

STREET NOTES

Street Notes: Explore, Reflect, Shoot

Think of this as a photography workbook.
Street Notes is your personalized guide and journal to develop your photography skills and reinspire your creative process.

Each photography assignment will help you build your confidence, break out of your comfort zone, and explore your creative potential.
After each assignment, reflect and write notes in a notebook or on your phone about what you learned.

This handbook is full of practical hands-on assignments that can help you get out of your ‘funk’ and hit the streets with new enthusiasm.

Keep shooting,
Eric Kim

What I love about photography:

What inspires me:

My photography goals:

PHOTO ASSIGNMENTS

1. FIVE YES, FIVE NO

2. TEN NO'S

3. CLEAN BACKGROUND

4. SUBTRACT, SUBTRACT,
SUBTRACT

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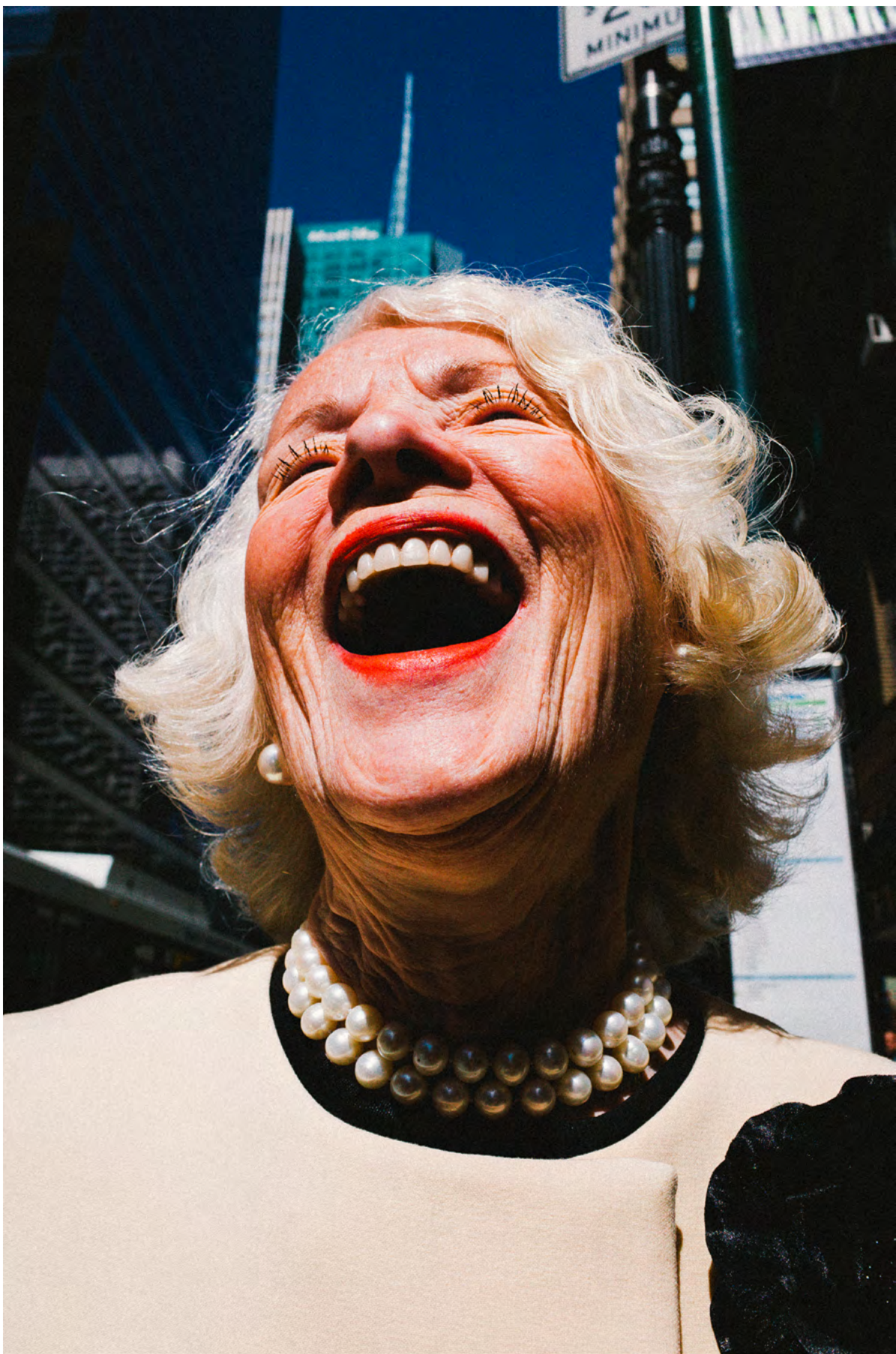
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1. FIVE YES, FIVE NO

Assignment

Take photos of strangers on the street and ask permission to take a portrait of them. Try to get 5 people to say “yes”, and 5 people to say “no.”

Purpose

One of the best ways to overcome your fear of shooting street photography is to start off by asking for permission.

A lot of people are afraid of upsetting others if they photograph them candidly and without permission.

However when you ask for permission, you give your subject the opportunity to say “no” and prevent them from feeling upset.

Furthermore, doing this assignment rewires your psychology a bit by getting used to rejection. I think one of the biggest fears that we have in street photography isn't being rejected, but the fear of being rejected. The fear of rejection is often the biggest barrier. But like a child, sometimes you need to fall a few times in order to realize that falling itself isn't that big of a deal.

You will get a lot of “no's,” but perhaps fewer than you expect. Sometimes the people you expect to say “no” actually end up saying “yes.”

1. FIVE YES, FIVE NO

1. Are you more afraid of getting a “no” or “yes”?

2. If someone says “yes,” how many photos will you make of them?

3. How many “no’s” do you think you will get before you get one “yes”?



2. TEN NO'S

Assignment

Ask people's permission to take their portrait and you will try to purposefully get "10 no's" as quickly as possible.

Purpose

This assignment is actually an off-shoot of the previous "5 yes, 5 no" assignment– but it really gets into the meat of the concept. By seeking to get rejected, you will become fearless.

Also when doing this assignment try to reword your phrasing to purposefully get people to say "no." Then based on how people react, you can start to understand what type of phrasing elicits a negative response. You can then start changing your phrasing to get people to say "yes."



2. TEN NO'S

1. Was getting a “no” as scary as you thought it was?
2. Were there some people who you were certain would say “no,” but ended up saying “yes” instead?
3. How did this assignment challenge the way you stereotype people based on their appearance or clothing?



3. CLEAN BACKGROUND

Assignment

Try to shoot the entire day with the simplest backgrounds as possible.

Purpose

One of the biggest mistakes I see a lot of street photographers make in their work is that their backgrounds tend to be too busy and messy.

When shooting street photography, we do the following: we look for interesting subjects, stick them in the center of the frame, and often forget about the background. What ends up happening is that we have photographed an interesting subject, but the background is totally distracting (or doesn't add to the image).

There is a concept in art called "figure-to ground," where you want your subject (figure) to be separated and have strong contrast with the background (ground).

A simple background can be plain colored (white, red, etc). A simple background can also be the sky (if you crouch really low and just photograph people against the sky).

You can achieve simple backgrounds in your photographs by changing your position (moving to the left, right, crouching, or tippy-toeing) or by identifying a clean background, pre-framing your shot, and allowing your subject to step into your frame.

A big pro-tip: when you're shooting, focus on the background (not your subject). Just stick your subject in the middle of the frame, and focus on the background and edges of your frame.

For good inspiration from photographers who have made an entire career of simple backgrounds, check out the work of Richard Avedon.

In the photograph below, I was in Tokyo and found a simple and clean diagonal wall. I waited around and saw a man in a suit walking by. I crouched down and took a quick photograph. In post-processing, I darkened his face. I love the mystery, suspense, and intrigue of the photograph as well as the minimalist background.



3. CLEAN BACKGROUND

1. What were your favorite clean backgrounds and why?
2. Which storefronts are good for clean backgrounds for you?
3. How did your photography approach change when you focused on trying to get a clean background?



4. SUBTRACT, SUBTRACT, SUBTRACT

Assignment

Start off with a photographic scene you are interested in. Continue to subtract from the frame until you (almost) have nothing left.

Purpose

We need to work to remove distractions from your frame. The point of the assignment is to try to figure out how much you can subtract from the scene and really capture the essence of the scene.

There is a lot of 'noise' in photography (elements that don't add to a scene). Rather, try to find the 'signal' (the elements which are interesting) When you're shooting a street photograph, what do you really find interesting? Focus on the details. Subtract the rest.

4. SUBTRACT

1. Is it easier for you to subtract or add?
Why?

2. What are messy elements that you like to subtract from your photos?

3. To subtract, do you prefer to shoot in black and white or color? Why?



5. ADD, ADD, ADD

Assignment

When you are shooting a scene, with each additional photograph you take, try to add another element (person, object, or compositional element).

Purpose

This is a more 'maximalist' approach in street photography– to create more complex images that have more layers, things going on– images that have more complexity. Generally this assignment should be for intermediate to advanced street photographers, who have mastered the act of subtraction (assignment #4).

This is how street photographers like Alex Webb, Lee Friedlander, Joel Meyerowitz, and Jason Eskenazi work in their photography. They constantly add to the scene and push their frames to the limit– to the point where chaos almost takes over. However, there is still form and order.

When you're doing this 'add, add, add' assignment–the key is to try not to have overlapping figures.

You can continue to shoot this way until you try to fill-the-frame from corner-to-corner.

See how much you can add to your photograph before it falls apart. Push the limits.

5. ADD, ADD, ADD

1. Was this assignment easier or harder than you thought it would be?
2. Do you prefer more 'minimalist' photos, or 'maximalist' photos?
3. What are some of your favorite elements to add to your frame?



6. ONE SQUARE BLOCK

Assignment

Take photos within an one square block area for one week.

Purpose

A few years ago I was one of the participants of the first “YOU ARE HERE” street photography show in Downtown LA at the ThinkTank Gallery. This was the idea: You could only shoot within a 1-square-block area in the Fashion District in Downtown LA.

At first it seemed like an impossible assignment. After all, how could you be creative in just one square block? There were so many other parts of the Fashion District that I wanted to photograph. I felt constrained to only shoot one square block.

But through the month (and perhaps walking around that block hundreds of times), I had a huge epiphany—constraints breed creativity.

Being committed to that one square block forced me to be creative. What could I do with the material and the people on the block to make interesting street photographs? It forced me to think ‘outside the box’ and appreciate what I did encounter in that space.

I also started to get to know that one square block really damn well. I got to also know the people who lived and worked on that street really well.

The funny thing was every time I circled around the block, I discovered one small detail or thing that was new.

At the end of the day, all photographers ended up making 3 strong images each and the show was a huge success.

How can you apply this assignment to your own street photography? Well, identify one square block in your own neighborhood or city (preferably near your home or work-place) and do a project on that block. Do it for a month, and put together an edit of your 3 strongest images.

If you are really ambitious, perhaps you can even do it for a full year. If you get 3 good photos every month, you can make an edit of 36 images for the entire year (a great size for a book).

This assignment will force you to be creative with the space and area that you have, and for you to get to know the area really well. I also think as a photographer, it is better to get to know one place really well (rather than constantly traveling and having a superficial understanding of many different places).

This assignment will also teach you that the best photographs are in your own backyard and don't have to be far from home.

6. ONE SQUARE BLOCK

1. Did this assignment liberate you or drive you crazy? Why?
2. What are some things that you noticed when going around your block a second, third, or fourth time?
3. What were your biggest takeaways from this assignment?



7. ONE CAMERA, ONE LENS

Assignment

You are only allowed to shoot with one camera and one lens for an entire year. If you think that is too hardcore, start off smaller—do it for one week or one month. This is a great assignment to help you simplify your life as a photographer.

Purpose

Once again, I think creativity best comes out through restrictions. Constraints are freedom.

Often photographers face ‘choice anxiety’—the feeling of not knowing which choice (in this case camera or lens) would be the most ‘optimal’ to shoot with.

Let’s say you own a DSLR, a rangefinder, and a compact camera. They are all great for different circumstances—the DSLR is great for commercial work and uber-high ISO, the compact camera is portable, and you also have your smartphone for everyday snapshots.

But let’s say you have an entire weekend to go to the city to shoot. The dilemma arises—which camera and lens do you bring with you?

You tell yourself the trade-offs of each camera, each lens (in terms of weight, size, focal length), and the purpose each camera holds.

You are so overwhelmed by the choices that you decide to bring them all. You see an interesting scene, and you wonder, which is the 'ideal' camera or lens to shoot the scene with? In that split second of thinking, you might end up missing 'the decisive moment.'

So what are the ultimate benefits of shooting with 'one camera, one lens'?

Well, by having fewer options in terms of what to shoot with— you have less stress. You know exactly which camera to shoot with every day (because you only have one option).

Therefore if you own several cameras, you can either lock them away, lend them to friends (extended loan), or simply sell them. Too many cameras and lenses are distractions.

By having one camera and one lens, you get to know the camera and focal length really well. Each different camera system has its pros and cons. There is no 'perfect' camera, but I can guarantee you that there is a camera out there which fits about 80% of your street photography needs. Ultimately that is a personal preference (which camera that is for you).

Generally for most street photographers, I think the Fujifilm x100 fits about 90%+ of your street photography needs. Small, compact, un-interchangeable 35mm lens, viewfinder, and unobtrusive.

The Ricoh GR is also a great camera for about 80%+ of your needs (small, compact, always with you, doesn't have viewfinder but isn't really an issue). If you have the cash, a digital Leica with a 35mm lens is an ideal setup. Or if you want to save money, you can always just shoot on your iPhone (or smartphone).

What a lot of us do with our cameras is try to find the 'perfect' camera (that fits 100% of our needs). That camera doesn't exist. This is a 'maximizing' approach which leads to additional stress, frustration, and dissatisfaction.

By choosing a camera that is 'good enough' for our needs is called 'satisficing'. A camera that fits 80%+ of your needs.

So for a week, a month, or a year– try to stick with one camera and one lens. Your compositions will improve (you will get used to that one focal length really well), you will have less stress (you know what camera to shoot with all the time), and you will carry less weight with you.

In terms of a good focal length, I recommend 35mm for 95% of street photographers out there. If you prefer a 28mm or 50mm those are good options too. But realize with a 28mm, you have to get really close to your subjects, and a 50mm might be too restrictive (especially if you live in a cramped city).

7. ONE CAMERA, ONE LENS

1. How did you overcome difficult shooting situations by being limited with your one camera and one lens setup?
2. What is your favorite one camera, one lens setup, and why?
3. Do you plan on sticking with one camera, one lens, or do you prefer variety?



8. ONE-ARM LENGTH

Assignment

For an entire day, week, or month you are only allowed to shoot from .7 meters (minimum focusing distance for a Leica) which is around 1-arm length away.

Purpose

If you have fear when it comes to shooting street photography, getting super close to your subjects will force you to build your confidence and become more intimate with your subjects.

You might find that it is impossible to shoot from .7 meters without being noticed. You can start off by asking for permission from your subjects.

You can also pre-focus your lens to .7 meters and tape your focusing ring there. If you have a lens without distance markings, just stick out your arm and touch a wall, then pre-focus on the wall, then tape your focusing ring shut.

Through this assignment, you will become much more comfortable shooting from a close distance. Once you're comfortable at this distance, learn to take a step back.

8. ONE ARM LENGTH

1. Why did this assignment make you uncomfortable?
2. How did your sense of personal space change after this assignment?
3. What street photography distance do you prefer and why?



9. ONE THOUSAND PHOTOS

Assignment

In a single day you have to take at least 1,000 photos. If you find yourself hesitant to shoot in the streets (because you are nervous or too self-critical), if you only take 1–2 photos of a scene, and want to learn how to ‘work the scene’ – this assignment will help you loosen up and grease your ‘trigger finger’.

Purpose

Another problem I see a lot of street photographers make is that they only take one photograph when they see an interesting street photography scene. The problem is that a lot of us street photographers have this ‘myth of the decisive moment’ stuck in our head, in which we think that the master street photographers (like Henri Cartier-Bresson) only shot one photograph of a scene, and somehow ‘got it.’

But in reality, the best street photographers often take a lot of photos of a single scene.

If you look at the contact sheets of master street photographers, you can see they often ‘work the scene’ when they see an interesting scene. You can see this by picking up *Magnum Contact Sheets*, or also by looking at Robert Frank’s contact sheets from “The Americans” from the book, *The Americans, Looking In*.

9. ONE THOUSAND PHOTOS

1. What were your biggest impediments to making 1,000 photos in a day?
2. How does it feel making more than 1-2 photos of the same scene or person?
3. How did this assignment change your street photography approach?



1 / 29



2 / 29



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20 / 29



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10. DEPTH/LAYERS

For this assignment, you are trying to create 'extreme depth' in the sense that you want to shoot a street photograph with the following: a subject really close to you in the foreground, someone in the middle-ground, and someone far away in the background.

You can do this assignment by doing the following: pre-focus your lens to 5–10 meters, find someone who isn't moving around much in the middle-ground and background, and try to add an out-of-focus face in your extreme foreground.

This will help you create more depth and complexity in your photographs.



10. DEPTH

1. Upon looking at your photos, are you generally too far or too close?
2. Did you have fun shooting depth– yes and no, and why?
3. How do you plan on integrating more depth into your street photography?



11. DON'T MOVE

Assignment

Pick a busy and interesting street corner, don't move, and photograph around you.

Purpose

Joel Meyerowitz has said that he used to run around the streets all day, looking for 'decisive moments,' but discovered that it was kind of a waste of time and energy. So he started to do something different—he would just find interesting and busy street corners, keep his feet planted, and photograph that one street corner.

The benefit of this assignment is that when you are just standing still at one corner, people begin to ignore you. You become invisible. Not only that, but people are walking into your territory, your space. You own that street corner (as a street photographer).

Preferably you want to do this assignment for about 30 minutes to an hour. I also recommend doing this during 'golden hour' (either sunrise or sunset when the light is very good and you have nice long shadows). Expose for the highlights (so your shadows are nice and black/dark).

This assignment will also teach you patience. It will make you realize that you can let your subjects come to you, rather than always trying to chase down your subjects.

11. DON'T MOVE

1. Did you end up shooting more or less by not moving? Why do you think that is?
2. How did your shooting style change by not moving in street photography?
3. Do you find yourself preferring to shoot street photography by waiting for them to enter your frame, or do you like to 'hunt' for the moment?



12. ONE ROLL A DAY

Assignment

Try to shoot a roll of film a day. If you shoot with a digital camera, perhaps you can also try to shoot 36 photos a day everyday.

Purpose

One of the most difficult things as a photographer is staying inspired and motivated. I know some people (including myself) who will take an entire month to even shoot a roll of film.

If you want to stay inspired with your film or digital photography, try shooting an entire roll of film (36 images) every day for an entire month (30 days). At the end of the month, edit those images down to your 5 favorite images. For inspiration, pick up a copy of [FILM NOTES](#).

By having to shoot an entire roll a day, you will be forced to go out and shoot, and find things that are interesting. Furthermore, it will help you develop a photographic habit. Like writing, often we get 'writer's block' and feel unmotivated. By writing and shooting every day, we can push our creativity and photographic eye to find beauty in the mundane.

Side note: This workbook was developed out of a groggy morning of writer's block. I wanted to develop a writing habit, so I had a double-shot of espresso and started writing this book.

12. ONE ROLL A DAY

1. How did you keep yourself motivated to keep shooting one roll a day?
2. What were some photos that you made during this assignment that surprised you, and why?
3. How has this assignment changed how you approach digital photography?



13. CAPTURE GESTURES

Assignment

Capture gestures in your photography. For an entire day try to only photograph gestures. Do not photograph people just walking with their hands stiff and by their sides.

Purpose

Gestures in photos can convey strong emotions photography.

What is a gesture? They can be facial gestures: someone smiling, someone frowning, someone making a funny face.

It can be a hand gesture (someone slumped over a table with his/her arm covering their face, someone pointing, someone with their hands on their knees, etc).

13. CAPTURE GESTURES

1. What are the most difficult gestures to capture and why?
2. What are the favorite gestures that you captured in your photos and why?
3. How do your street photographs with hand or body gestures change the emotions in your photos?



14. SHOOT THE RAINBOW

Assignment

For an entire day, week, month, or year try to photograph the colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink. Make an ultimate selection of your 7 favorite photos (1 photograph per single color).

Purpose

This is a bit of a simplistic exercise, but also quite fun. It forces you to challenge yourself to purposefully look for colors. It is like a little treasure hunt and your eyes will become much more perceptive to colors.

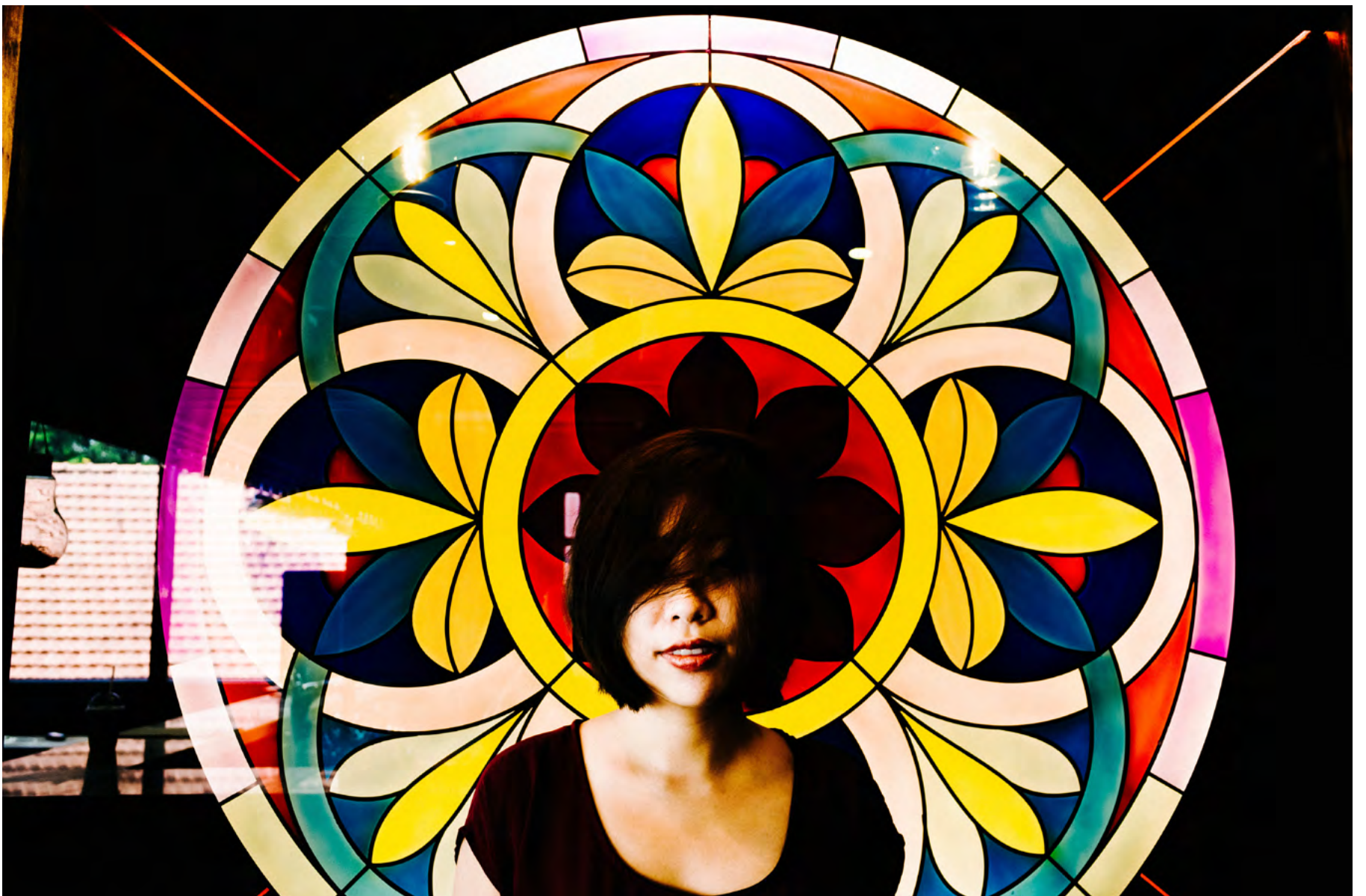
On the contrary, you can also work on capturing a monochromatic 'rainbow.' Try to shoot '50 shades of gray.' Look for different tones of blacks and whites. Start off from shooting 'low-key' photos (darker photos) and end up shooting 'high-key' (brighter) photos.

If you're shooting digitally, set your camera's LCD preview to black and white. This will help you better see the world in monochrome. The benefit of monochrome over color is that it helps you focus on shapes, forms, shadows, and the light.

Another practical tip: try to either focus only on color or monochrome for long periods of time. This will help you hone your artistic vision.

14. SHOOT THE RAINBOW

1. Which colors stood out to you the most, and why?
2. How did your perception of color change after doing this assignment?
3. Ultimately do you prefer color or black and white photography – or both and why?



15. SHOOT TRIANGLES

Assignment

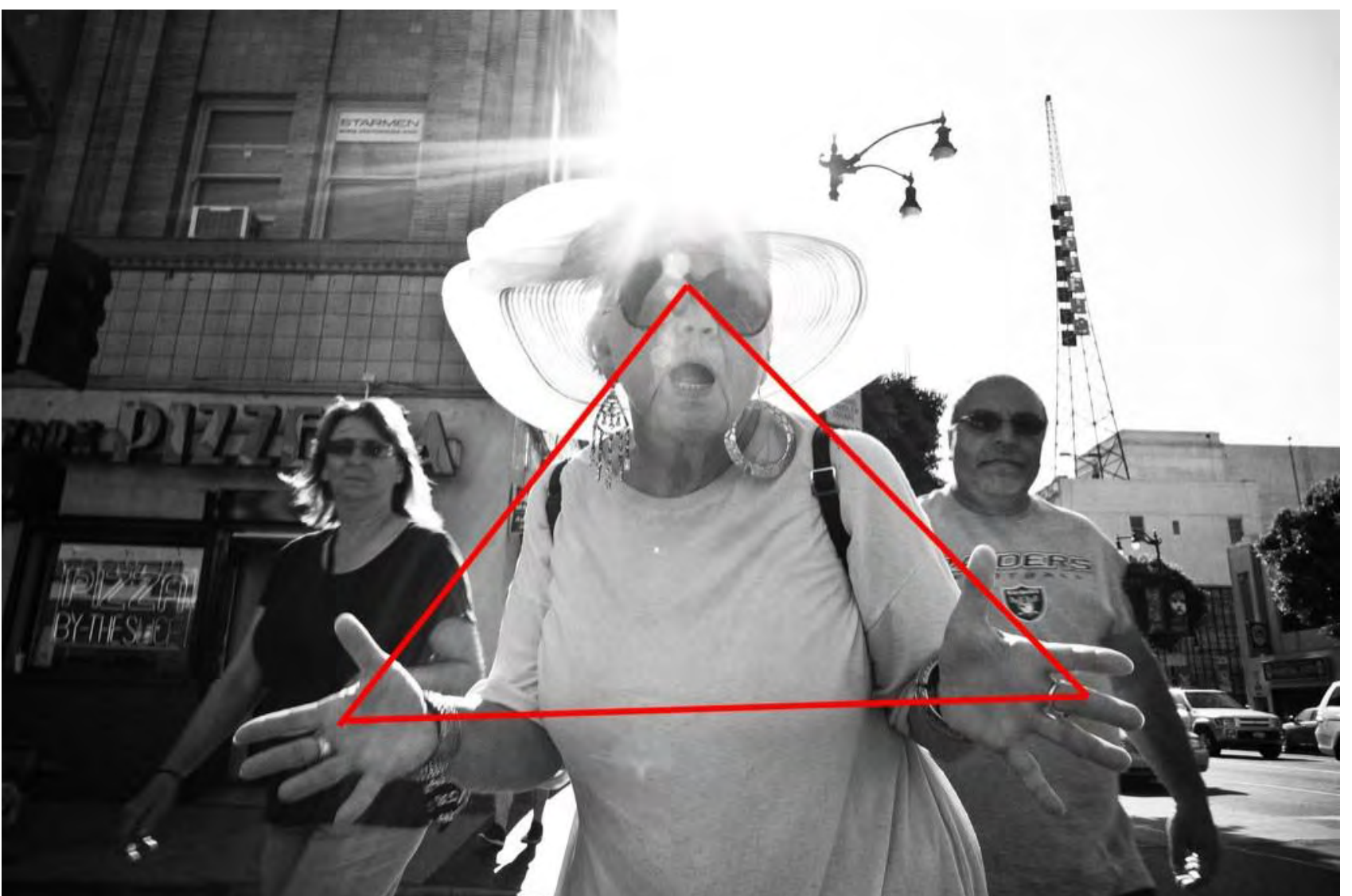
Compose photos with 'triangles.'

Purpose

Find 'triangular' compositions of odd-numbered subjects or triangular shapes.

Generally photographs work best with an odd numbers of subjects to create balance in the frame (1, 3, 5, etc).

For a triangular composition, try to get a person or element in each corner of the frame. You can start off by having a subject in the bottom-left of a frame, a subject in the bottom-right of a frame, and then try to add a subject in the top of the frame.



15. SHOOT TRIANGLES

1. Where were the best places for you to capture triangles in your street photos?
2. What were some clever ways you created triangles in your street photographs?
3. Were there any other shapes or forms you noticed when shooting this assignment?



40 MORE ASSIGNMENTS

1. If you shoot a portrait of someone on the streets, offer to email or print the photo to give to them.
2. Do not upload any photos to social media for all of this year (instead, share your 12 best photos at the end of the year).
3. Buy at least one photo book a month (and read/analyze it intensely).
4. Pursue a photography project of your choice and publish it at the end of this year (around 15-20 photos).
5. Make a portfolio website with a tight edit of your photography. Start off by limiting your website to your 3 best projects.
6. Take at least one photo every day (note: you don't need to upload it every day).
7. Attend at least one photography workshop.
8. Stick to black and white or color for all of this year.
9. Go on a road trip and document your experiences.

10. Delete all the photos you've uploaded on social media and reboot it from scratch.

11. Every month for a year, attend at least one photography exhibition, gallery, or show. Also, it does not need to be photography-related.

12. Don't buy any new cameras, lenses, or gear for this year (stick with the equipment you already have).

13. Shoot only film (if you are a digital shooter), or only shoot digital (if you are a film shooter) for all of this year.

14. Donate a camera or volunteer time to a local photography program.

15. Stick to only one film or digital preset for all of this year.

16. Go at least on one trip somewhere overseas to photograph.

17. Do a photography project of your own city, town, area.

18. Leave at least 4 sentences per comment or critique on other people's photos online.

19. Do a joint photography project with a friend or fellow photography colleague.

20. Have an exhibition of your work (can be in a small coffee shop, or even your own house!)

21. Do a 'street portrait' project of interesting people you meet in the streets.

22. Only use the minimum focusing distance on your camera (or .7 meters) when shooting on the streets for a month.

23. Look all of the portfolios of the photographers in Magnum on their website. Analyze and think about what makes their work great.

24. Print out your photos and give them to at least 10 of your friends.

25. Interview a fellow street photographer for your blog.

26. Write a list of 10 of the most important things you learned in street photography and share it via social media.

27. Shoot using only a smartphone for all of this year.

28. Learn how to develop black and white film by yourself.

29. Meet at least one local street photographer in your own city (and shoot with him/her for a day).

30. Watch at least one photography-related documentary once a month.

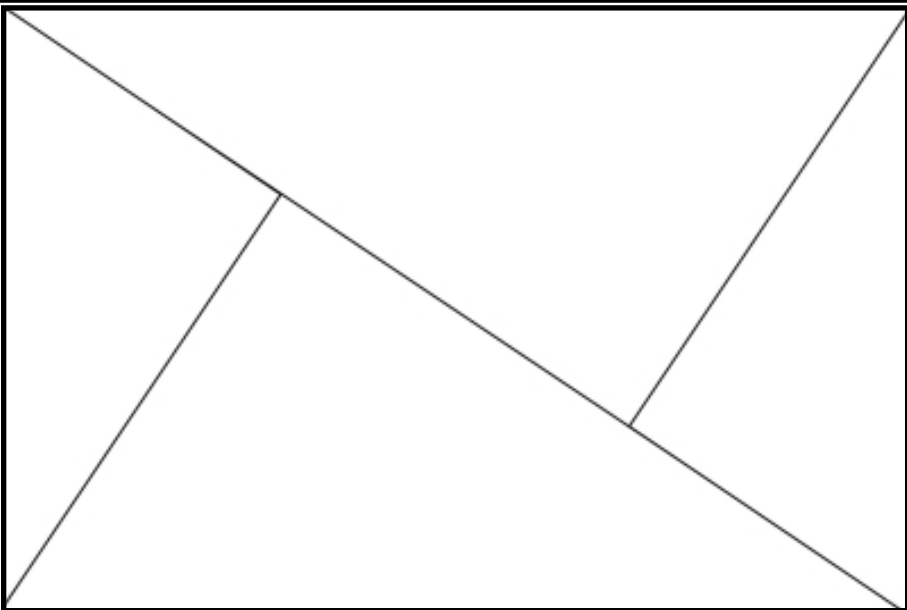
31. Read all the “Learn From the Masters” articles on the Eric Kim Blog.
32. Buy a copy of *Magnum Contact Sheets* and study every single page.
33. Learn another art (besides photography) like painting, drawing, sculpture, music, etc.
34. Connect with others using Street Notes in the ERIC KIM FORUM.
35. Start your own photography collective (local or international).
36. Only check social media once a week.
37. If you are a 35mm film shooter, shoot medium format for the entire year.
38. Meet with other street photographers at least once a month.
39. Host a local group street photography show.
40. Start your own photography blog, and share the top 100 lessons you’ve learned about street photography.
41. Come up with a list of 20 of your own assignment ideas tailored towards your photography goals.

COMPOSITION

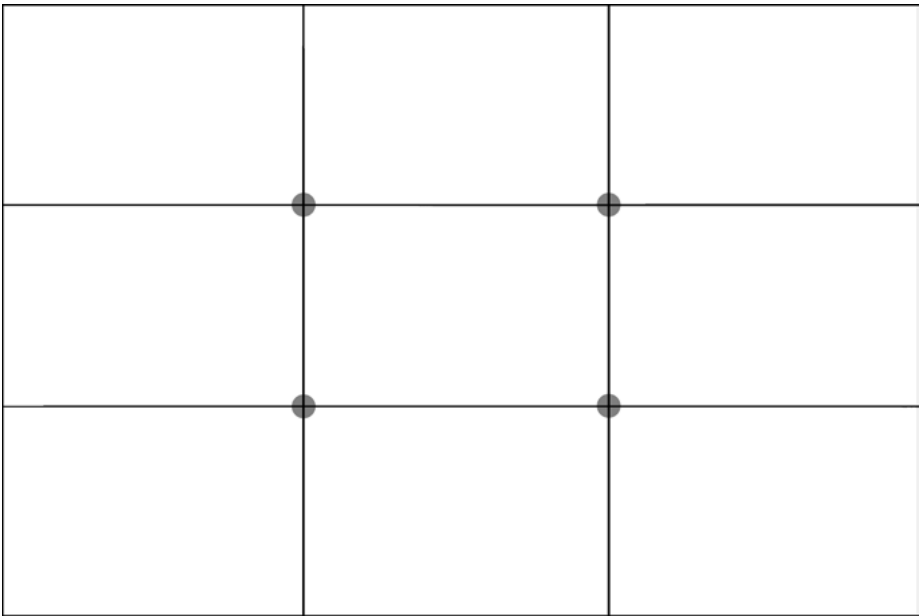
Quick Tips

- 1. Take three steps closer.
- 2. Look at the edges of the frame.
- 3. Get a clean background
- 4. Look for gestures.
- 5. Work the scene.

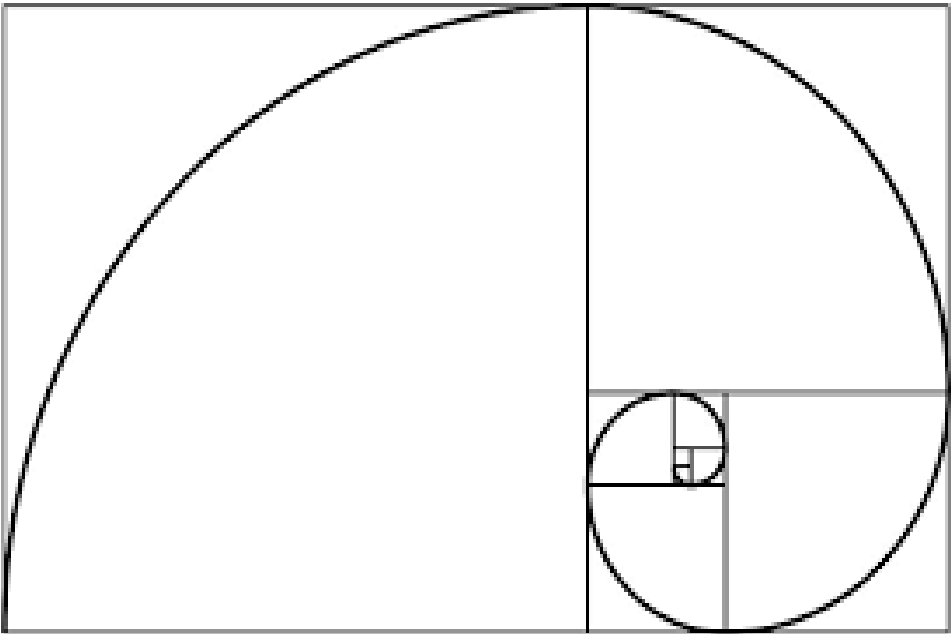
Golden Triangle



Rule of Thirds



Fibonacci Spiral



TECHNICAL

Quick Tips

1. Two arm lengths away is 1.2 meters.
2. For zone focusing, use f/8, ISO 1600, and pre-focus to 1.2 meters.
3. When in doubt, use "P" (program) mode
4. For dramatic shadows, shoot at -1 or -2 exposure compensation
5. Use a flash when shooting against the sun, or when your subject is in the shade.

Editing & Post-Processing

1. When in doubt, ditch.
2. For a project, process photos consistently in terms of color, crop, and black and white conversion.
3. Do not use a watermark.
4. Post-process in moderation.
5. If you make one 'good' photo a month, you're doing well.

HAPTIC

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Mobile Edition