

Street Photography

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“If you can smell the street by looking at the photo, it’s a street photograph.” Bruce Gilden

I. What is Street Photography?

- A. A Photowalk is not Street Photography
 - 1. A Photowalk is a communal activity of camera enthusiasts who walk around together to take pictures of things that interest them.
 - 2. A person participating in a photowalk may however engage in street photography.
 - 3. Street photography is typically an activity practiced by an individual photographer rather than in a group.

- B. Street Photographer Blogger Diane Wehr has identified five types of street photography:
 - 1. “Classic or candid” Street Photography: shows people in their daily surroundings.
 - 2. “Street Portraits”: focus is on the person, not necessarily the environment.
 - 3. “Geometric” street photographs: patterns, textures, color and light are the subjects.
 - 4. Abstract street photography uses reflections, blurs, shadows, silhouettes and colors to give the feel of an event rather than record the event.
 - 5. Intrusive street photography is actual “in your face” snapshots for the purpose of capturing reactions.

- C. Street Photography can simply be defined as “any kind of photography taken in a public space” Gibson, *The Street Photographer’s Manual* (2011) p. 8.
 - 1. It captures people in public places.
 - 2. It also may simply show “evidence” of people.
 - 3. The human element is not always in the street; it “can be inside a building or on a beach.” Jardin, *Street Photography: Creative Vision Behind the Lens* (2018) p. 3.
 - 4. Street photography is therefore a recording of people and place at a particular point in time.
 - 5. The bottom line is that “every photographer should define what the street means to them in their own way. There is not one way of defining street photography.” Carolyn Drake

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- D. Street Photography is a hunt! Nagar, *The New Street Photographer's Manifesto* (2012) p. 16.
1. The photographer is the hunter.
 2. The hunt is to capture that “decisive moment”, meaning a slice of life at a point in time; a phrase that is attributed to the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, the pioneer of street photography.

II. What are your legal rights to take photos in the street?

A. United States

1. Public Places: you have a general legal right to photograph people/places for art or editorial purposes without their permission or knowledge.
 - a. Government can restrict photography in a public place for an overriding government interest. For example, judges can prohibit photography in courtrooms to preserve decorum in the proceedings. Surprisingly TSA does not prohibit photography at security checkpoints “as long as the screening process is not interfered with or sensitive information is not revealed.”
 - b. Contrast American Airline’s policy that “[p]hotography of airline personnel, equipment, or procedures is strictly prohibited.”
2. Private Property:
 - a. Property generally open to the public: start with the premise (but not the right) that you can photograph but an owner can restrict by posted signage or by specific prohibition.
 - b. Property not open to the public: start with the premise that you can not photograph until you have explicit permission, *i.e.* “Take all you want!”
 - 1.) A property owner generally cannot restrict the photography of the property and its people by individuals who are not within the bounds of the property.
 - 2.) This is a limited right subject to common law rights with respect to invasion of privacy and to statutory restrictions on photographing people (and parts thereof in private places without their consent).

B. Sudan

Travelers who wish to take any photographs must obtain a photography permit from the Minister of Interior, Department of Aliens.

C. Local Ordinances

1. There is an ordinance restricting the photographing of Geishas in Kyoto, Japan.

D. Germany

1. The “official guideline” from Wikimedia Commons states that you can take a photo of a person in public place is wrong or at least incomplete with respect to Germany.

2. Paragraph 22 of the German law Kunsturhebergesetz prohibits the dissemination of photos of people without their consent, if the depicted persons can be recognized.

3. Paragraph 23 is an exception if the people depicted are merely “accessories” to a scene.

E. Cultural constraints may be more important than legal concepts in practice.

1. Learn the local mores and traditions, so you’ll know not to make a simple mistake that could be construed as improper or insulting. Compare German mores with Italian. Above all apply the “golden rule” of street photography: respect people and they will respect you.

Questions:

III. Ethical Constraints on Street Photography

Street photography by its nature can lead to tensions between the photographer and those being photographed. These tensions raise questions of ethics and their application to street photography.

A. Ethics are moral principles that govern a person’s conduct in a specific situation.

B. Sources of Ethical Principles:

1. Religious beliefs, *i.e.*, the Bible, the Torah or the Koran, etc.
2. Professional Canons of Ethics, *e.g.* “Code of Professional Responsibility for Arbitrator of Labor-Management Disputes.”
3. “Code of Street Photographers?”

“We all have a different definition of ethics ... If, for example, I photograph lovers who are not ‘supposed’ to be together but are in a public place, then I see nothing wrong with it.”² Jardin, *Supra*, (2018) p.8.

C. Two Primary Ethical Concerns in Street Photography

1. Should you get Permission from People that you Photograph?

- a. There was no consensus when this question was posed to 18 photographers by Alison Zavos of the on-line posting publication *Feature Shoot* in 2015 in a survey as they answered as follows:

Ayesha Malik: It depends on the situation.

Ron Haviv: It is a situation by situation decision regarding permission.

Bieke Depoorter: Normally, yes.

² Ms. Jardin contradicts herself when she further writes that “[r]especting your subject is the number one rule in street photography ... I make a point of never photographing people in vulnerable or embarrassing situations.” (*Id.*)

Corinna Kern: [doesn't really answer the question but says]"I often end up spending a lot of time with individuals I photograph and relate to them in a non-judgmental way and on a friendship level."

Carolyn Drake: It depends on the circumstance.

Laura Pannack: Yes, whether that's verbal, through eye contact and gestures or written consent.

Peter Dench: I rarely get permission from people that I photograph.

Maggie Steber: Not always, it depends on the situation.

Jonathon May: Street photography, I don't bother.

J.M. Giordano: I don't.

Wasma Mansour: Generally, yes ...

Cristina de Middel: I normally do.

Jenny Lewis: Yes ...

David Pace: I always get permission from the people that I photograph.

Molly Landreth: Absolutely.

Benjamin Lowy: No. Definitely not.

Nancy Borowick: Depends

Martin Osborne: It depends.

- b. I fall into the "depends" category with respect to seeking permission to take a photo of a person on the street.
 - 1) No, totally candid for a number of reasons.
 - 2) Sorta permission with a wink, nod, or smile.
 - 3) Yes, "may I take your picture?"
- c. The David duChemin's four step approach³:
 - 1) Take a breath, walk up to the person and smile.
 - 2) Tell the person where you are from usually in one word.
 - 3) Show the person the back of the camera and make the ask, "may I take your photograph?" or simply, "Photo?"
 - 4) Take the image and show it.
- d. Some tips on how to get the shot:
 - 1) To "tip or not"? Some do; I have never.⁴
 - 2) "Take a picture, give a print."
 - 3) Email a jpeg: Hazel Grace - "Thank you so very much!!"
 - 4) Learn a phrase or phrases in the language of the land.
 - 5) Figuratively embrace the moment and the person.
- e. At the "end of the day" respect your potential subject's wishes:
E.g. Photo of a blank white background with a text that read "a photo of a guy I took the other day that he asked me to delete."

2. Can you "stage" the shot?

³ duChemin, *Within the Frame: The Journey of Photographic Vision* (2009), pp. 105 - 106

⁴ The 18 photographers interviewed by Feature Shoot answered the question of paying a person for a photo portrait as follows: 14 would never pay; 2 would; and for the last 2: "it depends."

- a. The purist, absolutely not: “At a time when staged narratives and rendered images are popular, I am excited by the fact that life itself offers situations far more strange and beautiful than anything I could set up.” Melanie Einzig
- b. The realist, of course you can as “using props is case of $1 + 1 = 3$.”
“Every photograph is a manipulation of the truth” Carroll, *Read This If you Want to Take Great Photographs of Places*, (2017), p. 75.
- c. The pragmatist says it depends:
“How many street photographers can honestly say that they have never kicked away a small distracting element from their intended framing?”
Gibson, *The Street Photographer’s Manual*, (2011), p. 14.
 1. Gibson says however that when a “subject consents to” being photographed ... this is not street photography; it’s a staged portrait” *supra*, p. 17.
 2. I disagree with Gibson with respect to portraits but for me it’s a matter of degree, too much and it is staged, but without direction to me it still is street photography.

Questions:

IV. How has the Corona Virus impacted Street Photography?

- A. Stopped it during “shelter-in-place” periods in time.
- B. Now apprehension and transition in streeting shooting:
 1. The apprehension:
“As the rules have loosened a little and I’ve grown braver on my bike, I’ve visited friends outside their homes or in their gardens, and for the past few weeks I’ve returned to my proper Leica. ... Going forward, though, I am extremely apprehensive. Photography is a competitive, anxious profession to be in at the best of times. But at the moment I feel I’m trapped inside an airless glass box, where on the outside there are signs of the world coming back to life tentatively and old connections being renewed. I worry I’ll have my nose pressed to the glass till we are safe with a vaccine.”

Fiona Shields, head of photography for the Guardian, a British newspaper

2. The transition:
 - a. Subjects: more about evidence of human life than humans “who are not there any more.”
 - b. Tactics: “porchtraits”, “drive by” street photography and more.

V. “Nuts” and “Bolts” of Street Photography

A. Street Photography is a hunt.

1. The strategies are: “stalk”, “stake-out” or a combination thereof.
2. Act and react to the prey, *i.e.* to capture the “decisive moment.”
3. Street photography is about taking good photos, not perfect ones. As Diane Wehr put it, “proper focus is not the most important [thing].”
4. Just take a lot of shots!

B. The “Nuts”: Gear

“Being discreet with large SLR bodies [Canon 5D], and lenses, a backpack ... is next to impossible. I’ve given up. But many photographers still prefer to use a smaller camera and call less attention to themselves.”

Davis de Chemin

1. Camera and/or phone – “love the one you are with”, but for me less is more up to a point.
2. Lens – One and only, the “nifty 50 mm lens” or the useful zoom? ⁵
3. Bags, straps and more: “I am tired of getting battered by straps. Going forward, I am just going to use cuffs!”

C. The “Bolts”: Settings – Go Big or stay Small?

The answer for me is to run quiet if not silent and “have it all” through the use of Custom Shooting Modes.⁶ A custom (“C”) mode is a camera setting that allows the photographer to instantly recall a saved camera setup configuration by turning to one of the designated “C” modes. Most manufacturers’ mid and high-end cameras has between one and three (my brand, Olympus, has just released a camera with four C modes) C modes available.

The following discussion is predicated on using an Olympus camera and resulting settings. **While the settings may vary by brand and camera, the concepts expressed below are generally applicable.**

1. Configuring a Custom Shooting Mode (For an Olympus EM-1 Mark III)
 - a. Turn the Mode dial to one of three basic modes, A, S, or P, and configure setting as outlined below.
 - b. Press the Menu button and go to the first function in Shooting Menu 1, “Reset/Custom Modes,” highlight and scroll right.
 - c. Highlight the second option “Assign to Custom Mode” and scroll right.

⁵ For many the gold standard of street photography cameras is the one used by Cartier-Bresson, a Leica rangefinder with a 50 mm lens.

⁶ There is no one size fits all shooting mode for street photographers. *See e.g.* “I try to shoot most of my street photographs in ‘P’ Mode, setting ISO on Auto with high end being 6400.” Mike Beoning, a street and urban photographer in Detroit, Michigan, who motto is “Shoot Light/ Shoot Often.”

- d. Choose one of three C modes to assign setting to (e.g. “C1”).
 - e. From the left/right button choose “Set”, then press the “OK” button and setting are now assigned to C1 which can be accessed on the Mode dial.
2. My Custom Shooting Modes for Street Photography

Setting	C1: Basic Walkaround	C2: Action	C3: Portrait
Assign Mode	A F/8	A F/8	A F/5
White Balance	Auto	Auto	Auto
ISO	Auto capped at 3200 with minimum ss of 1/320	Auto capped at 3200 with minimum ss of 1/320	640
AF area selection	nine points	nine points	five points
AF Mode	C-AF	C-AF	S-AF
Face Priority	Off	Off	On
Shooting Mode	Single	Sequential L(5FPS)	Single
Metering Mode	ESP	ESP	Ctr

3. A critical setting in the above shooting modes for “walkaround” or action is **Auto ISO with a minimum shutter speed**. This allows you to keep your aperture fixed, freeze/capture action with a fast shutter speed. The only change in the Exposure Triangle is ISO which is capped at a ceiling, for me ISO 3200. In my camera you set these parameters by using Custom Menu E1 ISO – Auto Set. For other camera manufacturers you will find this setting at:
- Cannon – ISO Speed Settings
 - Nikon – ISO Sensitivity Settings
 - Sony – Auto ISO Min. SS
 - Fuji – ISO Auto Setting

The max ISO is a hard limit, the camera will never exceed it. The minimum shutter speed is a soft limit. If the scene is dark, and ISO is at max, the shutter speed will go below the set minimum.

4. My camera has two card slots: I shoot in RAW and JPEG

D. The Gear and Settings Takeaways:

1. Pack light: one camera (and a phone) with one lens, preferably a zoom with reach.
2. Settings:
 - Start in Aperture “Walkaround” F8
 - Strive for minimum shutter speed of 1/250

- Shoot all but portraits in continuous sequence or use custom modes
- Do not worry about relatively high ISO settings

VI. Developing a Plan for Street Photography

A. Preparation

1. Check out your street sites through books and the internet. *See e.g.* the blog Shooter Files.com with street guides to 100 major cities of the world. Tools such as 500px.com, Instagram and Google Image Search can be useful.
2. Pre-Shoot Walk (or better yet take the bus!)

B. Employ Local “Guides”

C. Know where the best “hunting” sites are:

- Bright lights and big cities
- Neighborhoods
- Malls
- Markets, egs. local Farmer’s Markets, Christmas/Holiday Markets
- Public squares
- Parks
- Train Stations and Bus terminals
- Events – parades, fairs

D. Street Photographer Tactics: **“The Complete Guide to Street Photography: 123 Tips”**

1. Just shoot, leave the technical and the perfect for another type of photograph
2. Shoot people from behind
3. Shoot reflections
4. Have a Theme Party
5. Remember there are valid options for subjects other than people
6. Markets are target rich environments
7. Blurring is not always a mistake
8. The “Shadow Knows”
9. “Night Magic”
10. Quiet is good
11. Find your “event” in the big event
12. Photograph a “Mini-Series”
13. Black & White might be right or not

Questions:

VII. Creating a Slideshow of Your Street Shot

A. Pick your Program

1. Default for me is the Lightroom Slideshow Module
2. Others

B. Pick your shots

In street photography: *The Art of Capturing the Candid Moment*, author and street photographer Gordon Lewis list on pages 112 – 129 the following qualities of a great street photo:

- Strong Composition: framed or cropped
- Capture a “decisive moment” which Lewis defines as the “split second when a significant [to you], spontaneous event combines with a ... composition of elements to produce a satisfying photograph” *Id.* at p. 28.
- Has a Strong Subject
- Displays exceptional Light or Shadow
- Has Distinctive Style
- Is “there and then”

C. Tell Your Street Story in 25 Slides or less By Using Some Version of A Photo Essay:

1. Having an opening: go wide
2. Medium shots: specific story line(s)
3. Details: up close and in detail
4. Portraits
5. Capture the Moment(s)
6. Have a Closer!

D. The Raleigh Street Shoot of February 24, 2020 (“Raleigh I”):

1. The critique: “Don’t smell much of the street”
2. The “Five”

E. The Raleigh Street Shoot of August 17, 2020 (“Raleigh II”):

1. The critique: “that smells better”
2. The “Six and their settings”

F. The Takeaways:

1. Find your Street Photography niche
2. In preparing for Street Photography “plans are useless, but planning is indispensable”
3. Be on point
4. You need to take a lot of rubbish (1029) to get a few keepers (25 or just 6)
5. Custom modes procedure works for me
6. Pace yourself
7. Street Photography is therapeutic
8. Life is a continuous flow of events, but it is specific moments in time that we remember most
9. People are wary
10. Street photography now can be shot but only if done very carefully

Questions:

VIII. Conclusion

“For me, being out on the street shooting is all about letting go of whatever negative thoughts I may be having at the moment and being fully immersed in the search for special moments in time. It’s the hunt that’s important, keepers are the icing on the cake.”⁷

IX. Bibliography

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Countless YouTube videos

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⁷ A comment by NYC photographer Ron Giaccone on Diane Wehr’s February 13, 2020, blog post: “Don’t Worry Be Happy – How Photography can Increase Your Personal Happiness.”

* Best two sources to learn about how to engage in Street Photography.