposition or a connection between the signs and the people – that has a deeper meaning.

## 8. Don't become overly interested in technical perfection

In today's digital age, we are obsessed with lens sharpness, camera sensor resolution, post-production magic—and more.

However regardless of how technically perfect an image is— if it has no soul it isn't a memorable or meaningful photograph.

While it is important to create photos that are technically competent—

Evans warns us that we shouldn't become overly interested in post-processing and the technical aspects of photography:

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are you interested in all the darkroom techniques that one can use?

WALKER EVANS: I'm always interested in it but I don't think it should get out of hand. I think it is dangerous particularly when you're young to get over-interested in that. By now I just simply feel that anybody that applies to it should be expected to produce very competent technical work and I go on from there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I notice that in the Yale show, as well as the one at the Museum of Modern Art, that there are no tricks, or apparent tricks that are so easy to do.

WALKER EVANS: That again, is a matter of style and taste. I don't believe in manipulation, if that's what you mean, of any photographs or negatives. To me it should be strictly straight pho-

tography and look like it; not be painterly ever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very straightforward printing.

WALKER EVANS: Yes. Photographs should be photographic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. But no dodging and all that –

WALKER EVANS: Yes. You dodge in printing but it doesn't show. You don't manipulate the negative any other way; you don't touch the negative. You just dodge; that's all.

### **Takeaway point:**

Evans admitted being interested in darkroom techniques, but he tried to stress the fine line between making a technically competent print, without getting too nerdy about it.

I am a bit more traditional when it comes to post-processing. I don't like photos that are HDR'd to death or have selective coloring. I think it looks tacky.

However everyone has their own taste when it comes to post-processing, and I respect that. So therefore I recom-

mend you to experiment with processing and the technical experimentation of photography – but don't make that the primary preoccupation of your work.

Focus on first taking great photos—photos that hit you in the gut and are emotionally stirring. The technical considerations should follow.

## **9. Aim for “visual impact”**

I feel that one of the secrets to making a great photograph is to make it memorable. But how can we make a memorable photograph when there is a sea of photos being flooded to Facebook and Flickr everyday? How can we make our photos stand out?

Evans shares the importance of having “visual impact” when it comes to creating a good photograph:

PAUL CUMMINGS: Could you describe in some kind of terms what makes a good photograph for you? I mean if you look at ten photographs what are the qualities that you would look for to kind of separate them?

WALKER EVANS: Detachment, lack of sentimentality, originality, a lot of things that sound rather empty. I know what they mean. Let's say, "visual impact" may not mean much to anybody. I could point it out though. I mean it's a quality that something has or does not have. Coherence. Well, some things are weak, some things are strong. You just have to.... Well, if you've got something in front of you and you've got some students you throw those words around and point them out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What would visual impact be? Would that be the way the photograph is taken?

WALKER EVANS: I purposely took that because it is a vague phrase. To me there are varying degrees of that in the picture. Sometimes it may be that that isn't the quality you want. It's important that – I can show you a picture that's strong in it, and one that's weak in it. Well, just like all these qualities that.... A man that's interested in theatre may say, "That isn't theatre," or "That isn't good theatre." I often say that in photography. Or that it's too pictorial; that's an-

other thing I'm against. These are words that you throw around to make your students interested and make them come alive.

Evans is very vague when it comes to describing what "visual impact" is. However it is in this vagueness which makes the search for what "visual impact" is more interesting.

I think "visual impact" means different things for different people – but we all can instinctually know what is an impactful photograph and what isn't.

The way I interpret it is a photograph that etches itself into your memory and colors your thoughts in a different way. A photo with "visual impact" dyes itself into your mind- and influences how you see the world.

The most memorable photos taken in history were probably from the Vietnam War– photos that challenged us to rethink our humanity and the pain and suffering that others feel. They are photos that are emotional (regardless of what Evans said that he prefers photos that have 'detachment.')



### Takeaway point:

To figure out which of my photos have “visual impact” I do the following:

a) When I am showing my friends and close colleagues my photographs on my iPad or laptop, I judge how quickly they look through my photos and which photos they pause on and ruminate on. The photos that often catch their attention causes them to halt their process of flipping through my images – and I know that there is something about the image that is memorable– that forced them to stop. While it doesn’t necessarily mean it is a good photograph, it certainly has “visual impact.”

b) I also let my photos “marinate” for a long time as a judge if the photo is good or not. For example, I generally try to wait at least a few months (at least 6 months to a year) before uploading photos to the web.

Why? I find that if I still like looking at a photograph I took 6 months to 1 year ago, it still has enough strong “visual impact” that I enjoy looking at it. 99% of the time I find that photos I first

enjoyed looking at (in the first month or so) I start to despise a few months later.

Also use the analogy of water and oil. If you mix water and oil together, they eventually separate. Over time, the oil rises to the top (the good photos) and the water sinks (the bad photos).

c) Think if people 20 years will find the photo interesting. This is a technique I learned from Satoki Nagata consider if you think a photo you take today will still be interesting or relevant 20 years from now. If so, it might have enough “visual impact” to stand the test of time. If not, you might want to discard it (or never show it publically online).

## 10. Build your experiences

At the end of the day, there are no shortcuts when it comes to photography. Evans (towards the end of his life) shares that his experience over several decades in photography eventually trained him to understand what “works” or what “doesn’t work” based on his experiences. Experience is something you can’t side-step– but something you must

wade in to understand photography on a deeper level:

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, people decide, you know, between, say, ten photographs. The ones that more people say yes about the chances are will exist in some way for a longer period.

WALKER EVANS: Well, again to return to teaching: Experience is very important. It comes only with time. I have time behind me so I venture to teach and say to students, “I don’t really know a hell of a lot more than you do except I’ve been around longer and I do have experience and if I can articulate it some of it will rub off and do you some good.” When I didn’t have experience that’s one thing I learned, that I needed it. It comes – talking to an experienced man is something; it’s not the same as having it but it’s better than not.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is this the experience of just living, or the experience of working in photography?

WALKER EVANS: Everything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything. The total combination. Yes.

WALKER EVANS: Well, if you’re sixty-five years old and you’ve tested a whole lot of things and a lot of them have gone wrong you know that certain things have value and you know where the value is likely to be found by experience. When you’re only thirty you don’t know enough to be sure what you’re doing. Or particularly if you’re only twenty. I can give a very good example of that: That boy working for the Yale News went to that show at Yale and he missed the point. He would say, “This is wonderful photography. Evans is at his worst when he tried to do a gimmick, which is putting up these signs.” Well, that’s missing the whole point. That isn’t gimmick at all. That’s the nugget of that show.

One of my favorite nuggets from this excerpt is when he told his students that he didn’t know that much more than them but what he had was his experience to back up his thoughts.

Evans was human like the rest of us– not some sort of photography demigod. He became a famous and renowned photographer not necessarily that he was

better than all the other photographers out there— but he worked hard in his photography throughout his lifetime and had the right connections (having his work exhibited at the MOMA certainly helped).

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't be frustrated that you aren't as famous as some of the great street photographers out there. Know that it comes with time.

Also when it comes to understanding what great photography is— what works, and what doesn't work (in terms of composition, technical approaches, etc) it is based mostly on experience.

However when it comes to experience it isn't necessarily how long you photograph, but how intensely you photograph and think about photography.

For example, one could say that they have been “photographing for 50 years” but if they only took out their camera once a month to take some photos of rainbows and flowers it probably doesn't compare to a photography student who photographs (or studies photography)

80 hours a week, and working intensely for 4 years. The photography student has ultimately put in more hours than his fictional elder.

So if you are serious about your photography and passionate about it— dedicate your entire life to it. Dedicate your waking hours thinking about it. During the day (when you are bored and have down-time at work) explore the Magnum Photos website, and understand what makes a great photograph. Go out and shoot whenever you have time during your lunch breaks (or your weekends). Meet up with other serious photographers and give and receive brutal critiques on your work.

This will give you the necessary experience to hopefully one day become a great photographer.

## **11. Don't become married to your beliefs**

One of the most controversial things that Walker Evans said when it came to color photography. To paraphrase, he referred to color photography as “vulgar”

and that black and white was the true medium for photography.

However a few years after he said that, he actually started to experiment with color photography with a Polaroid camera. Therefore what he did was a bit hypocritical– but he did the honorable thing by admitting his mistakes and taking on a new view:

Yale: Have you ever tried color film and do you think it renders a less honest image than black and white?

Walker Evans.: No, I've tried it. I'm in a stage right now that has to do with color and I'm interested in it. But I don't think that the doors open to falsehood through color are any greater than they are through the manipulation of prints in black and white. You can distort that, too. I happen to be a gray man; I'm not a black-and-white man. I think gray is truer. You find that in other fields. E. M. Forster's prose is gray and it's marvelous.

Yale: Most of the people who have been doing color seem to be drawn to the dramatic, like Ernst Haas.

Walker Evans: I understand all that, but I've now taken up that little SX-70 camera for fun and become very interested in it. I'm feeling wildly with it. But a year ago I would have said that color is vulgar and should never be tried under any circumstances. It's a paradox that I'm now associated with it and in fact I intend to come out with it seriously.

### **Takeaway point:**

I feel one of the most dangerous things is to become married to your thoughts and opinions. The dangerous part of this is once you get stuck in thinking one sort of way- you fall into limiting yourself creatively and fail to embrace a larger view of the world.

I find myself making hypocritical statements all the time and rather than being embarrassed about it: I am proud of it. Whenever I say something that contradicts what I said a year or two ago, it shows to me that I have learned something new (and that my old self was wrong).

For example, a few years ago I never understood the real value of shooting



film. It seemed like a waste of time and money, especially with the convenience of digital. However now after over two years of being dedicated to shooting my personal street photography work on film, I better understand the benefits and prefer it to shooting digitally. Had I been scared to contradict my previous statements– I wouldn't have enjoyed the beauty and joy of shooting film.

So don't become married in your own beliefs whether it be related to photography (or personal). Keep an open mind – and when it comes to contradicting yourself or being hypocritical – revel in it and embrace it. Admit your past wrongs, and search to try new things that will help you grow and develop photographically (and as a human being).

## 12. Embrace simple cameras

Walker Evans is most famous for shooting the majority of his life's work on a Leica, a Rolleiflex, or an 8×10 camera. However one camera that he discovered late in his life was the Polaroid SX-70, a simple automatic camera that he shot color on.

According to former students, he would always carry the Polaroid with him on his daily outings, and make "... hundreds of pictures of signs, bits of litter, and the faces of his friends and students." (according to friend and student Jerry L. Thompson).

Another story from William Christenberry is that when he went on a trip to Hale County, he brought his Rolleiflex and the Polaroid SX-70, but Evans never even took out the Rolleiflex from the case. He only used the Polaroid.

When asked why he embraced using the Polaroid camera, he stated the benefits how it opened things for him:

"A practical photographer has an entirely new extension in that camera. You photograph things that you wouldn't think of photographing before. I don't even yet know why, but I find that I'm quite rejuvenated by it. With that little camera your work is done the instant you push that button. But you must think what goes into that. You have to have a lot of experience and training and discipline behind you. . . . It's the first

time, I think, that you can put a machine in an artist's hands and have him then rely entirely on his vision and his taste and his mind." – Walker Evans

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the worst obsessions that plagues photography is our obsession of cameras (myself included). I have found that personally I spent way too much time early on in my photography experiences worrying about what camera to shoot with— rather than just going out and shooting.

If we can learn anything from Walker Evans is that there is a great merit to using a simple and automatic camera. It breaks us free of limitations—in worrying about technical settings, fancy equipment, or exotic lenses. It distills the photographic process into a much simpler experience. Of just pointing and clicking the shutter.

Daido Moriyama comes to mind—shooting the majority of his career on the simple Ricoh GR-series camera. It is a small and unassuming black point-and-

shoot that is easy to operate, carry, and make photos with.

So when it comes to photography, don't worry about the camera or technical aspects so much. Embrace whatever camera you have on with you at the time, whether it be your point and shoot or iPhone. Having a simpler camera is often better.

## **13. Compose instinctively**

When we first started photography and wanted to learn the rules of composition – we applied them to taking photos of stationary things like trees, flowers, and landscapes.

However composing when it comes to street photography is much more difficult. When Evans was asked how he composed, he said it was much more unconscious and instinctive:

L.K.: There is an abstract about the most literal photograph of yours. Do you think in terms of composition?

Walker Evans: I don't think very much about it consciously, but I'm very aware of it unconsciously, instinctively.

Deliberately discard it every once in a while not to be artistic. Composition is a schoolteacher's word. Any artist composes. I prefer to compose originally, naturally rather than self-consciously. Form and composition both are terribly important. I can't stand a bad design or a bad object in a room. So much for form. That way it's placed is composition... when you stop to think about what an artist is doing one question is, what is the driving force, the motive?"

#### **Takeaway point:**

One of the biggest problems that I find in street photographers starting off is that they spend too much time trying to frame and compose a scene— and not just shooting quickly from the gut. Composition and framing are incredibly crucial to street photography to make an effective frame — but these are things that come naturally over time. I think it is better to take the first shot from the gut— and then if you have the time, recompose and shoot the scene several more times.

But at the end of the day like Evans says— who cares about composition? We should be more concerned about the “driving force, the motive” of our photography.

## 14. Take photos worth taking

One of the critiques that modern digital photography has is that “everyone is a photographer now.” I really hate that mentality, because the inherent beauty of photography is the democratic nature.

However just because everyone can literally take a photograph— doesn't mean it will be a good or meaningful photograph.

I suppose you can compare the Polaroid of Walker Evan's time with the iPhone: even an idiot could use it (which was one of its main critiques). Evans shares his thoughts on why it is the photographer that matters more than the camera (by using writing as an allusion):

Yale: Maybe that's one of the worst things about the SX-70 — that there is

no technical hurdle. Just anyone can take shots.

Walker Evans: Well, that isn't the worst thing. That's always been true with anything, whether there's any technical need or not. For example, we're all taught to write, and anybody can sit down and write something. Not everybody can sit down and write something that's worth writing.

### **Takeaway point:**

Everyone who is taught how to write can do it quite easily. However not everyone who writes has something worth writing about– or worth reading.

Apply the same mentality to your photography. Anyone can take a technically proficient image now– but do they photograph something that is worth photographing. Or even more so– do they take photos that are worth looking at by others?

Ask yourself the question the next time you are out shooting: is the photo I am about to take worth taking? Will it have a deeper meaning and influence people in an emotional way? Am I trying to

make a statement? Or is this photograph not worth taking?

If the photo isn't worth taking- just don't take the shot. Take photos that you feel deep in your heart and soul are worth shooting.

## 15. Turn your subjects into participants

One of the hardest things in street photography is taking photos of strangers you don't know– and make them feel comfortable about it. At times, people are quite reluctant to being photographed. But how can we overcome that? Evans shares that we should make them feel more like a participant, than simply a subject.

“Incidentally, part of a photographer's gift should be with people. You can do some wonderful work if you know how to make people understand what you're doing and feel all right about it, and you can do terrible work if you put them on the defense, which they all are at the beginning. You've got to take them off their defensive attitude



and make them participate.” – Walker Evans

**Takeaway point:**

Although the majority of street photography is done candidly- it doesn't always have to be candid. Take candid photos, but also take photos where you interact and talk with your subjects. Make them feel like they are a part of the photo-taking process, rather than just being the subjects.

After you take photos of your subjects, talk with them, figure out what their name is, where they are from, what their interests are. Show them the back of your LCD screen and share what you saw that was unique about them that you wanted to photograph. Offer to email them or sent them a copy of the photo. Make them feel like an active participant- and you will succeed more as a street photographer and human being.

## 16. Photograph ordinary things

One of the greatest beauties of street photography is that it celebrates

the ordinary and unadorned things of everyday life. Evans has built a substantial body of work on ordinary things that he was criticized for. They weren't considered “art” when he was photographing them – but he received recognition later on in his life.

“Aesthetically they both justified and vindicated even to myself. And that is that forty years ago when I was going around with a camera I was doing some things that I myself thought were too plain to be works of art. I began to wonder – I knew I was an artist or wanted to be one – but I was wondering whether I really was an artist. I was doing such ordinary things that I could feel the difference. But I didn't have any support. Most people would look at those things and say, “Well, that's nothing. What did you do that for? That's just a wreck of a car or a wreck of a man. That's nothing. That isn't art.” They don't say that anymore.” – Walker Evans

**Takeaway point:**

Don't always feel obliged that when you shoot in the streets, it has to be

something totally outrageous or out of the ordinary. You don't need an elephant on the road, pumpkins on fire, or people doing backflips. Rather, focus on the ordinary parts of everyday life— and make them appear extraordinary. This will also give you more opportunities to photograph, rather than just being drawn to the odd and strange event. The beauty of life is in the everyday, not the extraordinary.

## 17. Collaborate with other artists

One thing I found most fascinating about Walker Evans is his collaboration with writer James Agee in creating: “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.”

The book first was going to be a magazine article about the horrible conditions that sharecropper families endured during the “Dust Bowl” in America. However the magazine article was never published— but it became into a critically-acclaimed book.

But Agee and Evans both combined their talents (writing and photography)

into a book which is described by Wikipedia:

“Agee’s text is part ethnography, part cultural anthropological study, and part novelistic, poetic narrative set in the shacks and fields of Alabama. Evans’ black-and-white photographs, starkly real but also matching the grand poetry of the text, are included as a portfolio, without comment, in the book.”

### Takeaway point:

I think the beauty of photography shouldn't just be restricted. It is one of the most adaptable forms of art— that can be combined and remixed with other forms of expression. It is often said that photographs should just stand on their own. I agree to that sentiment in some regards— but I feel that photography can be transformed into something greater with accompanying text, video, or audio.

So when it comes to your photography, think about others ways how you can collaborate with other artists. Think of making a video slideshow of your work, that cuts in interviews with people on the street. Add ambient noise. Add fic-

tionary text to accompany each photograph (while stating that they are fictional stories). Use your creativity and collaborate with others who have great ideas and visions.

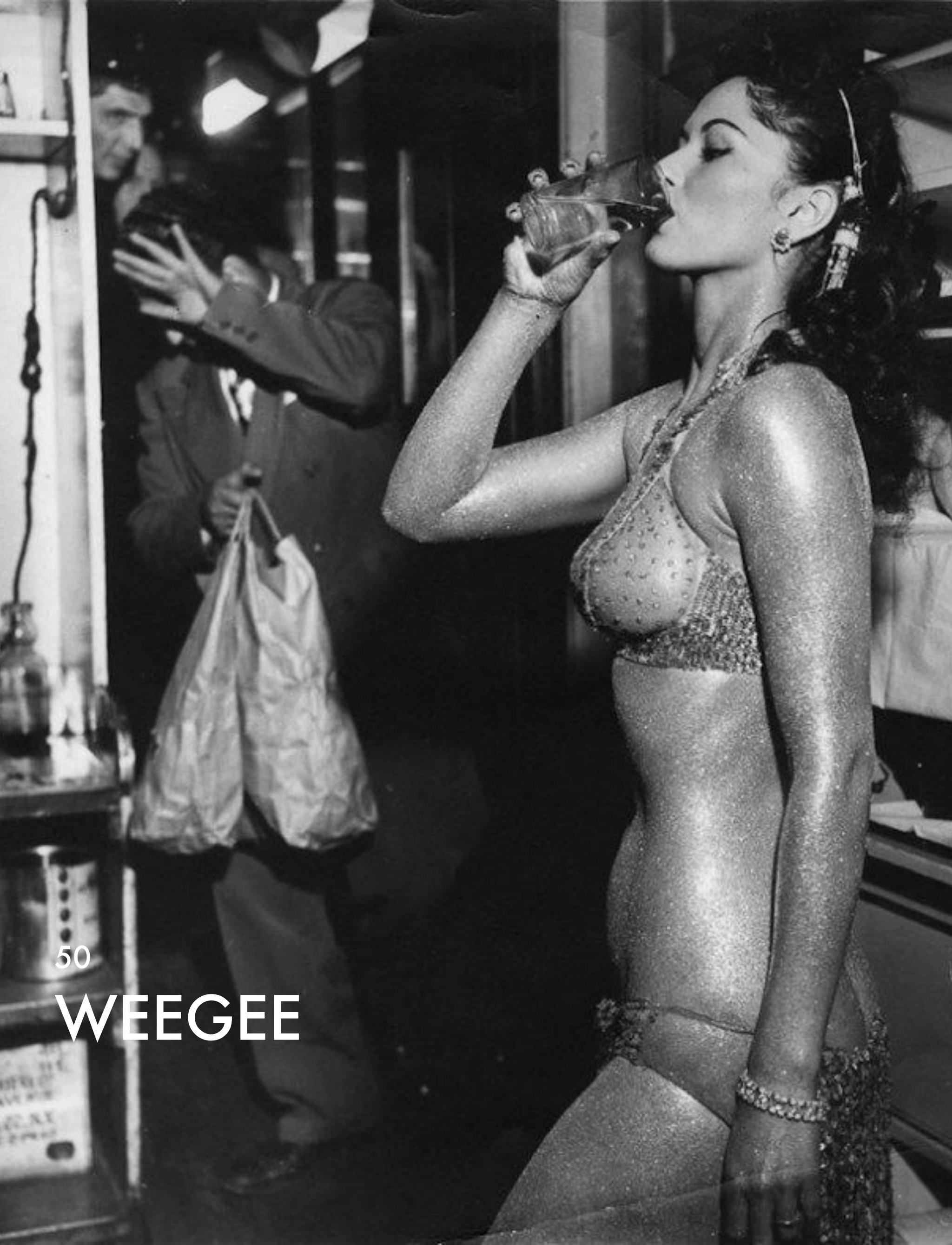
## Conclusion

Walker Evans was certainly a great pioneer in photography not because he followed the path that others paved before him, but that he was a rebel and did things nobody else did. He photographed ordinary things, signs, and people which were against the popular “fine art aesthetic” of the time.

He also disregarded conventions, cliches, and strove to create visual impactful images photos that burned themselves into our thoughts and memories.

He was also fervent enough in photographing America during his time that we have rich images of what it was half a century ago.

So let's all try to follow in the footsteps of Evans and pave new ground in our street photography.



50

WEEGEE



Weegee is certainly one of the most infamous street photographers in history. Although he never called himself a street photographer (he worked as a press/news photographer) his obsession with capturing people was unparalleled. With no formal photographic training, he covered some of the most gruesome murders (and shots of everyday life) around New York City from the 1930's to the 1940's. Armed with a portable police-band shortwave radio, he was always on the beat for new stories to cover— and he even had a complete dark-room in the trunk of his car. This allowed him to get his photos to the newspapers as quickly as possible.

Weegee is also famous for the use of his 4×5 Speed Graphic large-format press camera and flash— which added even more drama to his gritty black and white photos. He was certainly one of the forefathers of shooting street photography with a flash (back when they used flashbulbs). He generally shot his camera preset at f/16 at 1/200 of a second, with flashbulbs and a set focus distance of ten feet (and didn't always know what

kind of photos he got until he processed them).

Many street photographers are under the false impression that shooting with artificial light in street photography is just a recent phenomenon. It started as early as 1887, in which the journalist Jacob Riis started using flash power to document destitute people on the streets. Certainly Weegee has had a strong influence on shooting flash in the streets to photographers such as Diane Arbus, William Klein, and Bruce Gilden.

## 1. Get the shot

Weegee's main profession was a freelance photographer. He often slept in the park, in his car, or other places—listening to the police radio for murders, fires, or other events of interest to photograph. This would allow him to capture the scene before any other photographer. He would then sell his photos to the newspapers to earn his living.

One of the most important parts of his job was to get the shot—and Weegee emphasizes the importance of acting

quickly. He explains in this 1958 interview:

“The subject is news photography. This was the most wonderful experience for any man or woman to go through. It’s like a modern Aladdin’s Lamp, you rub it and, in this case the camera, you push the button and it gives you the things you want. News photography teaches you to think fast, to be sure of yourself, self confidence. When you go out on a story, you don’t go back for another sitting. You gotta get it.”

Street photography is very similar. You have to think fast, because when you see an interesting person or a scene unfold, you almost never have a second chance to capture it. Not only that, but self-confidence is also of utmost important (both in terms of using your camera and approaching people).

Sometimes when Weegee covered murders, he could take his time:

“Now the easiest kind of a job to cover is a murder, because the stiff will be laying on the ground, he couldn’t get up and walk away or get temperamental,

and he would be good for at least two hours. So I had plenty of time.

Other times, he had to work extremely quickly—especially when the time is of the essence:

“At fires, you had to work very fast.”

Weegee also mentions the importance of working quickly, that once the moment is gone—it is gone forever:

“And my, I think the definition of a news shot would be this, a news picture editor. I once photographed and did a story on Stieglitz, truly a great photographer. And we started talking about things and he said, ahh... he said “Something happens, it’s a thousandth part of a fleeting second. It’s up to the photographer to capture that on film, because like a dying day, the thing will never come back again.”

So how can one better “get the shot”? Well Weegee was originally called Weegee (because it sounded like OUIJA board)—in the sense that people thought he arrived at a murder scene (before it happened). Very much like the psychic powers of a OUIJA board.

However Weegee says that was all nonsense—and that his secret was always being ready with his camera, “...just in case”.

MCBRIDE: Well, the reason they said he was like a Ouija board, it is because he’s psychic, he can pick up crime where there are no indications at the moment. He’ll just go to a spot, and there’s a feeling inside him. Isn’t that it, Weegee?

WEEGEE: That’s right. I can sense it. I hover around a neighborhood knowing something is gonna happen.

MCBRIDE: You don’t know what exactly?

WEEGEE: No — I can’t — I don’t know what, but I’m all ready with my camera, just in case.

### **Takeaway point:**

When it comes to news photography (and especially street photography) time is of the essence. Time is ever-so-fleeting, and once a “decisive moment” presents itself to you— it will often never

show its face again (in the same context).

Therefore the practical idea is always be ready with your camera, no matter what. Mind you that Weegee was working with a massive 4×5 press camera. It is tons heavier than a modern day DSLR.

Not to put unnecessary pressure on you but think to yourself when you see an interesting scene: “I might never see this again.” Think to yourself: what are you willing to risk to get the shot? Are you willing someone yelling at you? Someone potentially becoming physically aggressive to you? Someone threatening to call the cops on you?

Know your own personal limitations but if you don’t want to regret having not taken a photo, just go for the shot. And remember, always have your camera ready with you.

## **2. Create your opportunities, don’t wait for them**

For his news photography, Weegee wouldn’t wait for the opportunities to

come to him. Rather, he would create his own opportunities.

Like a stray wolf—he was always on the prowl. He didn't just sit back and wait for the stories to come to him. He would deliberately seek out his stories. Weegee shares his working method:

“And, I have found covering stories as they happen – in my particular case I didn't wait till somebody gave me a job or something – I went and created a job for myself; freelance photographer. And what I did anybody else can do.

What I did simply was this; I went down to Manhattan police headquarters. For two years I worked without a police card or any kind of credentials. When a story came over the police teletype, I would go to it. And the idea was I sold the pictures to the newspapers.

In choosing his stories, he didn't necessarily just go for what was gruesome (murders, fires, etc) but he would often go for what had a deeper meaning (politics, families, etc):

And naturally, I picked a story that meant something, in other words, names

make news. If there's a fight between a couple on 3rd avenue or 9th avenue in Hell's Kitchen, nobody cares, it's just a barroom brawl. But if society has a fight in a Cadillac on Park avenue and their names are in the Social Register, this makes news, and the papers are interested in that.”

### **Takeaway point:**

It is easy to complain that where we live isn't very interesting– and that there isn't much street photography to shoot. Those of you who live in suburbs may sympathize with this idea. I know I personally felt like that when I first moved to East Lansing in Michigan.

However the funny thing is that even street photographers I know who live in Los Angeles, Paris, New York, or even Tokyo get bored of where they are. So realize that it doesn't really matter where you live– make your own street photography opportunities.

In East Lansing, there aren't that many interesting people to photograph (mostly students). Therefore, I have been shooting more urban landscape



(like Lee Friedlander) around the Lansing area (the rougher part of town). I have also been making 1.5 hour commutes (one way) to Detroit, to photograph the people and landscape there as well.

So once again, there are always opportunities to photograph. The only thing that matters is how hard you are willing to hustle to get those shots.

### 3. Be flexible with what you shoot

Weegee made his living as a freelance photographer—so he often shot a wide gamut of subjects. Although he is infamous for photographing death and violence— he also photographed society events (like balls for rich socialites). He didn't see that as a downside, he took it in stride and made the photos interesting as well:

“I covered all kinds of stories from Murder Incorporated to the opening of the opera to the Cinderella Ball at the Waldorf. In other words, you take everything in stride. The same camera that

photographs a murder scene can photograph a beautiful society affair at a big hotel.”

#### **Takeaway point:**

I know a lot of street photographers who work as commercial or wedding photographers full-time. Either that, or street photographers who have day-jobs totally unrelated to anything ‘creative’ (think accountant, corporate lawyer, or service worker).

However realize that you don't have to just shoot street photography to get better at it. John Goldsmith (one of the finest contemporary street photographers I know) makes his living doing commercial work. He recently shot commissioned portraits for the Vancouver Foundation—and the posed photos he got were very much in the “street photography aesthetic.” Just because the assignment wasn't street photography doesn't mean he can't incorporate his own style and vision into his corporate work. You can also see my interview with John [here](#).

Therefore regardless of what you make your living—take it in stride. If you are an engineer by trade— I am sure that your technical knowledge of taking photos (and sense of form and composition) will be strong. If you are a teacher, I am sure you are able to internalize knowledge better (and also pass it on) when it comes to street photography. If you work a boring office job— perhaps it is your hatred of your day-job that allows you to be more creative in your own personal street photography work (and you can always shoot on your 30 minute-1 hour lunch break).

## 4. Capture the context

Robert Capa once said, “If your photos aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” However it is not always best to be too close. Sometimes it is even better to take a step back— to get more of a context of a scene.

For example, Weegee was covering a murder scene. Instead of just getting close to the action, he took a step back to make the photograph more interesting:

“There was another photographer there, and he made what they call a ten foot shot. He made a shot of just a guy laying in the doorway, that was it. To me, this was drama, this was like a backdrop. I stepped back all the way about a hundred feet, I used flash powder, and I got this whole scene: the people on the fire escapes, the body, everything. Of course the title for it was “Balcony Seats at a Murder.” That picture won me a gold medal with a real genuine diamond, so that was it. In other words I try to humanize the news story.”

By Weegee taking a step back and letting everything in he could tell more of a story through his photos. It helps you humanize the scene—and helps your viewers connect with the image.

### **Takeaway point:**

Often times close is better— often times it isn’t. My humble suggestion is to try to work the scene in several different ways. If you have the time and chance— try to take multiple photos of a scene. Get a photo of a scene or person close-up, then take a step back. Re-

compose, try to add different elements into the frame (to add more context) and even try different angles and perspectives (taking a step to the left or right, crouching, or even standing on your tippie-toes).

## 5. Look the opposite way

Many street photographers like to shoot when there is a certain event or festival in town. Although it can be tempting to just photograph the interesting scene at hand— it can often be more interesting to turn your camera the opposite way— to the spectators.

Even Weegee would often turn the camera the other way and photograph the less obvious (which to him, made more interesting photos).

For example, instead of just photographing another burning building, he was more interested in the people it affected—and photographed the people instead of the fire:

“Of course I ran into snags with the dopey editors. If it was a fire, they’d say, “Where’s the burning building?” I says

“Look, they all look alike. I says look, here’s the people affected by the burning building.” Well some understood it and some didn’t.

In one case I went to a tenement house fire, here’s a mother and daughter looking up hopelessly. Another daughter and baby are burning to death. Now, at a fire, what happens, those that are lucky to get out of the burning tenements gather in the street, of course.

And then the firemen start counting noses. They want to see how many people are there, and I notice also at this particular fire the aid to the Chief came out and he says “Boss, this is a roast.” meaning, somebody, one or more persons had burnt to death. That’s what the firemen call a roast. And I saw this woman and the daughter looking up hopelessly, I took that picture. To me, that symbolized the lousy tenements, and everything else that went with them.”

I think the best street photographers are the ones who are able to photograph things that are less obvious. For example, if you are traveling to Rome or Paris,

don't photograph the Colliseum or the Eiffel tower. Rather like Martin Parr, you should photograph the tourists themselves (and see how ridiculous they look in a certain context).

Whenever in doubt sometimes looking the other way can be more interesting. And always remember in street photography, the more humanistic and emotional your photos are— the more they will generally resonate with your viewer.

## 6. Look for people with character

One of the things that Weegee was fascinated with is looking for fascinating characters. He photographed tons of people— and if he saw someone that he didn't find that interesting, he knew instinctively.

For example, his friends would often spot out drunks passed out on the ground and tell him to take a photo. Weegee declined, knowing that they weren't interesting to him—and didn't have enough character:

"I will walk many times with friends down the street and they'll say "Hey, Weegee. Here's a drunk or two drunks laying on the gutter." I take one quick look at that and say "They lack character." So, even a drunk must be a masterpiece! I will ride around all night, or all year, looking for a good drunk picture.

Weegee was a perfectionist. He wanted the photos he took to interest—not only to himself, but to his viewer. So he would refrain from taking cliché and boring photos of people he thought were too "ordinary." He recalls the story in which he made his favorite photo of a drunk person:

One of the most beautiful ones I got after riding around two years. Then I made my drunk picture. It was a guy on (Amsterdam avenue?) one Sunday morning about 5 o'clock, he was sleeping underneath a canopy of a funeral undertaking parlor. Now that to me was a picture. Of course the obvious title would be "Dead Drunk." So, in other words, I am a perfectionist. When I take a picture, if it's a murder or it's a drunk, it has gotta be good."



### Takeaway point:

One of the great things nowadays is that we have the luxury of digital. Imagine Weegee shooting with a massive 4×5 press camera. Not only did he only have one exposure per shot (and had to reload it afterwards) he also had to deal with lightbulbs that would burn out after photographing. Therefore whenever he took a photo, he generally only had one shot to get “the shot.”

With digital, we can sometimes become a little too careless and overshoot things that aren’t that interesting. One quote that comes to mind (from Invisible Photographer Asia) is: “Editing beings in the viewfinder.”

Therefore even before you take a photo, really think to yourself: is it interesting? Is it worth taking a photo of? Does this scene look like all the other scenes I have seen, or is it inherently different in some sort of way? Does this person I want to photograph have personality and character in their face? Are their clothes interesting? Are they boring? These are some questions you might

want to ask yourself before photographing.

And remember, don’t aim to just take boring and mediocre photos in the street. Strive to be more selective in finding interesting characters and scenes—and strive for perfection.

## 7. Capture faces

One thing that I find street photographers doing too much (when starting off) is photographing people’s backs. Granted, there is nothing wrong with taking photos of people’s backs (sometimes they can make interesting photos, especially when leading lines are involved and they are walking into the distance).

However at the end of the day— we as humans are genetically programmed to be attracted to human faces. Even newborn babies can identify faces, as it is a survival mechanism.

Therefore when it comes to photographing people in the street— realize that (not always, but generally) having people’s faces in the photo are more interesting.

Weegee knew this concept very clearly:

“When a person gets in trouble and they get arrested, the first thing they do they cover up their faces, and the editors don’t like it. They say “Don’t give me any excuses, give me a picture so my, our readers can see what the person looks like.”

They often say that “eyes are the windows to the soul” and some of the most memorable photos are the ones in which the subject is looking straight at us (and we can see their face, expression, and eyes). Think of the Mona Lisa—with her sly gaze looking at you (you are not quite sure what her expression is). Or the deep gaze of Steve McCurry’s “Afghan Girl.” Her turquoise-colored eyes look straight through you—and pierce you in the heart.

### **Takeaway point:**

I know it can be difficult to photograph someone’s face (especially if they are walking ahead of you). The easy thing to do is photograph their backs. But think to yourself: what is more inter-

esting, the back of someone’s head or in front of their face?

Some practical advice how to photograph someone’s face: If you are walking behind them, quickly pace up the street and walk ahead of them, then turn around at the right moment and photograph them head on. If you are taking photos with permission— you can even get more intimate images by telling your subject to look straight into the lens. This will then give your viewer the sense that your subject is looking straight at them.

## **8. Make people feel comfortable around you**

Although the majority of street photography is shot candidly— know that all the photos you take don’t have to be candid. Sometimes interacting with your subject and getting them to feel more comfortable around you and open up to you can make more interesting photos. Not only that, but it is often more humane.

For example, Weegee tells one story in which he was trying to photograph a woman didn't want to be photographed. He shares how he got her to feel more comfortable by connecting with her on a more human and personal level which made her accept in being photographed.

Weegee starts off by saying that he wants to first talk to her, instead of photographing her:

“For example, a woman.. the New York cops arrested a woman who was wanted for 25 thousand jewel robbery in Washington, D.C. The woman, being a dope, was naturally captured. And she was in the cell downstairs in the basement of the Manhattan police headquarters. I went down, she started to cover up, I says “Look lady, save your energy. I’m not gonna take your picture. All I want to do is talk with you.”

Without surprise, the woman is suspicious of Weegee and his motives:

“She says “No, I know what you want, you want to take my picture. Why should I let you? So my friends, relatives

and mother can see it on the front pages of newspapers?”

Weegee then starts to reason with her– saying that he wants to photograph her in a more humanistic and honorable way:

“I says “Now wait a minute lady, don’t be so hasty. You have your choice. Do you want your picture to appear in the papers, a rose gallery picture with your number underneath it? Or, would you let me make a nice home portrait study of you using nice, soft lighting like Rembrandt would have done?”

Having said that, the woman feels much more comfortable with him:

“Talking and (knocking?) with her, I convinced her that was the only logical thing for her to do, to pose for a picture. Now that was a good catch I’d say for me, besides the New York cops.”

Weegee concludes by sharing the importance that you can disarm and uncover your subjects by treating them like human beings, and reasoning with them in a personal way:

“Anyway, this showed that by arguing with people you can get ‘em to uncover. people are reasonable, even jewel thieves.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I shoot a lot of street photography candidly, but I also like to photograph with permission. Often when I photograph candidly, I feel that I am not able to capture someone’s true personality and character. After all, most of the time it is just a grab shot in the streets without getting to know a person and their background and history.

Therefore when I see someone interesting on the streets that I want to get to know better– I first start talking to them (even before asking to take a photograph). I ask how their day is going, what they are up to during the day– to disarm them and feel more comfortable. After we make a connection– and for chatting for a few minutes, I then generally ask to take a portrait. Sometimes they say no, but the majority of the time they say yes.

When they do say yes, I have more time to work with them. I can move them around a bit (to find a simpler background) and to even make them laugh or look serious– in an attempt to show different wavelengths of their personality. Sometimes the posed photos are interesting, sometimes they aren’t. However I feel that even though I don’t get an interesting posed portrait in the streets– I still value the human connection that I make with them. And that is what matters the most.

## **9. You don’t really know what you get (until you try)**

Weegee often shot in the middle in the night–in complete darkness and with the crude (and horribly inaccurate) wirefinder of his 4×5 press camera. Therefore he wasn’t always 100% sure what he got when he photographed. He only would discover what he got once he processed his photos.

He explains in an interview:



MCBRIDE: I should think when you are taking pictures, you're oblivious. You don't really know what else is going.

WEEGEE: Oh absolutely not. I just look through the wire- finder in my camera and as a matter of fact, when I really see the picture is when I've developed the film. Then I really see what I've have done.

Weegee continues that when he photographs, he is often caught up in the moment:

"I really seem to be in a trance when I am taking the picture because there is so much drama taking place or will take place. I mean, you just can't hide it — go around wearing rose-colored glasses. In other words we have beauty and we have ugliness. Everybody likes beauty, but there's an ugliness. When people look at these pictures of people sleeping on the fire escapes, and kids and little girls holding cats, they just won't believe a thing like that has happened."

### **Takeaway point:**

There is so much chaos in the streets and in public places. I think it is

due to the chaos (and lack of control we have as photographers) which makes street photography the most difficult type of photography. According to Magnum Photographer David Hurn, there are only two things we can control: where to stand, and when to click the shutter.

Therefore know that there is a lot of uncertainty when you click the shutter. You won't always be 100% sure of all the elements that will be in your frame. The small little detail in the back of the frame can often make or break your shot.

However you won't really know what you capture until you try. Whenever you see a scene that you find might be potentially interest (and you have an itch to photograph it)— I say go for it. As my buddy Charlie Kirk often says, "When in doubt, click."

99.9% of the time you aren't going to get anything interesting. But that .1% you do get something interesting—it is worth it in the end.

Once again, the downside of shooting digital is that you often can over-

shoot a scene (which makes editing a nightmare after). However at the end of the day, I think it is better to take more photos of a scene or a person than fewer. Especially if you shoot digital (you have no downside). I shoot film, and I still try to take at least 5-10 photos of a person or a scene if possible. I have even shot an entire roll (36 photos) of one person or scene if I thought it was interesting enough.

## 10. Get to know your neighborhood damn well

As I mentioned earlier in this article, photographers tend to complain that where they live/photograph isn't very interesting. However I find that the most interesting photography projects doesn't really depend on where a photograph lives or photographers. Rather, the most interesting projects I have seen are generally when a photographer gets to know a place extremely well. This can be his/her own neighborhood or somewhere else.

The reason why Weegee's photos were so good is that he knew New York City like the back of his hand. He knew

every street corner, where the action was, and where interesting things may happen. This is what gave his almost supernatural powers in terms of "predicting" where interesting things would happen (even before they happened).

In an interview Weegee shares how he is always on the streets, driving around, and his knowledge of the blocks and people of NYC:

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:

Who's always been madly in love with New York City, but maybe Weegee, I'm not quite as much in love with it as you are. The way everybody talks about you and this book, this beautiful book that you've done, I think maybe you not only love it better than I do, but you know it a doggone sight better than I do. You've been studying it how long?

WEEGEE: Well, all my life, down on all the streets, I know 'em all because I drive all night long. I know every block, every sign-post, every cop, every beggar, every . . . everything."

**Takeaway point:**

When it comes on working on a photography project (or any project for the matter)– the deeper you go the better the project generally gets. This takes a lot of time and effort.

For example, Bruce Davidson rode the subways nearly everyday for 2 years straight to create his monumental “Subway” book.

Josef Koudelka also took 10 years traveling and living with the Roma people for his masterpiece: “Gypsies.”

In a recent interview I did with Harvey Stein, he photographed Coney Island for over 40 years (!) for his incredible: “Coney Island: 40 Years” book.

So know that it doesn’t really matter where you photograph it is all about how you photograph. Rather than just going for single images in street photography and posting to social media– get to know a place really well and work on projects. Projects tend to have more longevity than just single images, and allow you to gain a deeper understanding of a place. Not only that, it allows you to go past the cliches–and more into the soul

of a person, community, or area you photograph.

## Conclusion

Weegee was one of the most passionate and controversial photographers of his time. Although he never called himself a street photographer and worked as a freelance photographer as a living, his use of the flash and gritty black and white helped bring a new sense of rawness and reality to his images. The images he created surely resonated with many photographers who followed him, including Diane Arbus, William Klein, and Bruce Gilden.

I think that the main takeaway point we can learn from Weegee is that he wasn’t someone who just sat on his ass and waited for photo opportunities to come to him. Rather, he hustled hard. He was constantly on the prowl, sleeping on park benches, in his car, with his police radio closely in-hand. He always had his hunkering 4×5 Speed Graphic press camera by his side, always ready for photo moments. Sure he didn’t live the healthiest life– but he poured all of his

energy, soul, and passion into his work and photography.

Although Weegee is given a lot of flack for just monetizing murder, death, and horrible events– he clearly had sympathy for the subjects he photographed and was a humanitarian at heart.

I think if Weegee were still around today, he would tell us to quit our bitching and moaning and just go out there and photograph.

## Quotes by Weegee

- “Sure. I’d like to live regular. Go home to a good-looking wife, a hot dinner, and a husky kid. But I guess I got film in my blood. I love this racket. It’s exciting. It’s dangerous. It’s funny. It’s tough. It’s heartbreaking.”

- “To me, pictures are like blintzes – ya gotta get ‘em while they’re hot.”

- “When you find yourself beginning to feel a bond between yourself and the people you photograph, when you laugh and cry with their laughter and tears, you will know you are on the right track.”

- “What I did, anybody can do.”

- “I had so many unsold murder pictures lying around my room...I felt as if I were renting out a wing of the City Morgue.”

- “So, keep your eyes open. If you see anything, take it. Remember – you’re as good as your last picture. One day you’re hero, the next day you’re a bum...”

- “People are so wonderful that a photographer has only to wait for that breathless moment to capture what he wants on film”





51

## WILLIAM EGGLESTON

I first heard about William Eggleston through my good friend and talented street photographer Charlie Kirk about a year and a half ago. He mentioned that he just purchased a copy of “Chromes” by William Eggleston— and that it was one of his favorite photographic books. I asked Charlie what the book was, and he mentioned it was a 3-set book published by Steidl (I would argue the best publisher in the world) with some of the loveliest color photographs that, printed in the book, look more like fine art prints than just reproductions.

I was very excited to hear this, as I was getting more and more interested in color. I searched it instantly on Amazon, and was taken back that it cost ~300 USD. I have never spent more than 100 USD on a photo book, and the thought of spending so much was quite daunting.

However I thought to myself: if I really wanted to learn more about color photography I would make the investment. Also the book was actually three books in total, so it would be around ~100 USD per book. And not only that, but if the prints were really as good as Charlie said it was, it would be like getting 364 prints for a total of less than 1 USD a print. I also figured that worst case if I hated the book, I could always always return it.

I then held my breath, put it on my credit card, and ordered it. The book then came to my doorstep a few days later, and I was surprised how massive it was. It came in a lovely cardboard box, and with a hard-shelled spine that held all three books inside. Like a giddy schoolboy, I ripped it open (gently) and uncovered the books.

The first feeling I experienced was the touch of the books. They were so soft, well-put together, and you can see that it was a quality product. When I opened the book, I loved the texture of the thick paper, and the colors of the book absolutely blew my mind. The deep crimson reds, the quixotic purples, and the organic greens.

But I was quite disappointed.

I didn't "get" the photographs. What was Eggleston photographing a bunch of random stuff for? His photos seemed to be like a bunch of random snapshots, photographed without much thought or conviction. Just the ordinary and banal things of everyday life. I wanted to punch myself in the gut for spending 300 USD for a photographic book collection that I had no interest in.

I then sent Charlie a message and asked him why he enjoyed Chromes, and that I was a bit disappointed. I remember him telling me simply, "The colors are just lovely." He didn't say much after that.

Determined, I then went back to Chromes and took a look at the colors, carefully and took my time. The first time I looked at Chromes, I simply flipped through each page, staring at each photograph for less than a second. But this time, I boiled a nice cup of coffee, sat down on a lazy Sunday afternoon, and actually took my time to look and analyze each photograph.

What I found astonished me.

I soon started to appreciate Eggleston's vision. What I initially thought were stupid photographs of ordinary, boring, stuff– was exactly what he was getting at. He wasn't interested in photographing “decisive moments” like Cartier-Bresson nor was he interested in capturing esoteric characters or extraordinary moments. He was all about finding the beauty in the mundane.

Not only that, but like Charlie said– the colors are absolutely mind-blowing. The book “Chromes” is a compilation of his unpublished color slide-film Kodachrome photographs (and some with Ektachrome and Afghachrome) and the

colors just pop out at you. They are so vivid, full of life, and you can see that Eggleston has a very good understanding of color theory. His photographs aren't just of random colors, but there is a very subtle form of harmony in his photographs. For example, many of his photographs have primarily warm tones in the background (like red, orange, or yellow)– yet his subject of interest may be of a very cold color (blue, green, or violet) which pop at you.

Not only that, but most of the photographs presented in the book were shot in brilliant light. The majority of his photos were taken during “golden hour” when the light is the softest at either sunrise or sunset. Therefore the images gleam with warmth and beauty– which really made me calm down and appreciate the nature of his photos.

I am now a huge William Eggleston fan. I love his philosophies when it comes to photographing such as his democratic approach, how he finds the beauty in the mundane, and his sharp eye for finding fascinating color combinations. Most of his photos don't have peo-



ple in them, but I think that sometimes photographs are even more interesting without them anyways. The simple coca-cola on a hood of an old Ford at sunset can almost seem more alive than a real person.

For this article I wanted to share some of my personal take-away points from the work of Eggleston. I know that Eggleston himself may not agree with a lot of what I am going to write, but this is something personal to me. I hope you will gain some insights about Eggleston's work through my experiences as well:

## 1. Photograph democratically

As street photographers, we tend to gravitate towards finding the extraordinary moments in life. We want to find the craziest-looking characters, the strangest gestures, and moments that seem quite surreal.

However Eggleston took this convention and flipped it on his head. He wasn't interested in the crazy and odd

things in life. Rather, he was drawn to the everyday, boring, and the banal— and wanted to show the inherent beauty of things that we often overlook.

How did Eggleston begin photographing ordinary things, whereas all the other photographers of his time were documenting beautiful landscapes, fine art, and notable events all around the world?

I think we all have a difficult time finding things of interest when it comes to shooting street photography. We feel obliged to photograph what is beautiful and extraordinary. But in the documentary published by the BBC: “William Eggleston: Imagine” his wife Rosa Eggleston, shared this story of how Eggleston was inspired to first start photographing “ugly stuff”:

“Bill at one time said to his great, highly respected friend: well, what am I going to photograph? Everything here is so ugly.’ And our friend said, ‘Photograph the ugly stuff.’ Well we were surrounded everywhere by this plethora of shopping centers and ugly stuff. And



that is really initially what he started photographing.”

What Eggleston was photographing was very much against the tradition and the norm of photography at the time. Eggleston wasn't so interested in photographing “art photography” but what simply interested him:

“We all started to think about it this way: none of us was interested in what—back then, what was considered art photography, which was very large large-negative landscapes like Ansel Adams.”

The beauty of Eggleston's approach is the fact that he photographs “democratically” and treats all objects as equal. He won't look at a sunset and think it is any more special than a hairdryer, or even a dirty toilet filled with piss.

In the documentary, Martin Parr shares his thoughts on Eggleston's approach especially how he can create powerful photos of “nothing”:

“He takes very ordinary situations and can create very powerful pictures out of almost nothing. And therefore he is not relying particularly on the ultimate

decorative thing like a nice sunset—or the incredible nostalgia that you will often see in contemporary practice. I would say he is kind of beyond that if you would like, he is almost photographing on the gap of everything else.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Realize that in street photography, you don't always have to capture the extraordinary things in life. Often times the ordinary and the banal can be the most interesting.

Perhaps an exercise can be this (like how Eggleston started off): Instead of trying to photograph the beautiful things in everyday life, photograph the ugly stuff. Go against the grain, against the norms, and it will help your work be more interesting and stand out.

## **2. Photograph your hometown**

Eggleston has spent the last 50 years documenting his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. I have never been to Memphis, but I heard it is quite a boring place. This is what photographer Juer-

gen Teller had to say about his first time visiting and how disappointed he was:

“He is the freest person I’ve ever met—he just does what he wants. And you know, if you go to Memphis, I was like totally disappointed when I got there. I was like oh my god, it is so boring—it is like an awful place. It is very dull, there is nothing going on!

As photographers, we always want to photograph novel things— things that are extraordinary. We get accustomed to the things in our own neighborhood, our own cities, and our own daily lives. We always think that the “grass is greener on the other side” and that photographing in the streets of Paris will be more interesting than the suburb that we may live in.

I know a lot of street photographers who live in suburbs, and don’t have the opportunity or access to photograph in a big and bustling city like Chicago or New York. They feel that because of this, they cannot take interesting photographs.

But let’s look at Eggleston— the master of being able to make the boring look interesting. He has lived in the same place for 50 years, and still hasn’t gotten bored of the place. He has done the majority of his work in Memphis, and photographs everyday. Even after such a long time documenting his hometown, he still feels the drive and passion to find parts of Memphis that he hasn’t discovered yet.

### **Takeaway point:**

Know that the place you live is unique. I would say it is even better that if you live in an obscure place, as a lot of street photography probably hasn’t been done in your community. This can give you the opportunity to make a unique body of work, whereas all the big cities have been photographed mostly to death (Paris, New York, Tokyo, etc).

So don’t take your own hometown for granted—even if you live in a suburb. Rather than thinking what you hate about your city, think about what you find interesting about it. Photograph the boring things of your city— and never

quit exploring. If you are able to make a boring photograph interesting, you have done your job as a photographer.

### 3. Cultivate your eye

I think the most important quality that a street photographer should have is a sharp and keen eye. It doesn't matter how technically proficient you are or how expensive your camera is. Without having a sharp and inquisitive eye— you will never make an interesting photograph.

So how was Eggleston able to cultivate his vision and eye? Well, he is generally curious about things— and would stare at things for hours (even without photographing them). His daughter, Andrea Eggleston shares this account:

“I knew that his photographs are very indicative of who he is and how he sees life, and I have always seen that in not only in his photographs but how he looks at things—and what he looks at—and what he notices. He definitely has a different eye. I've seen him stare for hours at a china set, [laughs] and not a

particularly valuable china set. It is sort of maddening, but extraordinary.”

Martin Parr also shares what makes Eggleston's vision so unique: his ability to make interesting photographs out of nothing:

“The thing you look for other photographers work is a sense of vision—that you can recognize someones vision by looking at their photographs. Now that may sound like a very easy thing to do, but in photography it is one of the hardest things to actually achieve.

If you would like it, Eggleston is a photographer's photographer. Because the vision is almost indescribable. It is more difficult to describe than most people's vision, because it is about photographing democratically and photographing nothing and making it interesting—and that would seem to me to be the most difficult thing to achieve of all.”

#### **Takeaway point:**

When it comes to street photography, know that your eyes are your most valuable assets. Don't worry about your camera, lens, or technical settings. If you

aren't a very technical photographer (or don't care much about settings), just use "P" mode and rather focus on training your eye.

How might one train his or her eye? Well, it sounds quite obvious— but you want to look around a lot and be inquisitive, especially in places which you might intuitively think is boring.

For example, let's take a place we take granted for: the supermarket. It is a part of our boring, everyday lives— to pick up food, take it to the checkout counter, and then drive it back home. But if you think about it, the supermarket is a very weird place. What other time in history did we have the chance to go to a central location with all the foods we could possibly want?

And not only that, but look at the foods they offer us— most of them artificial and fake. Look at how colorful supermarkets are, and how bored (or excited) shoppers can be. Look at how consumerism and advertising influence people's decisions with the tacky billboards and pricing labels inside. Look at the long

queues at the checkout counter, or the plethora of choice we are given as consumers.

If you see the supermarket from an outsider's perspective— it is a pretty weird place.

So perhaps the thought experiment we can do is pretend like we are aliens from another planet. Imagine if you landed on Earth and you are experiencing human society for the first time. What would you find interesting? What would you find strange? What would you find perplexing?

## 4. See the world in color

The majority of street photographers shoot in black and white. Why is that? Well, there is a sense of nostalgia we get from looking at old Cartier-Bresson photos in monochrome. It reminds us of the past, when things were more "interesting" and "romantic."

For the longest time, the photography world only regarded black and white as being art. Color was ugly, it was vul-



gar. No serious photographer would photograph in color.

The renowned Magnum photographer Martin Parr explains how radical it was for Eggleston to be shooting in color in the late 1960's (when everyone else was still shooting in black and white):

“His color is just sort of the color of nothing, if he likes- just ordinary life. And its funny that originally he started in black and white and moved to color. And I guess for him, it wasn't an issue. But at the time, you have to understand, if you were a serious photographer you had to be working in black and white. So when he came along and did this sort of nothingness color, it wasn't decorative, it was just ordinary life –it was quite radical, because it was so underplayed. And it took us a long time to understand and appreciate that.”

For those who would try to experiment in color, they had a difficult time photographing in color. They were so used to shooting in black and white that color became another variable– to make the difficult job of photography even

harder. So when these photographers had to shoot in color, they would still see the world in black and white. John Szarkowski expands on this difficulty that photographers faced in the introduction to Eggleston's ground-breaking book “William Eggleston's Guide”:

“For the photographer who demanded formal rigor from his pictures, color was an enormous complication of a problem already cruelly difficult. And not merely a complication, for the new medium meant that the syntax the photographer had learned–the pattern of his education institutions–was perhaps worse than useless, for it led him toward the discovery of black and white photographs.”

Szarkowski continues by outlining the two biggest difficulties that black and white photographers had shooting in color. The first being that these photographers wouldn't use the color in their photographs to add meaning. Rather, it was extraneous and didn't add much to the image:

“Considering the lack of enthusiasm and confidence with which most ambitious photographers have regarded color, it is not surprising that most work in the medium has been puerile. Its failures might be divided into two categories:

1) “The more interesting of these might be described as black and white photographs made with color film, in which the problem of color is solved by inattention. The better photographs of the old National Geographic were often of this sort: no matter how cobalt the blue skies and how crimson the red shirts, the color in such pictures is extraneous – a failure of form. Nevertheless such pictures are often interesting, even if shapeless and extravagant, in the same way that casual conversation is often interesting.”

The second point that Szarkowski mentions that photographers failed in is just seeing colors as being pretty things to add to an image (rather than once again, thinking about the meaning that color imbues into the image):

2) “The second category of failure in color photography comprises photographs of beautiful colors in pleasing relationships. The nominal subject matter of these pictures is often the walls of old buildings, or the prows of sailboats reflected in rippled water. Such photographs can be recognized by their resemblance of Synthetic Cubist or Abstract Expressionist paintings. It is their unhappy fate to remind us of something similar but better.

Not only that, but photographers had a difficult time seeing the world in color. In this below except, Szarkowski mentions the difficulty of photographers being able to see the sky and the color blue as being the same thing:

“Outside the studio, where such color has been impossible, color has induced timidity and an avoidance of those varieties of meaning that are not in the narrowest sense aesthetic. Most color photography, in short, has been either formless or pretty. In the first case the meanings of color have been ignored; in the second they have been considered at the expense of allusive meanings. While

editing directly from life, photographers have found too difficult to see simultaneously both the blue and the sky.”

Szarkowski, however, mentions that many contemporary photographers during his time (1976) were starting to make some headway when it came to incorporate the meaning of color into their photographs, and saw the world in color:

“In the past decade a number of photographers have begun to work in color in a more confident, more natural and yet more ambitious spirit, working not as though color were a separate issue, a problem to be solved in isolation (not thinking of color as photographers seventy years ago thought of composition), but rather as though the world itself existed in color, as though the blue and the sky were one thing.

The best of Elliot Porter’s landscapes, like the best of the color street pictures of Helen Levitt, Joel Meyerowitz, Stephen Shore, and others, accept color as existential and descriptive; these pictures are not photographs of color, any more than they are photographs of

shapes, textures, objects, symbols, or events, but rather photographs of experience, as it has been ordered and clarified within the structures imposed by the camera.”

Eggleston is certainly someone who sees the world in color. In an interview with the Whitney Museum (2009) he stresses the importance of also going out when the light was good, to get the best colors in his image:

“I wanted to see a lot of things in color because the world is in color. I was affected by it all the time, particularly certain times of the day when the sun made things really starkly stand out.”

Not only that, but Eggleston is also emotionally moved when he sees the world in color. According to his son Winston, this is how Eggleston reacts when he sees beautiful colors:

“I wasn’t even born when he started taking color pictures, but I think he likes all colors. I mean, he really goes nuts over some of them. ‘Look at this beautiful orange’ or this beautiful purple.’ I’ll be with him somewhere and he will look

at the sky and say, ‘Goddamn, that’s a good looking blue.’”

Another quite radical thing that Eggleston did with color photography was to adopt the “dye transfer” printing method. It was a method that only advertising photographers used— as it was quite expensive. It highlighted images with extreme saturation, vibrant colors, and it wouldn’t fade. When interviewed about using dye-transfer prints, Eggleston shares:

“It was a very old process, and used almost completely for fashion advertising, they would do the final prints and transfer – and I never heard of it being used for non-commercial or art photography, what I was doing. And I had two prints made right away, and I was astonished how good the material is.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I think in street photography the main medium people are still drawn to is black and white. Part of this to do with the sense of nostalgia that we get from classic black and white street photographs. Another part is that black and

white tends to be simpler to work in. Color adds more variables, which adds more complications, which makes shooting in the streets even more difficult.

However if you decide to embrace shooting street photography in color, don’t just shoot how you would in black and white and just leave your images in color. Rather, start to see the world in color.

See how you can incorporate the meanings of color into your image. For example, don’t just shoot the color red just because it is red. How does the color red add meaning to your images? Is it a bloody red that adds symbolism of danger, lust, anger, impending doom, or something else?

When shooting the color blue, think about the meaning of the color blue and how you can add meaning to your images. When we think of the color blue, we think calm, peace, and relaxation. We think about the serene waters in a stream or the playfulness of the skies and clouds.



Seeing the world in color is certainly a difficult task, but once you start to train your eyes— you will be surprised what you see, and the extra layer of meaning and intent you can add to your images.

## 5. You will be criticized

Any influential or revolutionary artist or photographer has always received criticism for trying out something new. Whenever we rebel against the status quo, there will be people who criticize you and try to keep things the way they were.

When Eggleston did his first influential show at the MOMA in New York in 1976 of his ordinary and banal photographs, it encountered a lot of hate, criticism, and negativity. A New York Times art critic dubbed the show: “The most hated exhibition of the year.” Another called it “Totally boring and perfectly banal” (which was ironically the point of the exhibition).

When interviewed about how he felt about his first huge show, Eggleston didn’t let the criticism get to him.

Rather, he realized what he was doing was something radical, new, and modern:

“I think it was wonderful having a first major show at MOMA, of all places. It got tremendous recognition, great amount of it—negative. I really felt sorry for them, because it was so obvious --it was like they had the the wrong time. They didn’t understand what they were looking at. And their job was to understand it. Modern art, it is the museum of modern art. And, they wrote pretty stupid things. Then it became known all over the world, so, the critics who wrote all that stuff later apologized [laughed] that they were wrong.”

### Takeaway point:

Don’t fear criticism from others when it comes to your photography. Rather, welcome it. I think whenever you provoke a reaction in which people criticize you, it means you are doing something right. Why is that? If nobody really cared, they wouldn’t say anything at all. But if you evoked some sort of emotional response (whether it be posi-

tive or negative) in a person, you have done your job as a photographer.

It is impossible for everyone in the world to enjoy your photographs. What matters more is that you enjoy your own photographs. And if a few people out there also enjoy your photos, even better.

I have gotten a lot of criticism and flak on the internet in the past (still today). At first it used to get to me quite personally, I would honestly lose sleep over it and question why I was doing what I was doing. However at the end of the day, it was a good thing that I was getting this criticism— as it allowed me to look at my work and approach with a more critical eye, and teach me how to build a thicker skin.

One of the most influential things I have read about criticism is from the infamous Seth Godin, a prolific marketer who also gets his fair share of criticism. In a short essay titled: “You will be judged (or you will be ignored)” he mentions the two ways that people will react to you:

“[There] are pretty much the only two choices. Being judged is uncomfortable. Snap judgments, prejudices, misinformation... all of these, combined with not enough time (how could there be) to truly know you, means that you will inevitably be misjudged, underestimated (or overestimated) and unfairly rejected. The alternative, of course, is much safer. To be ignored. Up to you.” - Seth Godin

So when it comes to your street photography you have two choices: to be judged or be ignored. You choose. Personally, I would rather choose the former.

## 6. Be a dreamer

One of the most fascinating things that I discovered about Eggleston is how he is a dreamer when it comes to his photography. Both figuratively and literally. Eggleston shares:

“Often very often, I have these ‘photographic dreams’. They are just one beautiful picture after another—which don’t exist. Short time later, I don’t remember them. I just remember being very happy during the dream [laughs]. Always in color.”

Eggleston often shares his photographic dreams with his son Winston as well:

“He will tell me, ‘I had the most fantastic photographic dream the other night. HE was telling me about all these colors involved.’ I think he is somehow trying to incorporate these dreams into his photographs.”

### **Takeaway point:**

One thing I learned about creativity and psychology is that if you think about something obsessively enough, they begin to enter your dreams.

Why does this happen? Evolutionary biologists hypothesize that it is one of the natural ways that humans approach “problem solving.” If we ruminate on an idea long enough, the hidden connections often connect and make sparks of inspiration or innovation while we dream— and are relaxed. Relaxation is one of the secrets of creativity, as we cannot make creative breakthroughs when we are constantly stressed and wired.

Perhaps we can learn a lesson from Eggleston is that we should always be ob-

sessive about our photographs, and always think about them. And if we are persistent enough, they can even enter our dreams!

## **7. Photograph the present moment**

Whenever we look at photographs from the past, we get a sense of nostalgia. I used to often look at old photos by Cartier-Bresson and say, “Man, I wish I lived in the 1920’s—things looked so much more interesting back then.”

However I think this is a fallacy that we shouldn’t fall into. Why not? Well, to the people living in the 1920’s, I am sure that things looked quite boring then as well. Even when Eggleston was documenting Memphis from the late 1960’s onwards, I am sure that people didn’t think that all the retro Coca-Cola signs or shark-tail classic cars were interesting either.

So when Eggleston photographs, what does he look for? In the documentary with the BBC, he answers that he focuses on the present moment:

“What I’m photographing, it is a hard question to answer. And the best I’ve come up with is ‘life today.’ I don’t know whether they believe me or not, or what that means.” [Pointing at a photograph] I don’t know what to say about that, but it is today.”

**Takeaway point:**

We live in a day and time where everything looks quite boring, usual, and even ugly. We see people walking around with their iPhones, ugly shopping malls, and boring supermarkets.

However, know that the photographs you take today will undoubtedly be fascinating 50 years from now.

I am sure that 50 years from now, people will look at photos we take of people on their smartphones and laugh, “Oh my gosh, they used to use iPhones back then?” (Of course this is when we have computers embedded into our brains).

So don’t worry about the past or the future. Just focus on life today, and history will take care of the rest.

## 8. Have others help you edit your work

It is hard for us to edit our own best images. It is always great to get a second opinion, as others are generally better at understanding what our best shots are. This is because that we tend to get too emotionally attached to our photographs, and don’t judge them on more “objective” standards.

In Eggleston’s case, he got a ton of help from John Szarkowski when it came down to editing his images. Eggleston first approached Szarkowski with hundreds of photographs, Szarkowski helped Eggleston edit down his images to less than fifty.

Martin Parr shares the importance of having Szarkowski edit Eggleston’s photos, Szarkowski had much more experience than Eggleston when it came to editing images:

“It took if you would like, Szarkowski’s brilliance as a curator to find these pictures— Eggleston is a very prolific shooter, or he certainly was then. He



would have had thousands of pictures and Bill himself would have little idea what his best pictures were. He would have needed someone to knock the thing into shape and make it tight, make the thing work.”

Eggleston himself shares the collaboration that he had with Szarkowski and the huge amount of help that he gave him:

“The guide is a great percent, choices by John, really. But we worked together—we were choosing all of these and the exhibition, projecting slides on the big screen. That is how we worked.”

### **Takeaway point:**

It is incredibly difficult (if not impossible) to edit your own images. It is always good to get a second opinion, as others are the ones who are able to be more honest with your images in terms of what works or what doesn't work.

However you shouldn't just take one person's opinion blindly over your own. What I suggest instead is to ask lots of different people for their opinion, independently, on a 1:1 basis (preferably in-

person). Then collect all the feedback you get from others as a whole, and then take a more serious and critical look at your own work.

Of course at the end of the day, your own opinion is the most important. But still know the importance of getting others to collaborate with you. This synthesis will ensure that your photos will be bulletproof.

## **9. Don't take any part of the frame for granted**

Whenever people ask me to edit/critique their images, rather than looking at the main subject (that most street photographers do) I tend to look at the background first and for distractions or interesting details.

Rosa Eggleston (William Eggleston's wife) shares an interesting anecdote in an exchange she had with William about not taking anything for granted in a photograph:

“One thing that I will never forget in my mind what Bill did say to me earlier on when he was talking to me, ‘Now you

must not take anything for granted when you are looking at a picture. Never do that. Every single little tiny space on that page works and counts.”

Eggleston has always place a huge importance of how to construct his photographs, especially when it came to composition. Much of this inspiration came from Cartier-Bresson:

“My friend who was also interested in photographing, one time he bought many books containing photojournalism pictures. To me they were not interesting. But then I saw this one [Henri Cartier-Bresson’s ‘Decisive Moment’] and oh my God, this is not photojournalism—this is great art. Compositions, obvious knowledge of painting,... and the way of composing, and they’re still great.”

When I first looked at Eggleston’s work, I thought that his compositions were quite boring and uninteresting. However this is because I didn’t spend enough time analyzing each photograph by Eggleston. If you look carefully in the

background, there are always small details which are fascinating.

This is what Martin Parr had to say about Eggleston’s compositions:

“The composition appears so intuitive, so natural. It is not forced upon us at all. It appears the simplest thing, but of course when you analyze it—it becomes quite sophisticated—and the messages that these pictures can release to us are quite complex and fascinating. And of course, that is a hallmark of a very good Eggleston.”

Some of Eggleston’s photos are cut off in strange places and composed unconventionally. But according to fine-art photographer Peter Fraser, that is part of his brilliance:

“It seemed so almost cackhanded, because there would be things missing, maybe, where you expected to see – maybe a complete figure or a complete component or a subject. It might be split, or cut off– there would be weird things happening perhaps around the edge of a picture – which turn out to be

incredibly important in terms of understanding Eggleston's aesthetic."

To Eggleston, he puts great emphasis whenever he takes a frame. Because he composes so intentionally, he has made the practice of only taking one photograph per scene. Eggleston shares:

"I do have a personal discipline of only taking one picture of one thing. Not two. I would take more than one and get so confused later. I was trying to figure out which was the best frame. I said, this is ridiculous—I'm just going to take one."

One of my favorite photos taken by Eggleston is one of a woman looking straight at him, with a quizzical look in her face. It is also a great photograph in which the small details really make the photograph. Parr analyzes the image and explains why he thinks it is good, with an emphasis on the detail of the chain on the right of the photograph:

"Now why is that good? She is sort of acknowledging him being there, yet there is something disturbing about her. It is great, and the chain is just wonder-

ful. You would pray to have a chain like that—and use it just like a prop. And of course it is a pure coincidence that it happens to be there, right next to that woman. So, serendipity!"

### **Takeaway point:**

It is very difficult (if not impossible) to see small details in a photograph when viewed 640px wide on the internet on our computer screens.

The way to really appreciate the images by Eggleston is through his photography books. They are printed much larger and have much more detail which allows you to see the small details in a photograph, from all four corners of a frame.

I think the same goes with not only Eggleston's work— but the work of other photographers. This is why I emphasize buying books, not gear—as they help us get a better understanding of what makes a photograph great and develop in our own work.

So realize that sometimes it is the small details of a photograph and the composition which makes a photograph

great. Think about your own photos this way. Don't just focus on the subject, but the background as well— and everything in-between.

## 10. Improve a little bit, everyday

There are no shortcuts when it comes to mastering a certain skill, art, or profession. This certainly applies to photography. To improve as a photographer is a very slow and gradual journey. You can't expect results overnight. Here is a brilliant excerpt that I love from the book: "Mastery" about being persistent (a quote from a zen master):

"It's like chopping down a huge tree of immense girth. You won't accomplish it with one swing of your axe. If you keep chopping away at it, though, and do not let up, eventually, whether it wants to or not, it will suddenly topple down... But if the woodcutter stopped after one or two strokes of his axe to ask, "Why doesn't this tree fall?" and after three or four more strokes stopped again, "Why doesn't this tree fall?" he would never succeed in felling the tree. It is no differ-

ent from someone who is practicing the Way" – Zen Master Hakuin

We should realize the same thing for street photography. There is no way you will improve your confidence of shooting in the streets, improve your compositions, or create better images just by expecting great images from one or two day of shooting. We need to put in the time, energy, and persistence to create memorable images.

One fascinating thing about Eggleston is that not only is he an avid photographer, but he absolutely loves playing the piano. How did Eggleston pick up the piano? Well, he picked it up just by fiddling around with a little bit everyday— and over time, he got quite good. Not only that, but he makes the analogy that photography is quite the same:

"Without instruction, at a very early age, I could play the piano. Anything, particularly—after hearing it once. Not reading music. I would pass a quite fine piano in my house everytime we came from the back from the front—and everytime I would pass it I would play a few



things, and without any success at all. And I got a little better and better, and time went on. And maybe never playing the same one twice. It aint much different the way I work today, still [in photography].”

### **Takeaway point:**

To become great in street photography is a life-long process. I myself still have a lot more to learn, but I know that with every passing day that I shoot, read photography books, and write about street photography I make a little bit of progress everyday.

Know that the greatest street photographers in history have only really achieved their fame after many decades of photographing in the streets. However they weren't so concerned about fame or fortune or anything of the sort. Rather, they did it because they loved the challenge and how it pushed their boundaries.

There are no shortcuts in life. You need the grit, perseverance, and the passion to pull you through. Never get discouraged in your street photography be-

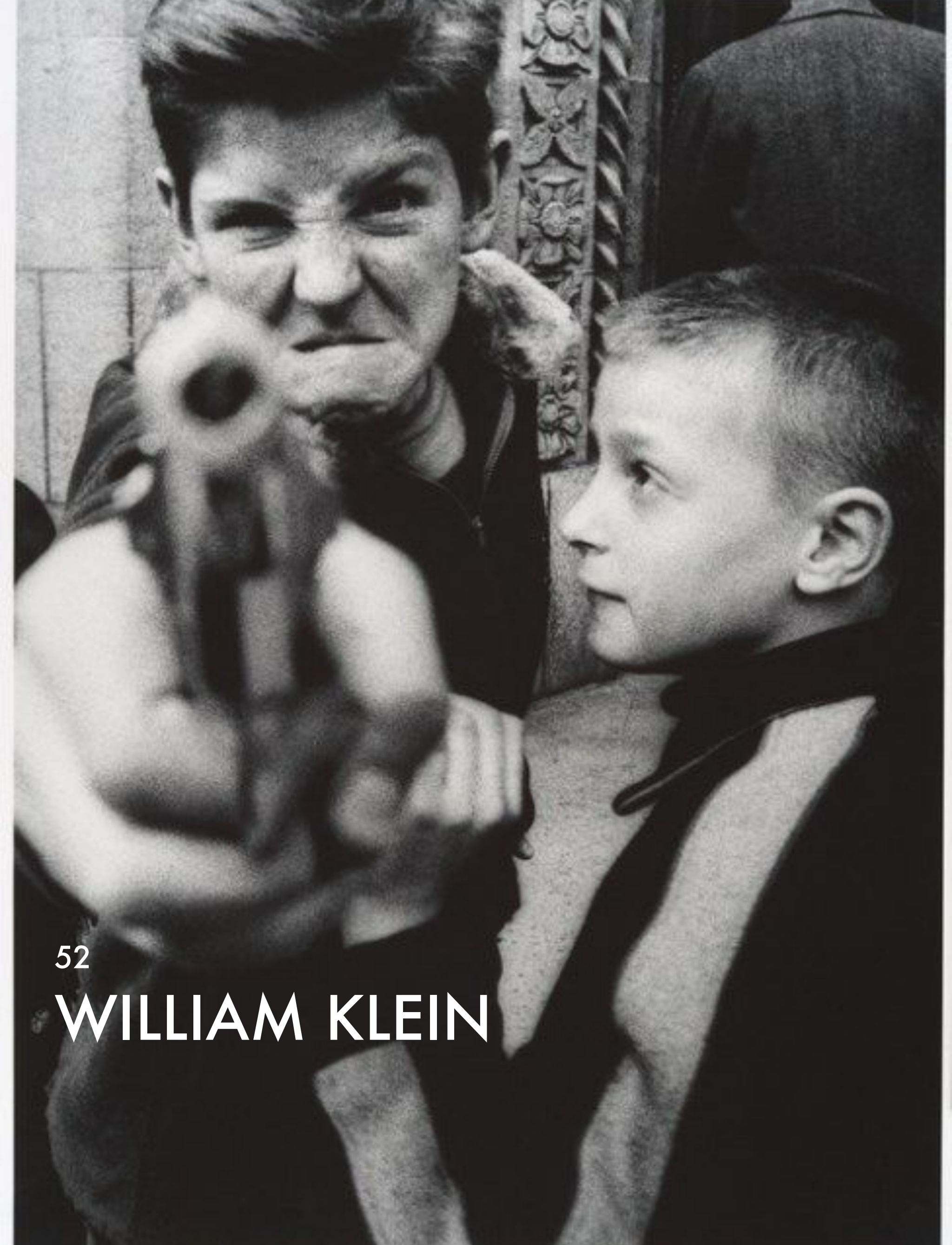
cause you feel you aren't making progress. You can never see progress in a short period of time. Know that if you keep on swinging the axe or playing a few notes on the piano— you will one day reach greatness.

## **Conclusion**

William Eggleston, whether you love him or not, is one of the greatest pioneers of color photography. What he was doing at the time was quite radical— not shooting in black and white as other “serious” photographers were doing.

But Eggleston didn't shoot in color because he wanted fame or anything of the sort. Rather, he found color to be more of a challenge and fascinating than black and white. He didn't complain that he lived in a pretty boring place in the South (Memphis) instead of living somewhere more “interesting” like New York City. Rather, he focused on documenting his own hometown in a very personal way, taking photographs everyday and looking for the brilliant light and color which made his community unique.

There are a lot of lessons that we can learn from Eggleston and his approach in photography. Whether you love or hate his work— it doesn't really matter. What I think though is important is that you at least appreciate what he did for photography, and the lasting influence on street photographers from all around the world.



52

WILLIAM KLEIN



William Klein is one of my favorite street photographers of all time. I think one of the things that I love most about him is his “I don’t give a fuck” attitude about the way he approached street photography how he did things his own way. He rebelled against many of the contemporary styles of photography during his time, especially that of Henri Cartier-Bresson and other “classic” street photographers.

In this article, I will share what I have personally learned about street photography through his work. Also in the spirit of William Klein, I will use obscenities when illustrating some points. After all, I think that is what Klein would have liked.

## 1. Get close and personal

Klein experimented with lots of different focal lengths during his career– but he is most well-known for his up-and-close and personal work with a wide-angle lens.

This is what Klein said about his approach in his book: “William Klein: Close Up“:

“I photograph what i see in front of me, I move in close to see better and use a wide-angle lens to get as much as possible in the frame.

When I look at the work of William Klein, I feel that I am really there. I feel like an intimate participant of the scene, rather than a voyeur simply looking in. Not only that, but he is able to shove tons of content into the frame, so there are multiple subjects and point of interest—not just one single subject.

When Klein would photograph with a wide-angle lens, there would be considerable distortion in his images (which a lot of photographers don’t like). In an interview Klein shared why he preferred using a wide-angle lens (21mm-28mm) compared to something more standard like Henri Cartier-Bresson’s 50mm:

“Does it really bother you? In any case, I’m not deliberately distorting. I need the wide-angle to get a lot of things into the frame. Take the picture of may day in Moscow. With a 50mm jammed between the parade and the side-walk, I would have been able to frame only the



old lady in the middle. But what I wanted was the whole group – the tar-tars, the Armenians, Ukranians, Russians, an image of empire surrounding one old lady on a sidewalk as a parade goes by.

In photography, I was interested in letting the machine loose, in taking risks, exploring the possibilities of film, paper, printing in different ways, playing with exposures, with composition and accidents. Its all part of what an image can be, which is anything. Good pictures, bad pictures—why not?

### **Takeaway point:**

If you want to create a sense of intimacy in your photographs, don't photograph half a block away with a telephoto lens. Rather, strap on a wide-angle lens (a 35mm or wider) and get up-and-close to the action. Become an active participant of the scene. Interact with the people, hear their conversations, and as a rule of thumb be close enough to see the colors of their eyes.

Also instead of just focusing on single-subjects, try to add more content

into your frame. When using a wide-angle lens, I noticed that Klein did this best when photographing in a landscape format. This way he was able to add more subjects to his frame.

## 2. Keep a “photographic diary”

When Klein first started to photograph the streets of NYC in 1954, he did it with a care-free attitude. He wasn't trained in photography at the time, but he simply captured what he found interesting. In “Close Up”, Klein Expands:

Before my book on New York, I was a painter. When I came back to the city in 1954, after six years away, I decided to keep a photographic diary of my return. These were practically my first ‘real’ photographs. I had neither training nor complexes. By necessity and by choice, I decided that anything would have to go. – William Klein (1990)

Sometimes when we shoot on the streets, we feel that we have to always work on a project or take our photography very seriously.

Although I do believe in working on projects and focusing when shooting on the streets, it is also important not to take things so seriously all the time.

#### **Takeaway point:**

By keeping a “photographic diary”—you can capture interesting moments of your everyday life through people on the streets. If you are feeling in a sad and depressive mood, you are probably more likely to spot that in the streets. So by photographing how you feel, you can create authentic and personal images.

Another takeaway point we can learn from Klein is the importance of the amateur approach. Being called an “amateur” is often a negative label. However the word “amateur” originated from the idea that someone did something for the love of it, rather than for the money, fame, or prestige.

So regardless of how much photographic training you have, just go out there and shoot. Don’t worry so much about the theory of photography, just shoot because you love it.

### **3. Go against the grain**

When Klein was shooting in the streets in the 50’s, there were certain “taboos” when it came to photography. This included Grain, high-contrast, blur, decomposition, and accidents.

However Klein used these techniques to his advantage. His photographs weren’t clean, sterile, and clinical. Rather, they were full of energy, vibrance, and a sense of rebellion that went against the grain.

Of course now looking back we look at Klein as a visionary and a genius in his work and approach. However when he was photographing at the time, people either hated his work or didn’t understand how unique or original it was.

When talking about his pivotal New York Book, “Life is Good & Good For You in New York (1956)“, Klein had this to say:

“The resulting book went against the grain thirty years ago. My approach was not fashionable then nor is it today.” – William Klein (1990)

In an interview with Klein (in his Aperture Monograph book), he shares how much American publishers abhorred his work:

“In the 1950s I couldn’t find an American publisher for my New York pictures,” he says. “Everyone I showed them to said, ‘Ech! This isn’t New York – too ugly, too seedy and too one-sided.’ They said ‘This isn’t photography, this is shit!’” – William Klein (1981)

### Takeaway point:

I think what we can learn from Klein is the fact that he gave the middle-finger to everyone else when it came to his photography. He did things his way, and certainly went against the grain. He knew that his photography wasn’t fashionable, but he didn’t give a flying shit.

Even when he talked about his work in his book: “William Klein: Close Up” in 1990, he still mentioned how his work still wasn’t fashionable.

## 4. Pursue ethnography

According to Wikipedia, “ethnography” is defined as the following:

Ethnography (from Greek *ethnos* = folk/people and *grapho* = to write) is a qualitative research design aimed at exploring cultural phenomena. The resulting field study or a case report reflects the knowledge and the system of meanings in the lives of a cultural group. An ethnography is a means to represent graphically and in writing, the culture of a people.

Why do I bring up ethnography in terms of Klein’s street photography? Well, he mentioned it himself when describing the content he pursued for his “Life is Good & Good For You in New York” book:

As for content: pseudo-ethnography, parody, dada. I was a make-believe ethnograph in search of the straightest of straight documents, the rawest snapshot, the zero degree of photography. I would document the proud New Yorkers in the same way a museum expedition would document Kikuyus. – William Klein (1990)

Although Klein refers to his work as more of a “pseudo-ethnography” (or

wanna-be ethnography) his work certainly explores the culture of people in New York.

What did Klein find in the people of New York in the 50's? Well according to his words he found: "...black humor, absurd, panic."

His photographs certainly aren't of the more romantic photographs like that of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Rather, his New York photographs are quite grimy, rugged, and raw. They show a side of New York that many Americans found repugnant. He photographed in the rough parts of town, documented the manipulation of the media, as well as the grittiness of the streets.

### **Takeaway point:**

When you are pursuing your own photography, don't try to just make interesting images. Rather, try to pursue the "sense of place" of wherever you are photographing. Through ethnography, try to pursue to "...represent graphically and in writing, the culture of a people."

## **5. Be purposeful when you are out shooting**

When Klein first started photographing the streets of New York in the 50's, he did so with a "photographic diary" approach. At the time, he didn't think of creating a book on New York or anything of the sort.

However one thing that I found fascinating is how he mentions that he doesn't believe in the idea of "carrying a camera everywhere you go." Rather, he mentions how he photographs with high-intensity when working on a project or a book:

"I don't roam around with a camera and never did. I took pictures in spurts, for my books, for some assignments or on special occasions. Like people who take out their cameras for Christmas and birthdays. Each time, like them, probably, I feel it's the first time and as if I would have to relearn the moves. Luckily, it comes pretty fast, like riding a bike." – William Klein (1990)



Interesting enough, Klein didn't actually spend a lot of time of his life shooting on the streets. However because he focused intensely, he was able to finish his books and projects quickly and efficiently.

John Heilpern wrote this about William Klein in an Aperture Monograph of him (1981):

"Just as Klein himself lives in self-inflicted limbo in paris, he appears to have made of his career what amounted to a willfull noncareer. Everything he worked at over the years, from his paintings to his later political films, he abandoned eventually to start afresh.

His four books of photography, on which so much of his reputation is based, took him an average of 3 months each to photograph and several more months to edit and design. (Klein did the design, typography, covers, and texts for all his books.) But little more than four years of his life have actually been spent seriously taking photographs."

**Takeaway point:**

I still think it is a good practice to carry a camera with you everywhere you go, as many "decisive moments" tend to happen at the most random of times. I always carry a compact camera with me, and have found some of my best photographs in the least likely places (supermarket, waiting in line at airport, while running errands).

However I still think there is great value in Klein's methodology in working in short and focused bursts.

It still blows me away how Klein was able to photograph most of his photography books of New York, Rome, Paris, and Moscow on an average of only 3 months. Most photographers take years or even decades to finish photographing for their books.

I suspect it is because when Klein was shooting on the streets, he didn't dick around. He hit the streets with passion and fervor, and shot in the streets without hesitation. Through his purposeful shooting on the streets he was able to create powerful and memorable photographs.

So even if you don't have a lot of free time to shoot on the streets, don't fret. If we can learn anything from Klein, it is that it is quality, not the quantity of time we use when shooting in the streets that matters.

## 6. Have fun

The reason I like to shoot street photography is because it is fun. When I am out on the streets, I feel like a kid again. Street photography gives me the opportunity to explore, interact with people, and lose myself in the moment while photographing.

What was the main impetus which drove Klein to first start taking photographs? Klein mentions the sense of fun and enjoyment that he got shooting on the streets:

“I was taking pictures for myself. I felt free. Photography was a lot of fun for me. First of all I'd get really excited waiting to see if the pictures would come out the next day. I didn't really know anything about photography, but I loved the camera.

Klein also shares the excitement that he got when experimenting shooting on the streets:

“... a photographer can love his camera and what it can do in the same way that a painter can love his brush and paints, love the feel of it and the excitement.

I would look at my contact sheets and my heart would be beating, you know. To see if I'd caught what I wanted. Sometimes, I'd take shots without aiming, just to see what happened. I'd rush into crowds – bang! Bang! I liked the idea of luck and taking a chance, other times I'd frame a composition I saw and plant myself somewhere, longing for some accident to happen.

Choosing location, maybe a symbolic spot, the light and perspective – and suddenly you know the moment is yours. It must be close to what a fighter feels after jabbing and circling and getting hit, when suddenly theres an opening, and bang! Right on the button. It's a fantastic feeling.”

**Takeaway point:**

Don't forget to have fun when shooting on the streets. If there is ever a point in when shooting in the streets is no longer fun for you, you should probably stop and pursue some other type of approach.

For example, for about 5-6 years I enjoyed shooting street photography in black and white. However after a while, it didn't interest me as much and didn't feel as challenging. However now that I have switched to shooting my street photography exclusively in color film, it has opened up new opportunities and challenges which I find fun.

Let your own interests lead your street photography. Don't really care what types of projects other photographers may be pursuing. After all, what is interesting (and fun) to them may not be interesting or fun to you.

## 7. Interact with your subjects

Street photography is generally understood as capturing candid moments of everyday life. However the paradox is

that some of the most memorable street photographs taken in history were either posed or as a result of the interaction with the photographer.

Think of Klein's famous "Kid with gun" photograph. Although the moment looks raw and candid, the photograph was actually a result of what Klein said to the kid. When Klein saw the kid with the gun, he told him: "Look tough." The kid then turned toward Klein, and pointed his gun straight at him—giving an incredibly brutal look.

So how did Klein interact with his subjects when shooting on the streets? He explains how his subjects were aware they were being photographed, but not always 100% sure:

"Yes, but they didn't know I might be photographing a hundred other things going on behind them—someone lurking in the background, a shadow, a reflection, posters, traffic, junk. [I'd say], 'Hold it! Don't move! Hey, look this way!' People would say, 'What's this for?' I'd say, 'The News.' 'The News! Wow! No shit!' I didn't much care."

So doesn't this mean that Klein was simply manipulating his subjects? This is an interview question that was given to him, in which Klein responds:

"Not always. We're not completely brut, you know. I thought people could be provoked to pose or play a role in some situations. Why not? People have posed for portraits for centuries. When I was a kid in New York, if some tough kid caught you looking at him he'd say, 'Hey! What are you looking at?' If you said, 'I'm looking at you,' he'd say, 'Oh, yeah!' if you said, 'I'm not looking at you,' He'd say, 'why not?' either way you were in trouble."

Klein also shares his thoughts on how pointing a camera at someone you don't know can cause a tension, but how it is also generally accepted:

"In rough neighborhoods in New York [sometimes]... it's better not to look. So if you point a camera at a stranger, you're almost breaking a tradition of not getting involved. Yet in a way, the camera erases involvement. Its accepted."

Klein knows how photographing someone can cause someone to be provoked, but in the end— most people quite liked being photographed:

"In another way, it could be worse—a provocation and a threat. But generally, the people I photographed in New York seemed flattered. If I manipulated them sometimes, they didn't seem to think they should mind. Elsewhere, if I'd get people to clown around with me, like people in Italy to pose in hierarchical Roman way, I think that should be a valid picture. They're telling us something about themselves."

But if a photographer provokes a person, what does it show except the result of the provocation? Klein thinks that people's reactions show less of the photographer, but more of the subject him/herself:

"Rather than catching people unaware, they show the face they want to show. Unposed, caught unaware, they might reveal ambiguous expressions, brows creased in vague internal contemplation, illegible, perhaps meaningless."



Why not allow the subject the possibility of revealing his attitude toward life, his neighbor, even the photographer? Both ways are valid to me.”

Klein shares how sometimes people he provoked did things he couldn't have even imagined:

“In any case, very often people did things I couldn't have organized or imagined. A mother points a toy gun at her child's temple. Maybe I asked her to do it, I honestly forget. But let's say I did, out of some perverse inspiration. At the same time, though, she holds the child's hand in the most tender, touching way.

The way a subject reacts to the camera can create a kind of happening. Why pretend the camera isn't there? Why not use it? Maybe people will reveal themselves as violent or tender, crazed or beautiful. But in some way, they reveal who they are. They'll have taken a self-portrait.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I know a lot of street photographers who are vehemently opposed to the idea of interacting with your subjects. How-

ever I don't think it is a problem to interact with your subjects when shooting on the streets.

I often interact with my subjects when I'm shooting street photography. I might sometimes first chat with them, get to know more about them, and ask to take a few photos of them. In other cases, I will ask them to pose for me a certain way I'd like to (asking someone to take a puff out of their cigarette, look straight into the lens, or not to smile).

Other times I have taken Klein's line of saying: “look tough” to some people I meet on the street. The type of expression or look they give me is generally much more interesting than anything that I could have orchestrated myself.

Don't feel that all the photographs you take have to be 100% candid. I often feel that the photographs in which people interact with their subjects are more interesting than candid moments. I think Klein would agree with this sentiment whole-heartedly.

## 8. Don't worry about cameras

As photographers we can be a bunch of nerds. We spend a lot of time on gear forums and obsess over the sharpness, bokeh, or “characteristics” of certain lenses. We spend a lot of time talking about the “ideal camera” for street photography. The problem is that after all this equipment masturbation, it can take us away from actually going out and taking photographs.

What did Klein feel about talking about gear and equipment? He wasn't very interested in it he was more interested in shooting:

“The right filter, the right film, the right exposure – none of that interested me very much. I had only one camera to start with. Secondhand two lenses no filter, none of that. What interested me was getting something on film to put into an enlarger, maybe to get another picture. And I was in a big hurry. Once I got used to everything in New York I knew the trance would wear off. So I took pictures with a vengeance.”

### Takeaway point:

I used to be totally obsessed with gear. When I was an undergraduate student at UCLA, I worked in IT as my work-study job and spent far too much time on gear forums. I would be like the thousands of other members discussing inane matters like the corner-sharpness of Canon-zoom L lenses vs Canon prime lenses. I spent too much time studying “bokeh characteristics” of different lenses. I spent too much time looking at 100% crops of high-ISO samples of different cameras.

What was the result of all that? Well first of all, it made me depressed as hell because I could never afford all of those expensive cameras and lenses (especially as a student). In-fact, it discouraged me from going out and actually taking photographs –as I felt that my gear was inadequate in creating good images.

However over the years, I have found how little gear has to do with creating memorable images. To think that Henri Cartier-Bresson made some of his masterpiece images in the early 1920's

with a primitive Leica and ISO 25 film! But yet nowadays we bitch and moan about our cameras not being able to go above ISO 1600.

At the end of the day, we should follow Klein's advice and don't worry so much about the camera or technical settings. The most important thing is going out and producing images.

## 9. Don't worry about technical settings

Many photographers I know tend to obsess over the technical settings. They need to have the "ideal" lens for a certain situation, to use the "ideal" f-stop, to use an "ideal" shutter speed, and the "ideal composition."

Klein gave the middle finger to all of that. He was the master of experimentation and trying everything unconventional—especially when it came to the technical details. Klein shares:

"I have always loved the amateur side of photography, automatic photographs, accidental photographs with un-

centered compositions, heads cut off, whatever."

Klein would also experiment with playing with grain, contrast, blur, and manipulating negatives. This is what he had to say about his New York book:

"The New York book was a visual diary and it was also kind of personal newspaper. I wanted it to look like the news. I didn't relate to European photography. It was too poetic and anecdotal for me... the kinetic quality of new york, the kids, dirt, madness—I tried to find a photographic style that would come close to it. So I would be grainy and contrasted and black. I'd crop, blur, play with the negatives. I didn't see clean technique being right for New York. I could imagine my pictures lying in the gutter like the New York Daily News."

In one of his most famous images of a kid in front of a checkerboard tile wall, he jiggled the enlarge head slightly up and down to give the impression that the photograph was rushing at the viewer. Certainly a technique that wasn't conventional at the time.

Klein would often shoot with slow shutter speeds to create motion and blur in his photographs. This was also against the grain at the time, in which sharp and in-focus photographs were the standard. When asked about why he used blur in his photographs, Klein responded:

“If you look carefully at life, you see blur. shake your hand. Blur is a part of life.”

Klein wasn't a technical photographer when he started, and he never tried to. He actually would try to purposefully make “mistakes” in his photographs from a technical standpoint:

“I have always done the opposite of what I was trained to do... having little technical background, I become a photographer. Adopting a machine, I do my utmost to make it malfunction. For me, to make a photograph was to make an anti-photograph.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't feel that your photographs have to be technically perfect. Experiment with different approaches in terms of both how you photograph, who you

photograph, and how you post-process your images.

Personally I don't like photographs that are “over-processed” like HDR photographs. However what Klein was doing with his photographs (extreme contrast, grain, and negative-manipulation) in the past is probably the modern-day equivalent approach of HDR.

So once again, screw the rules and create your own new ones. That is how Klein made a name for himself perhaps that is how you can make a name for yourself too.

## 10. Be opinionated

We as street photographers aren't documentary or reportage photographers. We are not trying to create images that attempt to show an “objective” view of reality. Rather, the images we create are generally for ourselves—portraying our own view of reality.

I think what makes a photographers' work interesting is how he/she sees the world. I think that photographers should have an opinion about the society



around him/herself and show it through his/her photographs. I think that striving to search for “objectivity” will simply make one’s work boring and not very interesting.

Klein’s street photography was very subjective. He traveled to places all around the world and photographed things how he saw them. He shares how he approached street photography in New York:

“In New York I took responsibility for the people I photographed. I felt I knew them – the people, the way they relate to each other, the streets, the buildings, the city. And I tried to make sense of it all. I just photographed what I saw though its true I used the camera as a weapon in New York.

When Klein visited Tokyo, he approached street photography there much differently:

“In Tokyo [the camera] was more of a mask, a disguise. I had only the vaguest clue to what was going on. I wasn’t there to judge anything. I was an outsider and felt pretty uncomfortable some-

times. Have you ever eaten an official Japanese dinner for four hours on your knees? It was different in New York.”

Klein also explains how he believed in getting personally involved in his photography:

“In a way its true I had a lot of old scores to settle. I was involved. According to the Henri Cartier-Bresson scriptures, you’re not to intrude or editorialize, but I don’t see how that’s possible or why it should be. I loved and hated New York. Why shut up about it?”

With Cartier-Bresson being almost like a demigod in the photography world, he set most of the standards for photographers. But Klein stayed true to himself and rebelled. This is what he had to say about HCB:

“I liked Cartier-Bresson’s pictures, but I didn’t like his set of rules. So I reversed them. I thought his view that photography must be objective was nonsense. Because the photographer who pretends he’s wiping all the slates clean in the name of objectivity doesn’t exist.”

Klein also makes the great point on how photographers are subjective when photographing a scene:

“How can photography be noncommittal? Cartier-Bresson chooses the photograph this subject instead of that, he blows up another shot of the subject, and he chooses another one for publication. He’s making a statement. He’s making decisions and choices every second. I thought, if you’re doing that, make it show.”

Klein talks more about how photographers are prejudiced, and how the camera adds to that prejudice:

“I’d say that such a person wouldn’t let the camera express itself. He’s prejudiced. A camera can record the passage of time, if only for a fraction of a second. Why say it shouldn’t? Besides, if you look carefully at life, you see blur. Shake your hand blur is a part of life. But why must a photograph be a mirror?

Most things I did with photography are considered acceptable today – except maybe this use of a wide-angle. It seemed more normal to me than the

50mm lens. You could even say the 50mm is an imposition of a limited point of view. But neither lens is really normal or correct. Because in life we see out of two eyes, whereas the camera has only one. So whatever lens is used, all photographs are deformations of what you actually see with your eyes.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Klein was very outspoken and opinionated when it came to his personality and especially his street photography. He believed that photographers should show their opinions of the world. Klein believed photographs should be subjective, and couldn’t be objective (even if the photographer tried).

After all, the photographer makes the conscious choice of what to photograph and what not to photograph, whether to capture a scene in black and white or color, or use a telephoto or wide-angle lens. All of these show subjective views of reality.

I believe in what Klein says as well. As street photographers, we aren’t covering a news in a war. Our photographs

aren't nearly as political as that of photo-journalists or reportage photographers. Therefore we should embrace the fact that one of the beauties that lie in street photography is that it is generally for ourself, not for others. We don't need to show an "objective" view of reality. We need to editorialize life and make it more subjective, personal, and intimate.

## Conclusion

Klein was one of the most rebellious street photographers in the course of history. He went against all of the traditions of photography— such as composition, using wide-angle lenses, blurring his photographs, getting up-close-and-personal, interacting with his subjects, creating grainy and high-contrast images, and far more.

I still feel that Klein is one of the most underrated street photographers, as he is not as well-known as some of the more prominent street photographers in history (many photographers who know Henri Cartier-Bresson have no idea who Klein is).

There is still a lot I have to learn about Klein, but the things I mentioned above is what I have personally learned from him. Give the middle-finger to convention and fuck what other people think. Go out, have fun, and pursue the type of street photography you enjoy. If people tell you what you are doing isn't "street photography" just ignore them and do what you love the most, photograph.







53

## ZOE STRAUSS

About a year I stumbled upon the work of Zoe Strauss in her book: "America." I was amazed with the power of her portraits as well as how she masterfully combined them with signs and urban landscapes. Also in terms of the book, they are some of the most powerful diptychs I have ever seen.

I recently checked out a copy of her newest book: "Zoe Strauss: 10 Years" and wanted to write an article about her work. She has an incredible story, and equally incredible images to back it up.

Here are the lessons that Zoe has taught me about photography:



# 1. Great projects take a long time

One of the biggest things that thrust Zoe Strauss into the public eye was her I-95 Project. Pretty much the concept was that she publicly exhibited her photos under the concrete support pillars on the I-95 in Philadelphia. Strauss explains more in-depth about her I-95 project:

"I-95 was an epic narrative about the beauty and struggle of everyday life, comprising 231 photographs adhered to the concrete support pillars under an elevated highway that runs through South Philadelphia, Interstate 95. The installation of photos went up once a year, from 1pm to 4pm, on the first Sunday of the month. I worked on 95 for a decade, from 2000 to 2010."

Strauss shares how she worked on the concept of the I-95 project:

"The concept for 95 came to me pretty fully formed, and I spent a little more than a year making sure the concept was strong and the execution was going to be rock solid. With money I got

from my wife and immediate family for my 30th birthday, I bought a camera within the month and began to make photos for the installation."

Surprisingly, Strauss came up with the concept first-- and then picked up photography to pursue it. She also truly dedicated her life to making sure the public exhibition would be executed:

"I had, and still have, very little interest in exploring how this idea came to me. I don't care about why. But I did care a great deal about bringing it to fruition and completely committed to doing so. In nailing I-95 down, I endlessly mulled over the format and laid out a blueprint for the installation. For example, I knew from the start it had to be a 10 year project."

Zoe Strauss took 10 years to work on this one project. Why did she decide 10 years? She explains:

"A decade would allow me enough time to make a strong body of work. I needed to learn to make photographs and couldn't gauge my capability until I actually started working. Setting a time

constraint assured that the installation wouldn't be overworked. Plus, I could go at it as hard as possible without fear of burning out."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think in today's world in photography-- we try to rush our projects and our concepts. Not only that, but with the rise of social media-- we are just uploading single photos without some greater concept or plan.

10 years is a long time to work on a project. But Strauss knew that she would need all of that time to learn the technical skills she needed, and also the time to create the types of images she needed.

I think what we can learn from Strauss is that great projects take a long time. Don't expect to finish an ambitious project in just a year or two. It might take up to 10. Don't rush it-- take your time, and make it great.

## **2. On taking portraits**

One of the most striking things about Strauss' work is how powerful her portraits are. Not only that, but she cap-

tures her subjects in a sensitive way-- while they expose themselves to her. She has taken photos of people nude, people battered and bruised, and doing drugs. How does she get her subjects to feel comfortable around her taking their photo?

Strauss starts off by explaining how choosing her subjects is an unconscious decision:

"In terms of making a portrait, the camera is the introduction. I approach someone with the intent of making a photograph and what attracts me to the person is intangible."

Strauss expands on sharing the importance of building a connection with your subjects:

"Later on in the edits it seems as if the portraits that have the greatest importance to me, and have the greatest satisfaction, are the ones where I have had some sort of connection with the person, and that almost always involves a connection that can not be articulated -- a sense of pride and joy of being in the world. It doesn't matter what the situation is but

there is a connection, without sounding ridiculous or hokey, we are both happy to be alive, and that's the biggest part of it."

Strauss also shoots most of her work digitally-- and one of the ways she builds a sense of trust and rapport with her subjects is by showing them the LCD screen:

"If I'm taking digital photos, if it's a portrait, I always show them."

Strauss also deletes the photos if her subjects don't like them:

"Even if it's difficult, I know they've seen it. Using someone's personal image as a metaphor for other things, I try to pay attention that these are real people. I'm not interested in a representation of someone in which they are grotesque, and they don't know they're being presented like that."

Strauss has also dealt with a lot of rejection when trying to take portraits of people on the street:

"I've stopped hundreds of people and asked to make their photo. If it's an

up-close portrait, I always ask the person if I can take the photo. Often the answer is "no".

However regardless if she takes a photo or not, she values the interactions greatly. She elaborates how sometimes great interactions can lead to boring photos, and short interactions can lead to intimate images:

"But if a photo doesn't come out of the meeting, it doesn't make the interaction less important or interesting. Sometimes a great interaction will result in a boring and unengaging photo and sometimes a two-sentence exchange and good-bye will result in a deeply intimate portrait. I can never be 100 percent sure, and sometimes I'll need a little distance from the exchange in order to know if a portrait is successful."

When asked about her photographic heroes, Strauss shared it was the WPA photographer-- because of the dignity they kept for their subjects:

"I love a lot of photography but I really feel connected to the WPA photographers. I feel like that was—you know

Dorothea Lange—an interesting important moment. I'm fascinated by that idea, the interaction between the photographer and subject is the photographer's choice in this instance. So many iconic images that come from that period we see without thinking of the choices of the photographer. So in terms of preserving the dignity of the subjects and meeting the needs of the assignment the project was successful in many instances."

#### **Takeaway point:**

The backbone of Zoe Strauss' work is her ability to become intimate with strangers, and take riveting portraits. Although she has been criticized by photographing the poor and destitute as well as marginalized people in society-- she gives them a voice. She interacts with them. She makes them a part of the picture-taking process. And if her subjects don't like the photos, she decides to erase them.

It takes a huge amount of courage to step outside of your comfort zone and ask a stranger to take their portrait. Why is that? Well, you have the possibility of

rejection. Nobody likes to be rejected-- it is a discouraging feeling and emotion.

However at the end of the day-- don't just concern yourself with taking photos. Try to focus on the interactions you have on the streets as well. To me personally the interactions on the streets I have with strangers are as valuable as the photos themselves. And sometimes the interactions are more important to me than the photos. It makes me feel more like a human being-- connecting with others in society, and also treating them as human beings (not just photographic subjects).

### **3. On putting together a book**

In an interview, Zoe Strauss shares her experiencing editing, sequencing, and pairing her images in her book: "America." She shares the insanely difficult process in-depth below:

"It is torture. It was so phenomenally painful. It shouldn't be but it just really really was. I had no idea how hard it was to put a book together. I certainly



didn't think it would be easy, but a big part of my work is editing and I thought that I would get through it. I was so fucking wrong. It was grueling and extraordinarily difficult. I would go back and forth about the narrative and the balance of the book, the mood, what the juxtapositions say on the page, is the text conversational and not descriptive of the photo but rather of the process, I was losing my fucking mind. And not to say that I didn't love it, I really did, and I couldn't be any more happy that someone gave me the opportunity to make a book, but I was really like, 'Oh my god.'"

One of the things I loved about most in Strauss' "America" is the pairing of the images-- or the diptychs in the book. She shares why she decided to pair certain images together in a diptych format:

"I really love it. It's a good format for my work and allows these two photos to have this exchange. In some ways that's how the I-95 project works, as these photos have this movement. It was really so much more difficult than I would have

thought and I don't know if I am going to continue to work in that."

Strauss shares how combining two images can create a new meaning:

"The placement was as important as each individual photo. There is a photo of a guy with swastikas, and I really love that guy and I want that to go next to the photo of the sign that said "Paris in jail" because I felt that was a WWII reference and a historical strain, but I felt like I couldn't have those two next to each other on the basis that it was implied this guy had gotten the tattoos in jail and it changed the meaning of what it means to be in prison."

Strauss shares how diptychs can create a different emotion and mood:

"The placement of that one was very difficult for me because I knew those two had to be close to each other and I didn't know how they were going to relate to each other and it was really obvious that the mood would change dramatically if it was on the opposite page or next to it. And it turns out that most of them were like that."

### Takeaway point:

One of the most beautiful things you can do with a book is play with the pairing of images. This creates so many opportunities of combining your images to invent new meanings.

Whenever I look at a photography book, I always ask myself questions such as: - Why did the photographer choose to pair these two images together? What meaning do they create? - Why did the photographer choose to sequence the book this way? - Why did the photographer choose to have only one image on a spread? What meaning is he or she trying to create?

Most photographers create their books very intentionally. They play with the ordering of the images and the pairings to create a certain emotion, mood, and meaning. And the more cognizant we are of this when we are looking through photography books, we can better appreciate the book.

Also if you work on your own photography book (I highly recommend self-publishing services like Blurb) -- think

about the meaning of pairings you have in a book. You can put together two images that have a similar meaning or aesthetic look. Or you can put two images that have a strong contrasting emotion or mood (happiness on one side, sadness on the left). Or you can play with combining different symbols -- to create a whole new meaning all-together.

## 4. On making change through her photography

Zoe Strauss' images are very socially conscious-- and they say strong messages about her local community. She brings beauty to certain people and locations-- while also making criticisms of America through her work. Strauss shares more of her thoughts on the power of photography to make change in the world:

"I think that art provides the ability to make change. I think there are different means at getting at reflection. Photography as a medium is able to provide people with ideas. In the last couple of years there has been such a shift in technology and the access that people have. I think the Abu Ghraib pictures are possi-

bly the most important photos of the last 50 years in some ways because it has changed the way we have access to images, and who makes the images and where they go. That being said, I think the medium has a lot of different possibilities. In terms of art, there is a possibility to provide someone with an image that will cause them to have a shift in their thinking, not necessarily to change their thinking but the possibility to think about things in a slightly different way. I don't think that is realistic all the time, but that's what I work toward. It's not always successful, but it's what I am plugging away at."

### **Takeaway point:**

I think as street photographers, we are all trying to create certain messages and meanings through our work. We are trying to show a part of social reality to our viewers. And sometimes our motives are to show the beauty of the world, the sadness of the world-- or something totally different.

Regardless what kind of message you are trying to make through your pho-

tography-- we do have the power to change the mind of the viewer. The change can be very small and subtle-- it doesn't have to change the world on a grand and global scale.

The impact of your photography can be as simple as having your viewers appreciate the beauty of everyday life. Or if you photograph poverty-- you can make your viewers feel more grateful for the things they do have in their lives (rather than worry about "first world problems").

Think about what kind of ideas you can provide in your photography-- and present it to your viewers and the rest of the world.

## **5. On blogging and photography**

Not only is Zoe Strauss a prolific photographer-- she is also a prolific blogger. Her blog is quite active-- where she shares images, poems, and other thoughts in her mind. Strauss shares why blogging is so important to her:

"I could care less about my website, I feel like those images are very static. The blog is about the transparency of my process, the many things that go into making the photos, how my life is an integral part of my work and they both constantly inform one another, they are not separate.

Transparency is something that is very important to Strauss' work. And she achieves this transparency of showing the image-making process through her blog:

"The blog is an important aspect of the I-95 project [as I wanted] to have transparency throughout the course of the whole project. I feel it's important to see that these images are not made in a vacuum, that they come from a process. I often feel like there is a separation when it comes to fine art and when the finished image is presented it is something that is very removed from what the actual moment was. It is an important part of my process [to show] the background of how this image came about and a record of my train of thought."

If you are interested to see more of Strauss' photography process-- follow her on Flickr, where she uploads unedited photos she is currently working on, in a "stream-of-consciousness" fashion.

### **Takeaway point:**

For me personally, blogging is a huge part of my life and my photography. I love to write and share articles on photographers who have inspired me (like Zoe Strauss and countless others) -- while also creating some sort of online street photography community. Even though I still have a lot to learn in street photography-- I love sharing what I have learned along the way. My aspirations with the blog are to share useful information about street photography, to connect other street photographers with one another, and also promote the genre to the rest of the world.

Strauss also sees blogging as an inseparable part of herself and her photography. Her transparency and "down-to-earthness" is what really makes her appealing as well. She doesn't act like a pretentious "know-it-all" photographer



(even though she has recently joined Magnum as an associate). Rather, she keeps it real-- and shares her photographic process openly with the rest of the world.

If you don't have a photography blog, I highly encourage you to start one. It can be on Wordpress, Blogger, Tumblr-- or whatever platform of your choice. Share your thoughts on photography. Share your working process. Share your Lightroom presets. Share inspirational quotes or words from other photographers. Share the sites of other photographers whose work inspire you. Share your thoughts on photography-- and your personal journey.

Make your blog open, personal, and transparent. Your blog will help you stimulate new ideas in your photography, and also connect you with potentially millions of people all around the world.

## 6. On gender and photography

Zoe Strauss has some pretty outrageous photos-- one of two guys at a parade showing their tattooed penises-- and another of a nude man in his hotel room. When I first saw those images, I thought to myself: it must be easier for Zoe Strauss as a female to take those kind of photos.

Zoe Strauss shares some thoughts in-depth about gender and photography-- and how sometimes being a female makes photographing certain situations easier:

"I think gender is something that is happening constantly in the world. We are always trying to navigate it and figure out how we interact with people in relation to gender. I think that people generally feel less threatened by a woman, I think that is something that is realistic, and I think that often allows me to go places that would be difficult for a man. I think realistically that it would be a different interaction, I don't know, if I would be like, "Hey dude, come on into my house, woo hoo!" I think in a lot of photographs people respond specifically to the photographer,

and because I am a woman I think it is an integral part of it and some of the shots I have, particularly nude shots of men, are ones that are more likely to have happened because I am a woman and it would have been a lot less likely that these guys would have been happy to share their penises [with] a man.

**Takeaway point:**

If you are reading this and you are a female street photographer-- that is wonderful. I think people are generally less intimidated by women street photographers. After all, women tend to be less threatening than men (in general). Not only that, but I have found that women generally have an easier time than men taking photos of children (women usually aren't perceived as potential pedophiles).

Of course it can also be difficult as a female photographer-- I have heard of stories of men taunting female photographers. And some female photographers might not feel as safe walking around in shadier neighborhoods by themselves.

I think it is important for us to consider our gender when it comes to shooting in the streets. For example if you are a man, know that it might be more difficult to photograph children and other women in public. If you are a female, you might have less problems doing this.

As a male, I personally haven't had many issues taking photos of children or women. I just try not to be sneaky about it-- and do it quite openly. If you photograph with a telephoto lens with a black trench coat on, it might look suspicious to outsiders.

And if you are a female street photographer-- use your gender to your advantage. Know that you are less threatening in general, so use that to build up your confidence when taking photos in public.

At the end of the day though-- don't worry too much about your gender. Male, female, transgender, whatever you may be-- just go out with a big smile, show positivity, and shoot openly.

## 7. On dedicating your life to photography

One thing that quite impressed me about Zoe Strauss was how passionate she was in her photography-- to the point that she decided against having children:

"In my mid-thirties my wife and I decided that we were most likely not going to have children. I'd always been certain I wanted children but suddenly found myself going full force at this all-encompassing, life-filling project, and I decided I didn't want to stop; I would forgo being pregnant and possibly ever having children. It was a painful decision to make, but I was moving forward like a full-throttle freight train, and I felt strongly I had to choose one or the other. I picked I-95."

### **Takeaway point:**

I'm not telling you to all go out and decide not to have children or get married in order to fully dedicate yourself to photography. However the reality is most photographers or artists who cre-

ate truly outstanding bodies of work have a difficult time balancing their personal life and work. Of course there are many exceptions of photographers out there who can balance the both.

I think the takeaway point is that great projects often consume your life. And unfortunately we can't have everything in life we want. We all can't be super rich, work only part-time, have an amazing and engaged family life, and also be a world-class photographer. Life is short. We have to pick what to keep in life, and what to leave out.

Ways you can practically apply this: if you want to take your street photography more seriously, think about what you can cut out of your life. Whether it be other hobbies, or other types or genres of photography. I don't think my street photography really took off until I decided against taking photos of weddings, landscapes, macro, babies, etc.

I also encourage for you to focus on creation over consumption. Meaning, create more photos-- rather than just consuming media. Spend less time on the

internet, on social media, on photography forums, watching television, or extracurricular activities that don't mean that much to you. Focus on your photography, put in your 10,000 hours of practice, and create great work.

## 8. On captions

In Strauss' work, she often has short descriptive captions for her work. Such as "Daddy Tattoo" or simply the name of her subject.

Many photographers have different conventions in terms of titling their work, or adding captions to their work. Zoe Strauss shares a bit more of the meaning of captions in her work. She starts off first by the importance of referencing the history of photography:

"I think there are a number of things that go into the text photos for me. One being that I am very conscious of the history of photography -- it's important to me to reference it and to talk about how photography is still a burgeoning art; it's important to pay homage to these specific forms that have essentially just oc-

curred and which we are still working through.

Strauss continues by sharing in her I-95 project, she wanted people to both read the text and look at the photos-- creating a "different way of seeing":

"Another big part of it in terms of the I-95 project and the installation is that I want people who walk through it to get a sense they are reading these images. So the literal act of reading is something that is really important in moving people back and forth when seeing the images, it creates a different way of seeing."

Furthermore, Strauss shares how she likes having some of her captions as incomplete-- which still gives some room for her viewers to make an interpretation:

"Personally I am very drawn to text, I am interested in reading and language, I am interested in more than one meaning with the text and how we can make our own meanings out of these things. Many of them are incomplete statements but they are solid and they say enough



for a person reading it to create their own narrative without telling them the whole story."

### **Takeaway point:**

Personally I used to title all of my photos-- but now I simply include the location and the date. I don't want to suggest any stories to the viewer. I want the viewer to come up with his or her own story or interpretation of the image.

Of course this is only my thoughts and feelings. Strauss adds a bit more description into her images via the caption, which works well for her. Considering that she is interested in reading text herself-- she likes giving context to her images.

So I think at the end of the day, title or caption your photos as you would like. I generally cringe when I read titles which are a bit cheesy like "Darkness", "Loneliness", or "Despair". But your work is your work. Title your images in a way in which you think your viewers will get the most out of them.

## **Conclusion**

Zoe Strauss is a unique photographer-- who is very open and transparent about her work. Coming from a working-class background herself, she is able to really connect with the people in her community through photography. All of her work is community-oriented, including her influential I-95 installation project/public exhibition.

Strauss makes herself vulnerable to her subjects, and they open up to her. They let her take intimate photos of their lives. And Strauss certainly has a strong sense of morals-- she wants her subjects to like the photos she takes too. She shows her subjects the photos that she takes, and deletes them if her subjects don't like them.

I think as street photographers we can all learn a thing or two from Zoe Strauss in terms of being more humanistic. To care about our subjects, our interactions with them, as well as our community.